

# A Journey to Unshakable Faith

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To my parents: From the time I was little, you both made such an investment in my life by reading to me and with me. The love of good books you instilled in me is a blessing I will be truly grateful for my whole life. I pray that other parents would realize the importance and impact that literature, especially the true Word of God, has on their children's lives.

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## PROLOGUE

The golden glory of an early morning sunrise burst over the horizon, flooding the valley of Alvastia with its warm light and bathing the sky in brilliant color. A meadowlark began to sing. As if on cue, she was joined by other birds. Their high, clear voices rose in a song of praise to their Maker. The world seemed at peace.

But for many people, that world was not as peaceful as it seemed to be. In the middle of the valley rose a tall, lonely castle protected by a thick wall. Yet surrounding that fortress were men trained for war, an invading army to whom this castle was a highly coveted possession.

On the rooftop, King Pellingor stood gazing out over the land, but his thoughts were far from the enemy encamped before him. The battle within him was raging more fiercely than any outside attack.

“O, Lord,” he entreated in a voice choked with tears, “if there be any other way than this, show me!” Even while he spoke, he recalled what he’d read earlier that morning: “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isa. 55:8-9).

He knew that this was not the path he would have chosen, but in his heart, there was also a strong trust in his Heavenly Father's ways.

“Father, help me to pray, ‘Not my will, but thine, be done.’<sup>1</sup> And keep her safe, Lord; keep her safe under the shadow of Your wings.”

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22:42





# 1

## IN THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS

Indoors in a well-furnished room in the left wing of the castle, a young girl stood gazing out of the glass-paned, crystal-clear window. Who would have thought the siege would last so long? Only last week, her head had been full of the kind of things every ordinary fourteen-year-old girl dreams of. Then, like an icy blast of wind freezing anything standing in its path, an enemy from the North had come, and nothing was the same.

A castle under siege. Turmoil within and an enemy without. These things used to seem far off, the kinds of circumstances she read about in books that vanished when she closed the cover. Now, they were just as real as the invading army, surrounding and slowly closing in—cold, ruthless, and terrible.

A tear slowly slid down her cheek. She hastily brushed it away. More followed. Did no one know of their plight? Doubts and fears whirled through her mind. Did God not hear them? How could He allow this to happen? She began to pace back and forth as she mentally rebuked herself.

*Now, Esther, you know that's not true. Of course, God hears us. But why is this happening to us? Why doesn't anyone come to our aid?*

Though she knew in her heart God heard and answered prayer, in the midst of suffering and sorrow, it was hard to believe. Esther often wished she had her father's unshakable faith or her mother's childlike trust in her Heavenly Father. Though she believed in Christ as her Savior, Esther still struggled with the doubts that sometimes filled her mind.

She sighed. Then she happened to glance at her music stand, the hymnal on it still open from yesterday. Esther thought of music as one of the most beautiful sounds

in the world. She loved playing the harp and had always filled the castle with its melodious sound.

Sitting down on a stool, she looked again at the song. It perfectly expressed what she was feeling. Esther smiled through her tears, placed her fingers on the harp strings, and began to play, singing softly the words she knew by heart:

O Lord, You are enthroned  
In Heaven's heights above.  
Blessed be Your holy Name,  
and Your kingdom spoken of.

May Your will always be done  
As we seek to follow You  
For Your promises are sure  
And Your plans are right and true.

Forgive us our unbelief  
When we wander from Your way.  
Teach Your children to forgive  
When others go astray.

All glory belongs to You,  
Our Sovereign God and true King.  
From mountaintops to the sea,  
All the earth Your praise will sing.

.....

In the royal bedchamber, King Pellingor turned to his wife. "Ariana, there must be another way! I'd feel so much better about this plan if she wasn't going out alone."

Ariana smiled from where she lay on her bed. Some may see her story as tragic, though she had long ceased to think of it as such. Pellingor and Ariana were a happily wed, young couple when the Lord blessed them with a daughter, Esther.

Soon after Esther's fourth birthday, it happened. Ariana and several other ladies and noblemen from the castle had gone out riding one fine, spring day. King Pellingor knew his wife's skill as a rider and had no fears for her safety. The horse she had chosen was Astor, a spirited bay who was young and still a bit skittish. However, Ariana had ridden him before with no mishaps.

The birds were singing merrily, and the flowers were in full bloom. The sun streamed through the trees as the party made its way through the woods, laughing, talking, and singing. All merriment, however, was soon brought to an abrupt end.

The events of the next few moments happened all too fast and were engraved forever on the memories of those who witnessed them. The queen, riding sidesaddle, had turned to answer the question of one of her ladies-in-waiting when a rabbit had darted across the path, spooking Astor. In his sudden terror, the bay reared, nosing the sky and pawing the air with his hooves. Caught off-guard, Ariana felt herself falling. In vain, she tried to grab the reins of her terrified horse. She fell onto the rock-strewn path. Immediately, she was surrounded by anxious men and ladies. At first, seeing her so still and pale, they feared for her life, but she had only fainted.

It was a mournful party that returned to the castle late that afternoon. The physician soon spread the grim news: Her Majesty would live, but the fall had in some way injured her back, and he feared she would remain an invalid for life.

Nine years had passed. Though her body had remained weak—and maybe because of it—Ariana's faith only grew stronger and more evident to all who knew her. Pain, her schoolmaster, drove her daily to Christ. Yet she rejoiced, for the pains of this world taught her to long all the more for the perfect joys of the next.

"Oh, Pellingor," she now said, "I would never send her out alone. And she won't be. The Good Shepherd will surely lead His lamb."

Pellingor, looking down at her, was in awe (and not for the first time) of the strong faith underlying her gentle

words. In the silence that followed, the faint strings of a harp could be heard.

Pellingor hesitated a moment before he would trust himself to answer. Then in a voice so low Ariana could barely hear, he said at last, "You're right. By keeping her here, we only increase her danger. Our only hope is to let her go."

.....

There was a persistent knocking at Esther's door. Rising hastily, she opened it. One of her mother's ladies-in-waiting stood there. Upon seeing the young princess, she dropped in a deep curtsy.

"Oh, Eleanor! How nice to see you; please do come in."

Eleanor smiled at Esther's enthusiasm. The two of them were close friends, and it had been Eleanor who had taught Esther to love and play music.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I'm afraid I can't. I was sent here by your mother. She and the king would like to talk to you."

"Talk to me? Is my mother all right?" Esther's face suddenly grew pale.

Eleanor quickly set her fears to rest, at least for now.

"Your mother is fine, my lady. As I said, she and your father just wanted to tell you something. I'm afraid I can't give you any explanations because that was the extent of my message."

"Oh. Well, thank you for telling me. I'll be there right away."

Esther flew down the long hallway, her thoughts racing on ahead of her. Why had they needed her? The possibilities were endless—though, as she reminded herself, not all of them were bad. But usually, Eleanor's messages contained more information and were not just a simple request for her presence.

Esther slowed as she reached her parents' door. She realized she'd been running. Again. How many times had she reminded herself to slow down? Esther glanced at her

reflection in a mirror, then grinned.

"I sure do look a sight." She giggled. Hurriedly, she began to straighten herself up, smoothing her light blue dress and finger-combing her dark curls into some semblance of order. She smiled at her reflection. Better.

Opening the door, Esther stepped inside, little knowing her life was about to change forever. Her father was pacing back and forth.

When he saw his daughter enter, he stopped and motioned for her to sit down. Looking straight at her, he said slowly, "Esther, what I am about to tell you will be as hard for you to hear as it is for me to say." He paused.

Esther looked up, the confusion she was feeling evident on her face. An ice-cold fear gripped her heart. She stared up at her father, wide eyes fixed on him, hanging on to his every word.

Taking a deep breath, Pellingor continued, "Your mother and I have prayed about and discussed this many times. We believe it to be the only plan. Esther, there is now no longer any hope that help will come in time. Yesterday, one of the generals told me they"—he nodded toward the window—"are planning to receive reinforcements soon. If that's true, this castle is no longer safe. I will stay and defend my kingdom to the last if it comes to that. Your mother, too, has chosen to stay."

He gazed fixedly out the window. "How I wish I could just take both of you away from all this." In a voice that was choked with tears, he continued, "Esther, my daughter, tomorrow you must leave the castle by the underground passageway. There is room enough for a girl and her horse. It will take you to the boundaries of Talenthor. You must find a guide to lead you the rest of the way. They will take you in, for your mother is of their blood. May you find refuge and safety there."

Esther stood there, stunned. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She felt numb and wondered if this was all a bad dream. No, not a dream—a nightmare. Surely, she would wake up soon. This couldn't be happening.

Her mother's voice broke in on her reflections and brought her back to reality. "Esther, darling, this is the

hardest thing the Lord has ever asked us to do. We have spent much time in prayer, and we believe this is the only way. I will miss you more than you can imagine. I love you, my sweet girl, and I know this is difficult. But your father and I believe this to be God's will for you, and He will guide you the whole way. You will be safe with my people, which is more than could be said of your position here. The longer you stay, the less chance you have of escaping. You *must* go, Esther."

"Oh, Mother, Father, please do not ask me to leave you! I can't!" Esther broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. When she looked up, her pale face was streaked with tears. "Ask me to do anything else but go and leave you here. I'll stay with you to the end. Oh, please, do not ask me to go!" Tears streamed freely down her cheeks. She felt her father's strong arms around her.

"Esther, I love you dearly. And it is because of that love that I must protect you by telling you to leave. Never fear, my love; the Good Shepherd does not leave His sheep to fend for themselves."

"Father..."

"Yes, Esther?"

"Will I ever see you or Mother again? I...I could not bear to think of this as our last meeting."

Pellingor smiled sadly. "Lord willing, it won't be. When you are older, you may return, but now..."

"I understand."

The king looked at his daughter as she stood there, the traces of recent teardrops still evident on her cheeks. Her blue eyes, normally bright with joy, were now clouded with this recent sorrow. Once more, he asked the Lord to keep his sweet girl safe, a prayer that was fervently echoed by Ariana, who motioned to Esther.

As her daughter came near, the queen undid the clasp of a gold chain that she always wore around her neck. From this necklace hung a single pendant, engraved with an intricate, golden cross. Ariana refastened the clasp around Esther's neck. As Esther reached silently to hold the cross, Ariana took the girl's hand in both her own. Their eyes met.

"This will guarantee your welcome at Talenthor,"

whispered Ariana. “It was given to my mother when she was a girl, and it was her parting gift to me when I left Talenthor. And now it is my gift to you as you journey there.”

Esther's heart was once more too full for words. She laid her other hand on top of her mother's. After a moment's pause, she said at last, “I will treasure it always, Mother. And no matter how far away my journey takes me, it will make me feel a little closer to you and Father.”

Hands clasped around her knees, Esther sat on her cushioned window seat, gazing out at the dark sky, lit with hundreds of pinpoints of bright light. Usually, she loved stargazing and knew many of the constellations by heart. Contemplating a universe that stretched beyond the limits of her imagination helped shrink her day-to-day troubles down to size.

But tonight was different. Her vision blurred, and she rested her head on her knees. Her mind was rolling the same troubling question over and over again: why was all this happening? Life had always flowed as smoothly as a small stream. Until now. They had been under a siege for over a week, and now she was about to be separated, possibly forever, from her parents. It just didn't make sense. Why would such a loving God allow this to happen? Her mind full of sorrow and unanswered questions, the young princess fell into a troubled sleep.

## 2

### I WILL PUT MY TRUST IN HIM

Esther rapped softly on her parents' door. She had already changed and was wearing brown pants, her riding boots, a green shirt, and a cloak. Her hair was pulled into a thick braid.

*Please, please be awake.*

She paced restlessly back and forth on the cold floor and was wondering if she should knock again when she heard her mother's voice say, "Come in."

Esther didn't hesitate but scampered in and closed the door. King Pellingor rose from his chair to say good morning—and farewell—to his daughter. Both her mother and father had agreed she should try to get as early a start as possible.

"Father? Mother?"

"Yes, dear?"

Esther paused. She wasn't sure quite how to phrase this question. "Well, I was doing some thinking last night, and, well, I want to ask you something." She took a deep breath. "It's not that I don't believe in the goodness of God. But..." Esther paused again, her question weighing heavily on her mind. Then all the pent-up sorrow and fear of the past week suddenly gave way, and she burst out, "If God is so good, why is all this happening to us? Doesn't the Bible say God is our King and crushes our enemies? Why do we have to be attacked with no help in sight, and then separated?"

Wordlessly, her mother patted the chair beside her bed. Esther sank onto the soft cushion, her mind in a whirl. It was out now, and she hoped she could find an answer to the burning thought that was troubling her. Ariana turned to her daughter, her face full of the compassion she felt for this young girl who was going through so much.

"Esther, I won't pretend I know why this is



happening right now because, honestly, I don't. Will you get my Bible and turn to 1 Peter 1:6-7?"

Esther slowly reached for the old Bible. It was well-worn and evidently used often. Flipping through the pages, she read the verses out loud. "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which perishes, though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Christ Jesus."

"And Job 23:10?"

"But He knows the way I take; *When* He has put me to the test, I will come out as gold."

"Thank you. Now, what these men are saying by the Holy Spirit is that we will have trials—even fiery trials—in this world, but what matters is how we respond. Will we cast our cares on Jesus, or will we complain that it would be better if only we could have things our way? God is good, and in His goodness, He has a specific plan for each of His children. And, yes, He is our King. He sent His Prince to conquer death and Satan for us. We still face the consequences of sin here because we live in a world filled with evil and misery and pain. But that does not make God any less good."

"Are you saying you think it might be God's will for me to...to leave?"

"Yes, dear. Both your father and I believe this to be the path God has appointed..." She couldn't finish.

Her heart almost bursting with sorrow she could no longer contain, Esther realized it was time for her to go. She flung her arms around Ariana's neck in a last embrace. Mother and daughter clung to each other as if they would never let go. And Esther didn't want to. But she knew she had to.

"Goodbye, Mother." She couldn't say more and didn't need to. Ariana understood. Planting a kiss on her mother's cheek, Esther turned to her father.

"Oh, Father." The rest of her words were lost in a choking sob. She was shaking. Pellingor held his daughter close. Esther never wanted to forget the feeling of her

father's arms around her, protecting her, holding her tight.

"I love you, Father," she whispered.

"I love you too, Esther. Have courage; it will be a dark night. May we meet again when the morning is brighter."

Esther was running now, racing as fast as she could, trying to outrun the thoughts overshadowing the bright sunshine of her joy. It was no use. Panting, she paused. Then, relief flooded over her as she realized where she had unknowingly halted. Pushing open a door, she entered the royal stables, breathing in the sweet aroma of the horses she loved. Here was the one part of her life that had not changed as everything else around her had. Esther always came here to think, but now she had no time for reflections. She was afraid if she thought too long about what she must do, she'd lose her resolve to do it.

Her father had said she could bring one horse. She walked down the row of stalls. Friga, Moonlight, Aestus. She knew them all by name. Without hesitation, she headed straight toward the middle stall, undid the latch, and whistled softly.

"Onyx? Onyx, come. We must ride away, the two of us." A low whinny answered her. A bright bay stallion came prancing out of the darkness, tossing his head high.

"Onyx!" Esther threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his thick, black mane.

Though she adored all the horses, Onyx was her favorite. Ever since she could remember, it had been like this. A special bond existed between the two of them: the wild, beautiful horse and the girl he loved. However, it was not the time for reflection on the past but riding forth into the future.

It was only a few moments' work to saddle her horse. In his saddlebags, Esther had stored food for the journey, her Bible, an extra cloak, canteen, tinderbox, and some apples for her horse. Esther led Onyx out of the stables and down a passageway into the guard room, where the weaponry was stored. Dropping the reins, she pushed an old, insignificant-looking chest out of the way. It revealed a

door handle, but the door itself had been built to look like just another part of the wall.

A few years back, when Esther was finally old enough to understand its significance, Pellingor had taken his daughter alone to this very room and shown her the entrance. It led straight out of the castle, and he instructed her to tell no one but to guard its secret carefully.

Esther pushed open the door and once more picked up Onyx's reins. She hesitated a minute, memories flooding her mind and heart. She almost turned back. Then, she took a deep breath and stepped into the tunnel. The chest had a latch on the back. Esther cracked the door and grabbed the latch, pulling the chest back in front of the doorway. Then she shut the door.

Onyx followed her, the steady beat of his hooves muffled by the dirt floor as Esther cautiously made her way forward.

The tunnel was pitch black, and Esther couldn't see a thing. Not that there was anything *to* see, but still... Halting, she drew out her tinderbox and struck a light. The small glow of the flame shone out bravely against the darkness.

A wave of appalling loneliness swept over her. She had been in this passage before but never in the dark and never alone. Though Onyx was with her, not even he could take away the throbbing ache in her heart, the empty place which her parents had so recently filled. At that moment, Esther wanted nothing more than to turn around to home, where she could once more feel protected, loved, and safe. Well, about as safe as one can be with an enemy around one's castle.

She didn't—couldn't—stop. She'd made her choice. She'd given her promise, and princesses, even exiled ones, don't go back on their word. Esther had always dreamed of going on adventures, of quests, enchantments, lost treasure, ruined cities, and forgotten passwords. But never in her wildest fantasies could she have pictured an adventure like this. And to be honest, she wasn't sure if she was ready for it.

"Jesus, give me courage, *Your* courage," she pleaded. Then, as a second thought, she added, "And please don't let my candle go out."

Even so, she knew her light wouldn't last forever. She trudged on, hoping with every step to see the end, a hope that was dashed with each step. She just wanted to feel the sun's warmth on her face and a cool breeze caressing her curls, just to see the bright sky and grass sprinkled with the morning dew and not this inky darkness that surrounded her.

Fifteen minutes later, Esther was still trudging along in the darkness. The stump of a candle was all that remained to light her way. It wavered in one last, desperate effort and then was swallowed up by the blackness. This silence was starting to become eerie. Esther felt herself about to give in to the sinking weight of despair. Her situation appeared hopeless, so she began to do what she had heard her mother do so often. She began to talk out loud—not to herself but to her Shepherd and Savior.

“Jesus, I confess that right now, I'm afraid. I need Your help to get through this tunnel. I need Your strength just to keep going. I need You, Lord, because there's no one else. Help me to remember I'm Your princess, a daughter of the King of kings.”

When Esther thought she couldn't take another step and was about to sit down and have a good cry, she bumped into something cold and hard that brought her back to her senses. The door! Of course! She'd been so engrossed in her own thoughts that she hadn't realized the end of the tunnel and the way to freedom was right in front of her face. Esther thought she had never been so happy to see a door before. Then again, she'd never been trapped in total darkness before either.

Feeling for the latch, Esther tried to undo it. The latch stuck. For a single, sickening moment, Esther thought she would be trapped down here forever. With a strength empowered by desperation, she pushed hard. The door swung outward. A burst of golden sunlight filled the tunnel. For the moment, darkness retreated.

As the princess stood there blinking in the bright sunlight, she sent a quick prayer Heavenward.

“Lord, I'm completely in Your hands. Help me to keep trusting You.”

Then Esther breathed a sigh that was equal parts regret and relief. Relief to be back in the fresh air and regret because she could no longer turn back. Her flight to freedom had now truly begun.

Leading Onyx, she crept out of the tunnel and realized why the door had been so hard to open. When the tunnel rose upward, it created half a hill. A false cover had been made to look like the other half of the hill, so no passerby would have noticed anything unusual. It was this cover she had pushed out of the way. Quickly, she shoved it back into place.

Esther's heart was beating so loudly, she was sure someone would hear. Even her own breathing and Onyx's occasional snort seemed to disturb the still morning air. It seemed peaceful and quiet. Too quiet. Strange, she'd almost forgotten what peace and quiet felt like. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Esther mounted her horse.

She could still see the castle a distance away. Reluctantly, she turned Onyx's head east. Talenthor lay in that direction. Between her and her destination lay a stretch of woods; they would provide good cover.

Once on the narrow forest path, Esther began to breathe more freely. She'd made it safely thus far with no other danger than bumping her head. All that remained was to go through the forest, bear east, and find a guide.

At last, she was on the road to freedom, but at a great cost—the cost of leaving behind the two people she loved most in the world. Even though her head still throbbed from her recent encounter with the door, Esther could have sung for joy if her heart hadn't been aching. Freedom. It seemed much too easy.

She looked back one more time. Somehow, it was almost like the end of everything.

Her mind was miles away, in a castle that lay to the west, when Onyx stopped short. Snorting, he shook his head and swiveled both ears around, alert, tense, waiting.

“What's the matter, Onyx? What do you hear? Come on, Boy; I don't like this either, but we've got to go forward.”

Onyx suddenly pinned his ears back. Almost simultaneously, a sharp command rang out, piercing the

stillness.

“Halt! Stay right where you are, or my men will shoot!”

Instinctively, Esther pulled the reins. She turned her horse around to face the voice...and froze, paralyzed with a new and sudden terror. If her heart had been pounding before, it was racing now. Face pale and eyes wide, the princess bit her tongue to hold back a scream.

“Malon.”

The word was hardly more than a gasp. Her mind whirled. *Malon!* The captain of a northern army, the sworn foe of her people, Malon was known to be a cold, ruthless leader. What was he doing here in the middle of the forest? That was when it hit her: these were the reinforcements her father mentioned would be arriving.

He smiled, but it was a cruel, grim smile that sent chills down Esther’s back. Here was a man who would stop at nothing to achieve his goal, and right now, that meant her capture. His eyes were cold and hard as iron, dark and without pity.

“Yes, I see by your face that you have heard of me, though surely you must know not to believe all you hear.” He reined in his horse, a magnificent, coal-black steed, who was prancing restlessly.

“You have two choices before you. Either my men can *take* you back to camp, or you can come of your own free will—escorted by us, of course.”

His eyes narrowed.

“And, Princess, one more thing: resistance is useless. Make a single wrong move,” Malon snapped his fingers, “and one of these arrows will surely be at your heart. Now. Which option? It’s your choice, but time—and may I add, patience—is flying.”

Esther gulped. There was no real difference in these two “options.” She would become a prisoner-of-war—or, more accurately, a bargaining tool—in the hands of the enemy. She knew her father would give up the castle rather than lose his only daughter. That made up Esther’s mind.

*What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.*<sup>2</sup> How

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 56:3

often had she heard her mother recite that verse? But never, until now, had it seemed so relevant—or so real. But when fear's strangling, cold grasp gripped her heart, Esther could not make those words apply to her heart.

Staring straight at the hardened warrior before her, blue eyes blazing with a fierce determination to remain free, she cried, "Neither!"

Onyx reared, the arrow meant for Esther passing just under his pawing forelegs. He wheeled like a bird in flight and sped away.

Malon instantly took charge of the situation.

"Taren, take your scouts and follow her." His eyes narrowed. "You know what to do when you find her. The rest of you, come with me to the camp. I've got a feeling General Ornus will be glad of our assistance."

Taren, a tall, young soldier riding a pure white horse, saluted. Motioning to his men, he set spurs to his horse's side. And the race was on.

Onyx already had a good head start, but Taren's white mare was rapidly gaining ground. Smaller and lighter than Onyx, she steadily closed the gap between them. Esther saw a movement from out of the corner of her eye. A quick, backward glance confirmed her fears. Taren's scouts were well-trained in the art of tracking. They had spread out like a horseshoe, effectively cutting off escape from either direction.

One's mind thinks of the remotest things at such times. Esther wondered why the archers weren't shooting. It struck her like a bolt of lightning: she was of more value to them alive than dead or wounded. As frightening as the thought was, there was no time to think. Closer and closer came Taren's horse. She had long since outdistanced the others; it was now a race between the two of them, the white mare and the bright bay stallion.

Esther was desperate. She was fleeing for her life! She gave Onyx his head. It was as though he had grown wings. He surged forward, a dark brown streak of speed and energy. On and on he galloped, effortlessly keeping up with a whirlwind pace. But Esther knew he could not keep it up forever. No horse could, and she wouldn't ask it of him.

Before long, he would have to stop.

Thoughts of capture and what happened after loomed before Esther. Onyx was tiring fast, his sides lathered dark with sweat. Esther signaled her horse to stop. So, this was how it was all going to end. Yet she held her head up, hardly flinching, staring death in the face. And though she was trembling, she wasn't as terrified as she had been a moment before as she reflected on the Lord's perfect timing and Sovereign command over all situations.

Taren had also halted his mare, who now stood less than a foot away from Onyx. Then, looking straight at the princess, Taren whispered, "Go!"



# 3

## A NEW JOURNEY BEGINS

The princess stared at Taren incredulously. “What did you say?”

“I said, ‘Go!’ Flee! Run! Don’t you realize this is your only chance? The rest of the soldiers will arrive soon, and then you’ll *have* to be taken prisoner. Is that really what you want?”

“But you...you’re...”

Taren sighed in exasperation and threw a glance over his shoulder. They didn’t have much time. If only he could make her understand...

“Listen, I don’t have time to explain, and you probably wouldn’t believe me if I did.”

There was a faint thrumming of hooves on the road—the rest of the tracking party. Taren gave her one last, pleading look, begging her to believe the impossible—that among the enemy, she had found an ally.

“May the Lord bless you,” she said simply. The hoofbeats grew steadily louder. “I’ll never forget this.”

A moment later, she was gone, riding eastward toward freedom.

Taren let out his breath. He stroked his horse’s neck.

“That was a close one, wasn’t it, Girl? Another minute and they would have had her.”

He saw the foremost scout approaching. The reality of what he had just done—though he would never regret it—sank in. Taren steeled himself for what he knew would come next.

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Slowly, they picked their way through the dense maze of trees. Esther knew that speed was vital, yet one sound would give them away. She led Onyx forward, trying

not to step on the sticks littering the forest floor. Up ahead, she could faintly see where the trees ended and the mountains began. As they neared the edge of the clearing, the sun shone brighter through the canopy of interlaced branches above. Somehow, her troubles didn't seem as big as they had last night. The birds chirped a sweet melody as they hopped from branch to branch. Esther felt a song of hope rise within her.

She wondered about the soldier who had freed her. They were supposed to be enemies, but he had given Esther her last, and only, chance. Esther realized she didn't even know his name. There hadn't been time to ask. Why had he let her go if he was truly her enemy? And if he wasn't an enemy, why was he fighting in Malon's army? She'd probably never know the truth. They would probably never meet again. Still, she wondered...

Esther gazed out across the field in front of her. Distant mountain peaks framed the horizon. She felt a thrill of excitement. Breathing a quick prayer for guidance, she grabbed a piece of Onyx's mane and vaulted onto her horse. She lightly flicked the reins.

Esther's plan was simple—to make as many miles as they could before sunset and put as much distance as possible between them and the castle. She urged her horse into a canter.

The day had dawned bright and clear with hardly a cloud in the sky—perfect for traveling. The ground before them was smooth and flat, broken here and there by a few small hills. Esther gazed out at the world that stretched before her eyes, a world she'd never seen before. For a while, at least, she could be a carefree girl again, still full of the hopes, dreams, and faith that a week of heartache had not been able to quench. She would never have imagined how much that faith would be tested.

Moving at a steady pace, they soon left the miles behind them. In a world populated by thousands, they were seemingly alone in a vast, waving ocean of grass. Just her and her horse. If there was ever a time Esther needed her Savior's strength, it was now.

Onward, always eastward, they traveled. Every mile

the same, one after another. Hours blended together. The mountains hardly seemed any closer. Esther began to wonder if they were just mirages, allusions brought on by her exhausted mind. Maybe they would keep traveling on forever, always seeking, never finding.

The sun was at their backs now, no longer blinding them with its glaring light. Esther made a short break for lunch before pressing on. They must keep moving. Nothing else mattered. Already, Esther had fallen into the enemy's clutches once. She had only been saved by the Sovereign hand of God. Next time... Well, Esther wasn't about to let there *be* a next time. She shuddered and urged Onyx on.

As the day wore on, her thoughts began to wander. Providence. Never before had it meant so much or seemed so sweet to her as it had this morning. There she was, almost ready to turn herself in, thinking there was no other way out, when God had shown her that nothing is impossible for the Creator of the universe. He had sent the right soldier at the right time so that she had been freed. He had even placed a soldier in that army who was willing to fight against the enemy, even in small ways and small things, at great cost to himself, like letting one girl, who was being hunted down, go free.

Esther gazed upward, her blue eyes brimming with tears. "Thank You, Jesus," she said. Her heart was too full to say more, but she meant every word.

The day had almost ended. During one of the halts that were becoming more frequent, Esther glanced at her horse. Onyx's nostrils were dilated, and his body was lathered dark with sweat. She had led him the last few miles because he was worn out. She was as tired as her companion. She doubted either of them could travel much further that night in their condition. It was impossible to think they'd reach their destination that evening.

Esther decided they could stop here for tonight. Esther hadn't planned on having to spend the night on the plain. It wasn't that she was *afraid*—well, not much anyway. She had just counted on arriving at Talenthor before nightfall. She hadn't realized it was so far away.

Hungry and tired as she was, Esther also realized that she couldn't pitch camp out here in the open. It was too dangerous. They would have to find some other shelter. On their right was a thin strip of woods. Not exactly a forest, but it would be safer than where they were.

The stars were beginning to come out, small drops of light peeking through a dark curtain. Esther smiled. She was glad that "Let there be light"<sup>3</sup> included stars.

Esther turned and began gathering sticks for a fire. Leaving Onyx for a moment, she moved on to where the trees grew thicker and the kindling was more plentiful. It didn't take long to gather a bundle, and Esther was about the turn back when a sound made her pause.

There it was again. That sound. It hadn't simply been her imagination. She waited for a second, then whistled softly. A low whine answered her—the cry of a small, hurt, helpless animal. Esther froze. Part of her wanted to go see where that noise was coming from. The other part, the more cautious side of her, wanted to stay back.

She put a hand on the hilt of her sword, which she'd brought to cut the bigger pieces of wood. Against her better judgment, Esther cautiously walked toward the cry. She heard it once more. She took a few more steps forward, and what she saw next wrung her heart in pity.

Lying on the ground was a dog. She couldn't have been more than a year or two old, though she was obviously undernourished and had been abandoned to fend for herself. The puppy was black, and there were white markings on her paws, chest, and face. Her long tail had a single white spot, as did her back. Her large, dark brown eyes, full of pleading and fear, would have melted the hardest heart. They were the saddest eyes Esther had ever seen. Starved for love, yet hesitant to trust its offer, the puppy watched Esther approach. Around her neck was a braided leather collar with a metal plaque bearing a sort of inscription on it. Most of the letters had worn off, but Esther could still read the first two, "FI."

Esther realized with a gasp why the dog hadn't moved this whole time. One of her front paws was caught in

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:3

a steel trap, its cruel jaws clamped tightly to her foot, cutting into the tender pads on her paw.

"Oh, you poor thing!" Esther murmured. "No wonder you were crying."

Dropping her sticks, forgotten for the moment, she knelt down beside the young dog and reached out one hand. The puppy flinched and pinned her ears back. After a while, she sniffed Esther's hand cautiously. It was as if she could understand that anyone, any help, would be better than lying here alone.

"That's good," Esther said softly. "You're a good girl, and I'm going to get you out of this. I just want to help you."

The puppy didn't even growl as Esther touched the trap. Esther's brow was furrowed in concentration as she felt the cold steel. There must be some way to unlock this thing. Finally, she found a small lever. She pushed it down hard. The trap sprang open with a click.

"There, Girl. You're free now." Esther stood up, brushing the dirt off her pants. The dog got up carefully, not putting any weight on her injured foot. Wagging her long, slender tail, she gazed at her rescuer. There was an expression akin to gratefulness in her warm, brown eyes.

Regathering her sticks, Esther turned to go. She hadn't gone more than a few steps when she realized the dog was following her. Limping slightly, the dog trotted up to Esther and nudged her hand. Esther patted her head.

"All right, Girl." She grinned "You can come, too. You need a name, though. Let me think. Fi...Fi..." She paused, looking up at the sky then back down at the black-and-white dog beside her. Esther snapped her fingers as a sudden inspiration came to her. The dog apparently recognized this as some sort of signal, a command so familiar from her old life and her previous owner. She sat down, her large, dark eyes asking Esther if this is what the girl had wanted her to do. Esther smiled.

"I thought of the perfect name for you, Girl! Fiona. Do you like that?"

Fiona wagged her tail.

And that was how Fiona, the young, lost puppy, came to join Esther and Onyx in their journey east.

Esther sat with her back to the fire. Onyx was grazing close by. Fiona was curled in a sleepy ball next to a tree. Never had the stars seemed clearer, or closer. Straining her eyes, she found the *Stella Polaris*, the North Star. Esther loved the North Star, the bright signpost of the heavens. You couldn't be lost once you knew where it was. And she knew that far away, in a castle surrounded by soldiers, a king and his queen were looking out at that same moonlit sky created by their God and were watching that same star. Maybe that also had something to do with why she liked it so much.

A snore nearby interrupted her reverie. Fiona was already worn out, and a warm fire had done the rest. She was fast asleep. As Esther watched in amusement, the puppy began running in her sleep. She whined once or twice. Her nose began twitching as she raced down her prey. Faster and faster, running in an all-out chase through the forests of her dreams, Fiona growled. Then she stopped. Her tail thumped, and she relaxed. Victorious.

The fire was slowly dying. Esther yawned. She could barely keep her eyes open. Total silence. The fire was hardly more than a few wavering flames. Soon, even they died out.

Esther desperately wanted to stay awake. For one thing, nighttime under an open sky was too wonderful to miss. Besides, she needed time to think. The events of the last twenty-four hours had whirled by, leaving her with no time for reflections. It still seemed so unreal, still a dream. She knew tomorrow, reality would set in.

Esther lay down, cushioned by the soft grass. She rolled up her spare cloak as a pillow. Though the night was not unusually cold, she shivered and snuggled closer to Fiona. Fiona woke up, blinking her eyes in sleepy confusion. Once she saw everything was all right, she closed them, giving a sigh of contentment as she curled up next to Esther.

"Dear Jesus, You are the Creator of this universe. Every star You know, for You made them all. You are all-powerful and omnipresent. Not a sparrow can fall that You do not see. Not a single flower can bloom that You do not know. All things and everyone are in Your hands, O Sovereign Lord.

“I pray tonight that You would watch over my father and mother. You have promised to always watch over Your children, so I pray that You would keep them safe. Guide me to Talenthor.

“And, Lord, I thank You so much for sending me that soldier in Your perfect timing. I know that I need You now. I’m so afraid. I wish I could trust You the way Father and Mother do, but it seems so hard. I can’t see the plan You have, and sometimes, I wonder how this can possibly all work out. Forgive me for doubting You, and please, please let me be able to see my parents again one day. In Jesus’ holy Name I pray, amen.”

And with these words, Esther closed her eyes and drifted off into the forgetful realm of sleep. She needed her rest for the long journey ahead of her.

