



Sunlight seeped through the leafy canopy above, casting dappled shadows on the grassy lawn leading away from the darkness under the eaves of the cottage. Standing at the opened back door, Emeilia stared blankly out at the forested horizon. Down a hill out of sight, in the meadow that overlooked the farm, Emeilia could still hear the laughter of her son and husband. Right now, she was supposed to be with them, enjoying the autumn afternoon with the two most important people in her life. But the summons had been urgent, from the King of Vaneah himself. Emeilia sighed, turning away from the sun to the dim interior of the cottage. Two narrow bedsteads were pushed against the far right wall. A simple square table with plain wooden chairs stood in the center of the room. The hearth set into the wall beside the beds was quiet and dark; at this time of year, the trick was keeping the house cool, not warm. A sword in a scabbard was propped beside the open front door. Emeilia looked over the life she had made for herself, with a house and a son, no less, and wondered if this would be the last time she would gaze upon it. She knew that her safety was all but guaranteed, but that was what came of being a soldier in the King's Army. She was aware, and so was her husband, Collan, that each mission might be her last. But they had decided that their son, Edward, need not know of the War of the Dueling Kingdoms nor the perils of his mother's work. She thought it would cause him too much anxiety to know that his mother may perish, keeping him from living a normal life. If and when the need to explain why Emeilia would not be returning home arose, Collan agreed to explain everything to Edward. The sword was the only piece of the war that Emeilia consented to have in her home, merely as a precaution and (though she would not admit it) paranoia.

Grabbing the sword in its sheath, she walked to one wall where a satchel hung. Already it contained traveling essentials, lacking clothes and other personal items. Gathering these took five minutes, then Emeilia was on her way, stepping through the open front door without a glance back to her life and love. "This never gets any easier," she whispered to



herself, letting the tears fall. They dripped down her chin and hit the dusty road, leaving tiny patches of mud every dozen steps or so. For the first ten minutes, Emeilia let herself be grieved, but as she approached the village, she forced herself under control. It would not do to let a soldier see their captain weeping.

Just coming into sight over the rise of the hill, the village steeple, soon followed by the tallest of the buildings, contrasted with the bright, cloudless blue sky. Cresting the hill, Emeilia saw the rest of the village. The market was in full swing at this time of the afternoon; shoppers clogged the square, browsing among the stalls and vendors and carrying baskets for their purchases. Several bored children had started a game of tag and were weaving through the adults. Much closer at hand, located on the outskirts of the village, was the blacksmith shop. Always in pursuit of a better blade, Emeilia had been quick to evaluate the shop upon her arrival almost five years ago. The head smithy, Jonathan, had been kind, and the metalwork he produced far surpassed the Army's standard issue. Ever since, she had gone to him and him alone for all things metal. As always, smoke curled its way out the chimney, and a red glow lit up the interior of the forge. She could hear the resonant tones of a hammer striking metal, but could not see Jonathan. Even if she had, she would not have stayed to talk. Both of them had work to attend to.

As much as she might like to bypass the village center, skirt the edges, and that way reach Mizpah, the King's outpost, on the far side atop a weathered mound, the village was surrounded by crop land. The only path was to go by the cobbled streets through the busy square. Usually people stayed out of her way—she didn't exactly exude affability—but today, no one even noticed her. They all were singularly focused on shopping, or finding their children, and did not look twice at a woman with a sword trying to get through.

A sudden pain erupted in her head, sudden and debilitating. Around her, the voices suddenly seemed too loud, and movements too random. Staggering forward, Emeilia collided with the low fountain wall and nearly tripped into the water. Clutching the rough



stones, she held herself in place as the world rocked and twisted. The moment before she thought she would be sick, the horizon leveled, but the village was not the same. The sky was dark as at dusk; however, the red glow of fires illuminated the square. Houses were in flames, licking from one thatched roof to the next. The fountain, which seconds before had been full to the brim with water, was now dry as a bone, the stones smashed into rubble. Dark shadows darted in and out among the fires, giant, hulking shapes of warriors and barbarians. Chain mail glinted in the blaze. Then, as quickly as it began, the world flashed back to its usual state. Not one of the villagers seemed to notice that anything had changed; they continued bustling as before. Emeilia leaned against the wall, panting for breath. Her forehead was slick with sweat, and her hand were bloody from her tight grip on the wall. She dipped her hands in the fountain, grimacing as the cold water struck her abused palms. The blood flowed outward in curtain-like waves, dissipating as she scrubbed at the grit and small pebbles embedded in her palms. Shaking the water from her hands, she pushed away from her the wall, swayed slightly as her legs threatened to buckle under her, and resumed her walking pace toward Mizpah. Once she broke through the mob of people, she began to run. Running took her mind off of what she had just seen. Though she had no basis to believe that the vision was of the future or was even true, the vividness of it chilled her nonetheless. It *could* happen—that much she knew. Drawing a strip of yellowing linen from her satchel, she wrapped it tightly around her right wrist, then looped another strip against her left palm.

“Halt!” The voice of a guardsman came ahead of her just as she finished tying off her bandages. She complied promptly and glanced up. She had arrived at the gates—a double wooden door, the only entrance to the fenced enclosure that was Mizpah. The man who had spoken was of medium height, strongly built with a carefully trimmed goatee, dressed in the garb of a soldier: leather boots, chainmail under a plain tunic, and a pike in his hand. Emeilia could tell by his grip on the shaft that he was well-trained in that particular



weapon. He was also one of the dark men from across the desert who only recently were permitted to enlist. To earn Emeilia's trust was a difficult task indeed, as she was inherently untrusting, especially toward men who were not considered worth anything but servants and muscle men. But the King had been resolute in his decree that every able-bodied man or woman (He stressed this heavily also) who wished to join His Army would be permitted and encouraged. When His Royal advisers commenced their long-winded speeches regarding the integrity of the Kingdom and pollution of His forces, He interrupted, stating that He wanted anyone willing to serve, not simply those society accepted. Of course, Emeilia was grateful for His allowing of women to fight alongside their countrymen, but the foreigners she was still wary of. "State your name and purpose," the man called, his voice slightly accented.

"I am Captain Emeilia of His Majesty's Army and commander of His Royal Guard, here on His Eminence's Request." She held out a rolled parchment. "I have His orders here." The man stepped forward cautiously, obviously uncomfortable with this woman claiming to be a captain in the King's Army standing at the gates out of uniform with a sword strapped to her back. If she was in his position, she would have questioned him to no end. *Good*, Emeilia thought. *At least they understand the need for security.* Taking the scroll, the guard minutely examined first the seal, then the text, the signature, and finally the seal again, all the while murmuring under his breath, "Let's see. Emeilia. To report. Mizpah. King's Quarters. Special Mission. Urgent." With a few more words lost to the wind that sounded like "That checks out," the guard abruptly rolled the scroll and handed it back to Emeilia. "Have a good day, captain," the guard said, raising his right hand to his helmet in salute. By regulation, the soldier did not have to salute anyone, regardless of rank, if they or the other was out of uniform. But among the ranking officers, it was considered good practice for the regular soldiers to be able to recognize their commanders even when they were out of uniform. Emeilia nodded to the soldier, unwilling and unable to salute out of



uniform. Dropping his salute, the guard turned to the gatekeeper, motioned to her, and turned back to Emeilia as the doors began to swing inward with a prolonged creak. She tucked the orders into a satchel at her side, squared her shoulders, and stepped inside.

As always, the camp was a bustle of activity. Immediately to her right and left, the merchants trusted by the Army set up booths along the inner perimeter of the wall and called out the particular merits of their products (“The best seasonings in the West! Spice up any bland mess meal!” and “Tired of your standard-issue sword? Come on over; I have weapons here that you’ll never tire of using, guaranteed!”). Emeilia ignored them. Ahead on her left, the many peaks of beige canvas tents covered over half the area of the camp; there the soldiers lived. A few soldiers talked from the open flaps of tents, but most soldiers either lined the narrow ledge on the top of the wall or drilled in the open field on Emeilia’s right. All these she passed by, her destination in the far corner of the encampment where a single stone tower rose out of the ground, for all appearances an extension of the earth like a mountain or hill. When the Army scouted the area five years ago, the early reconnaissance detailed an abandoned watchtower from a forgotten kingdom hundreds of years ago. Moss and ivy covered the worn grey bricks, the wooden door all but rotted away. The King decided that it was from here that He would oversee the war effort, and not from the capitol city of Vaneah itself—De Vontino. That was where the King’s Palace was located and, Emeilia thought bitterly, where the King should be. Certainly she appreciated that she was able to bring her husband down from their hometown and live together for nearly five years. But when her son arrived, her normal, predictable life as a soldier became quite the more complicated as she had to take on the role of mother, in addition to wife and soldier. Collan understood that she would be gone for weeks at a time, but to Edward, his mother left quite randomly and it was random when she would return. *If* the campaign operated by usual standards, she would be gone for a few years and the battle would be won. She would only need focus on being a loyal soldier and a leader. But



because of the haphazard nature of the hit-and-run tactics the King employed, and the weeks of downtime between, Emeilia could be home for a month then gone for the same. And like this summons, she could never know when she might next be put on active duty. Balancing the act of being a mother and a soldier had begun to wear her out.

Called to halt for the second time that day, Emeilia waited patiently as the Royal Guard—dressed in nicer, more luxurious clothing atop finer mail than the standard soldier—likewise perused the scroll of her orders, more carefully than his counterpart at the gate. Only a select few were granted audience with the King, as His safety was of the utmost importance. Apparently satisfied with the authenticity of the document, the guard offered the scroll back to her, pulled a key hanging under his tunic, fit it inside the lock, and pushed open the door to the tower. Its mouth yawned dark and cool and perhaps a touch ominous.

Inside the tower, Emeilia's shadow silhouetted in the light of the doorway. Then the door was shut behind her, leaving her in the dark while her eyes adjusted. The only light came from the two torches set into the wall on the first floor with a third along the right hand wall up a spiral staircase to the second floor. Aside from the sconces, the walls were bare. A lack of windows was preferable in a fortress intended to withstand the onslaught of siege, but it made for rather dank and cold living space. By the dim, flickering orange light, she could make out the overlapping maps resting on the dark oak table, held down at their curling corners by stones and inkwells. Aside from the ever-shifting forms of the shadows as the flames flickered in unfelt gusts, the floor was quiet. Climbing the stairs to the next floor, which was the King's Bedchambers, she saw that this floor was empty as well. Across from the stairs, a ladder ran vertically up the wall, leading to a trapdoor and the lookout. Crossing the thick tribal rug, a gift from the desert chieftain first to join the King's cause, she grasped the first rung of the ladder, wincing as her injured hand connected with the wood, and pulled herself hand over hand to the top. Then, shifting her grip to grab the ring dangling in the trapdoor, she pushed it open and emerged into the daylight again.



The sun blinded her as a gust of wind simultaneously tugged at her hair and clothes, shockingly frigid. Squinting against the light, she waited until her eyes became accustomed to the sun's presence, then cast her gaze around the battlement. For a moment, Emeilia did not see the Man standing in the Eastern corner with a telescope held to His face. When she did, she thought He was one of the sentries constantly posted to watch the East. He was dressed in a simple dark green hunter's jerkin with His long golden hair tied back with a piece of leather cord. He lowered the telescope and turned to face her. The moment she saw His face she dropped to one knee. It was the King.

She remained unmoving, staring at the floor for twenty, thirty, forty seconds, refusing to even so much as twitch without His approval. His voice came at last, the perfect mixture of soft and firm, sweet and rough, "You may rise, Captain." Regaining her feet, Emeilia folded her hands behind her back and looked into the King's eyes. Possibly unique among mankind were His golden eyes, penetrating as a fire and bright as a lion's coat. Even in full daylight they were startling vivid. The King crossed His arms behind His back. "Forgive Me My impertinent summons: I did not allow you the rest you so rightly earned. But surely you know that it was not with ill-will or without remorse that I brought you here, that I would only do so if it were absolutely necessary." Emeilia nodded. Now was not the time for any words but His own. He would make it abundantly clear when it was her turn to speak.

"As you well already know, raiders and barbarians from Lehl have massed on the far side of the De Vontino Bridge. It was your report, as you know, that informed me of this. However, I must ask, is there anything you would like to add to what was stated in the report?" He waited, indicating her turn to speak.

"Yes, Your Majesty; actually I do have something that I did not share in the official report, as it was a feeling, not true evidence." The King motioned for her to continue.

She hesitated. "Excuse me for seeming vague, Your Highness, but those raiders and



barbarians of which You spoke seemed *off* to me.”

“In what way?” The King did not act skeptical.

“The raiders camped there—all of them without exception—moved sluggishly, with abrupt and jerking movements. It did not seem to me that they were of their right mind. Normally, I would blame this on intoxication, but on such a large scale. . .” Emeilia quieted at the look on the King’s face. He looked more distressed than she had ever seen Him, even when the Enemy was at His very gates in the Battle of the Senna Plains. “Did I say anything to offend You, Your Highness?” She asked in mild terror. The King gently shook His head, but it was obvious His thoughts were elsewhere.

“Would you say—and I request your most candid supposition—that those men and women were being controlled by another? Not as though forced to act in a certain way but honestly, truly, under the power of other to dictate their actions?” The King spoke with the utmost deliberation and concern, even worry. Something of this troubled Him a great deal.

Emeilia squared her shoulders, looked the King in the face, and said with conviction: “Yes, sir. That would adequately describe what I saw. But if I may, is such a thing even possible? Can a person’s actions be controlled to that extent?” The King did not seem to hear her. He had turned back to the East and stared intensely toward the barely visible spires of De Vontino, and beyond that, the bridge of the same name. “So the rumors were true,” He murmured just loud enough for her to hear. After a moment of silence, He unexpectedly answered her question, “Yes. It is possible to control another. But only by a brand of Dark Magic none have dared use ere now.”

“What is the practicality of such sway over so many? Surely they are not formidable in battle, as slow as they are?”

“On the contrary, the possessed soldiers are their strongest in battle, as the Magic that commands them does not heed the pain of sword or spear or arrow. They cannot be stopped ‘til they are killed or die of blood loss, and fight until that end.” Emeilia shuddered at the



thought.

“Who controls them?” The words were out of her mouth before she even considered withholding them. “Your Majesty,” she added quickly. The King turned away from His watching to Emeilia. His eyes were sad; a tear dripped from the corner of one eye.

“He is Benmesh, He who is sworn against me, the ruler of the Lehl Lands, dictator of his subjects in peace and war, and formerly,” He sniffed, “My most loyal advisor.” The King’s face held compassion and sadness, but that was impossible. Surely the King did not feel remorse for His lost advisor, after all the assassination attempts, coups, and outright attacks against his old King. Any sympathy the King had had must have shriveled and died long ago, leaving behind only determination to win the war and eradicate the name Benmesh from the face of Teluth. Surely.

The King wiped His eyes on a handkerchief He pulled from a pouch on His belt. He cleared His throat. “Now, you are likely most ardently desiring to know why I called you here, as you also know I would not lay this on you without giving you some task to accompany. My orders for you are this: you will militarily escort a convoy of my selection to the Bridge of De Vontino and cross with it into the borders of the Lehl Lands.” He silenced her protests with a hand. “If you come as an ambassador in My Name, the soldiers of Lehl will respect you, if not for your sake, but for fear of My wrath. My emissary, whom I will give the words to speak, shall implore all who will hear him to lay down their arms and return with you to Vaneah. Only when you have gone to all the soldiers in the army are you permitted to return to Vaneah. However, so all is transparent, your sole responsibility is the care and protection of my Messenger. For that and that alone am I sending you. The success of the mission depends entirely on him, and in turn, on you. Do you understand?”

Emeilia’s instinctive response was denial. It made little sense for the King to send one of His top commanders on a simple escort job. And into the Lehl Lands, no less. Her skills with a sword were noteworthy, yes, but not more than the skills of half a dozen guards at



once. *She* was an unnecessary piece in this mission. But if the King had decided to send her personally, rather than any number of soldiers He could assign to the mission, there must be a reason. Perhaps she wasn't meant to understand why yet, but she was loyal to her King to the end. Aloud, she said, "Yes, my Lord. I will protect Your Messenger with my life."

The King nodded. "I would expect nothing less of my chosen Captain. Only let us hope that it does not come to that. For when you and the convoy return here to Mizpah, then we shall go to war."



BIBLE STUDY

“But the summons had been urgent, from the King of Vaneah himself.”

—God invites us to partake in His Plans. In the story, Emeilia received a summons from the King. Very likely the King would have accomplished His goal without Emeilia, if she had decided not to comply. But out of loyalty she did so, despite the pain of separation that would come of it. Sometimes when God asks you to do something, it means asking you to give up or sacrifice something you hold dear like family, friends, or your hometown. But the sacrifice is always for the better purpose of furthering the Kingdom of Heaven.

“Gathering [her necessities] took five minutes, then Emeilia was on her way, stepping through the open front door without a glance back to her life and love. “This never gets any easier,” she whispered to herself, letting the tears fall. They dripped down her chin and hit the dusty road, leaving tiny patches of mud every dozen steps or so. For the first ten minutes, Emeilia let herself be grieved. . .”

—Emeilia was saddened by her departure and separation from her family. Grief is a human emotion and is by no means forbidden by God. He may call you to hard things, and you are allowed to be sad, or angry, or scared, or confused. However, these negative emotions can be replaced by joy, peace, encouragement, and certainty. As God helps us to understand these emotions, we can help others going through similar phases.

“He was also one of the dark men from across the desert who only recently were permitted to enlist. To earn Emeilia’s trust was a difficult task indeed, as she was inherently untrusting, especially toward men who were not considered worth anything but servants



and muscle men. But the King had been resolute in his decree that every able-bodied man or woman (He stressed this heavily also) who wished to join His Army would be permitted and encouraged. . . He wanted anyone willing to serve, not simply those society accepted.”

—There are no social prerequisites to following Christ. No one is excepted from God’s Love, even those unaccepted by society. In the world of Teluth, the men from across the desert were untrusted by Emeilia at least. The King, on the other hand, trusted anyone and everyone willing to serve—that was the only thing He wanted. Willingness to serve.

“ “Do you understand?”

Emeilia’s instinctive response was denial. It made little sense for the King to send one of His top commanders on a simple escort job. And into the Lehl Lands, no less. Her skills with a sword were noteworthy, yes, but not more than the skills of half a dozen guards at once. *She* was an unnecessary piece in this mission. But if the King had decided to send her personally, rather than any number of soldiers He could assign to the mission, there must be a reason. Perhaps she wasn’t meant to understand why yet, but she was loyal to her King to the end.”

—Emeilia did not understand the reasoning behind sending her on what seemed the simplest of missions. She wanted to reject the mission at first. Then she considered not the nature of the mission or her certain over-qualifications or under-qualifications, but rather the nature of the Sender. It was the King who gave her the order. As such, she could not think to defy Him. Though she does not understand it now, Emeilia knows that there is a reason. There always is a reason behind every plan of God.