

Chapter 4

“Lysia, my dear daughter and my little sister in the lord, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Buried with him in baptism – raised to newness of life.”

Strong hands lowered me beneath the surface of the little pool, and raised me again, dripping wet but warm with love and life. The walk to the entrance to the catacombs had been uneventful, but the walk through the underworld I never knew existed was one of the most eerie experiences I ever had. All around us were the sights and smells of death, with niches filled with dry bones and rotting flesh. The corridors we passed through were a labyrinth I could never have navigated alone, but Portius made turn after turn without hesitation. He walked in front with the torch, while I walked behind him clutching his free hand, and Talitha held tightly to my other hand from behind me. There wasn't enough space to walk abreast.

Near our destination, I saw symbols painted on the walls, mostly crosses and fish. I dared not ask what they were at the time; Portius told me later they were symbols for Christ and his church. Moments later, we were challenged, and greeted warmly after Portius gave the proper response. Among the small group assembled in the room, I recognized Garris and Doria in the flickering light of the torches set in the walls. The others were strangers, though I had seen some come by the house to borrow scrolls.

The ceremony itself was quick and simple: an opening prayer followed by the baptism ritual. I was given a rough robe to wrap myself in, and was warmly hugged by each person there in turn, after Portius and Talitha, of course. Portius ignored his wet pants and shirt, and spent a few minutes talking to some of the other men, probably his fellow elders. Someone brought out a flagon of wine, and a loaf of unleavened bread, and I had my first communion meal. Portius had already explained the significance of it; we were sharing, symbolically, the broken body and the shed blood of Christ.

The assembly broke up immediately after that; it was not a good idea, Portius explained, to linger too long, even in a place as secluded and secret as this one. I felt like dancing and laughing on my way back to the surface, but I knew I must restrain myself. Talitha kept squeezing my hand, and I could see her smile in the dim reflected light whenever I looked back.

We were half way back to the house when a man I had never seen met us. His face and shirt were blood-streaked, and he staggered as he moved toward us. Portius recognized him at once.

“Andreas! What's wrong? What's happened?”

“Nyla... I couldn't stop them.” He was sobbing as he spoke.

Portius dropped my hand, and started toward his house. Andreas gripped his arm.

“No, Portius, wait. They're looking for you. Think of the girls. You can't help Nyla now. You have to get away.”

Portius stood with fists clenched, his face white, his eyes wild with fear. He made an effort to break away from Andreas, but the man would not let go.

“Papa!” Talitha wailed, throwing her arms around his waist. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

It was as if Portius suddenly remembered we were there. He started, and looked at his daughter, then at me. A myriad of emotions, from grief, to anger, to fear, washed over his face, then he seemed to reach a decision.

“Your mother is dead,” he said, his voice a harsh groan. “I – I have to get you away.”

Talitha was now sobbing uncontrollably, saying, “No, no, no!” over and over again. I felt myself go dead inside, but acting on some impulse I didn’t understand, I went to Talitha.

“We have to go,” I kept repeating, and I tried to pull her arms away from Portius. She resisted, but I had a strength beyond myself, and I managed to break her free, hugging her to myself.

Andreas said again, “We have to go. Patrols are coming this way. We must go to the catacombs. They won’t find us there. Hurry.”

He pulled Portius after him, and I followed with Talitha, who followed not like a puppet drawn along on a string. Minutes later we were back at the entrance to the catacombs, and the sound of angry voices reached us as we disappeared from view.

Andreas told us his story, the tragic story of Nyla’s end, as soon as he felt we could stop for a rest.

“They were looking for you. The priests of the Bear have a new squad of goons called the Truth Police, who have nothing to do with either the truth or the police. Tonight is the first we heard of them. They were looking for you. I was keeping watch on your house, as I always do, when I saw a group of hooded men moving toward it. I saw them too late to give much of a warning, but I ran ahead of them to the house. Nyla came out when I pounded on the door, and I just grabbed her hand and we headed away from the house, running as fast as we could. We didn’t get far; one of them clubbed me over the head; by the time I regained consciousness –” He began weeping again here. “There was nothing I could do. The blood on my shirt is hers; I cradled her in my arms, and tried to revive her, but she was already with the Lord. The only thing that may help is that she had the most beautiful, peaceful smile on her face.”

By this time, all four of us were sobbing, there in the dark depths of the catacombs, mourning the dead in a place of death. I don’t know how long we stayed like that; it seemed an eternity before we were quite once more. No one said anything for a long while after that.

Garris joined us then. He told us that several other Christians had been caught that night, and either killed or arrested.

“The priests are frightened,” he said. “They’re reacting just as the Jewish leaders did after they crucified our Lord, and he rose again. They think they can kill our leaders, and frighten the rest into deserting the Way. All that they’ll do is make us stronger; they don’t understand that our leadership comes from Christ, and his Holy Spirit. After our Lord arose, and Stephen was martyred, the Chief Priest tried to destroy the church. Instead, it grew, and spread around the world, even to us.”

His words were meant to comfort and reassure, but we could think only of our dear Nyla, lying dead near her home, and ours. Portius was oblivious to anything said or done around him; he sat leaning against a stone wall, his face a blank. Talitha wasn't much better; she sat with her hands wrapped around her upraised knees, rocking back and forth, and moaning. I saw everything around me with great clarity, but it was a reality separate from that "me" hidden somewhere inside.

The following days were a dim haze; we ate, we drank, we slept, but no one talked except in monosyllables. Life returned to us all at once when we awoke finally from sleep, in more ways than one. The pain was still there, but somehow our injured minds repaired themselves enough to function. We discovered that three days had passed since that awful night, a night that should have been always a memory of great joy.

Portius's home had been confiscated, his warehouse emptied of goods. A warrant was issued for his arrest as a heretic, and an enemy of the Great Bear. His was one of several; twenty-three Christians had been murdered the night of the purge. Forty others disappeared, and dead bodies showed up in the river for weeks afterward.

Periodically, patrols were sent into the catacombs, but the spies didn't know the location of the Christians hidden there. The searches through the miles of interlocking tunnels were useless; we were never in any real danger. Watching eyes kept us informed of where the so-called Truth Police went in their meandering.

Portius spent long hours in prayer, and in deep thought. A measure of light returned to his eyes, but the flame of unbridled joy was gone forever. When he came to a decision, he called Talitha and me to him. We had no idea if it was day or night; they were both the same here. His voice was quiet, but flat, as he spoke to us.

"Children, I have prayed for a long while, trying to understand what God's will is for us now. What we cannot do is give up; that would be an insult to your mother's memory, and an affront to our Lord. We can't stay here; it would be a slow death for us. I thought of going to Berith, the home both of Nyla and Mari, but slave raiders are still a problem there. Besides, passing over the Parnath mountains is dangerous at any time, and winter will soon be on us. To the west and south of Tirzah are the Korei, the nomads of the grasslands.

"One of the chieftains of the Korei is a Christian, converted by my witness for the Lord. He is a friend and blood brother of mine, and he will give us shelter. Perhaps the Lord is sending us there to help spread the Gospel in that wild and savage place. The brethren here will help get us safely out of the city. Our lives are not our own; we're in God's hands."

We left soon afterward. After traveling for what seemed endless miles through the catacombs, we came out in a part of the city I had never seen before. Narrow, winding streets and alleyways formed a maze of their own, just as confusing as the catacombs. They were lined with ugly, filthy tenements, the home of the very dregs of society in Tirzah. A group of sturdy men, armed with staves, and with assorted sword and daggers, met us as we came out on the street. They stayed with us as we wound our way out of the slums. A glance at the roving gangs of thugs, and solitary wolves, which milled around the streets, made the reason for our escort clear.

Despite all the filth and stench, it was good just to feel the air and the warm sunlight again. We walked from the early morning until late afternoon, stopping only to rest our weary legs, with our escort in a circle around us as we sat right in the filthy streets. By the time we reached the city wall, we were as filthy as the people who lived around us.

There was no gate here, just a rough hole dug down from within a ramshackle house that hugged the wall. We waited for darkness to fall before leaving, greedily devouring the meager fare of coarse bread, goat's cheese and water our hosts provided for us. I suspected it was more than they usually ate in a week.

When we left, we were given a knapsack with enough food to last us for a few days, if we were careful. We were given directions to safe houses in two villages that belonged to Tirzah, before we reached the grasslands. Exchanging hugs and tears with our hosts and guides, we had prayer together, and set out into the night. It would be several years before any of us passed through the walls of Tirzah, the only home I could really remember, once more.