

Chapter 16

“Those are Spear Raiser shirts,” whispered Talitha, as if afraid of waking the dead. “It looks like they’ve been here for days; the bodies are already starting to rot away.”

“I wonder if one of them is Laksu?” I asked, not really wanting to look close enough to find out.

“I don’t see his emblem,” Talitha replied, after moving her horse closer to the bodies. “It looks like these were just left behind; some of them are women, and that one there is a small child. Korei *never* leave their dead unburied; they believe the spirits of the unburied dead will come back to haunt them. They must have been terrified to run away like that. What could have frightened them so much?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know; they’re very superstitious. They may have heard something, or seen something, after some of them were already sick, then just have run away.”

“Well, we can’t help them now, and there’s no way we could bury them all, even if we had the tools. We’ll have to leave them to the animals. I’m surprised the bodies haven’t already been eaten.”

Further on, we discovered yet more bodies, both of animals and of the Korei. In all, we counted thirty bodies before we reached the second island, early that evening. The island itself had been stripped bare of trees and brush. The stones from the old campfire site had been strewn about, along with the ashes and half-burned wood. Footprints and hoof prints covered the ground, and it was impossible to make out details.

I wondered if Marcus had come this way; with the swamp’s being so dry now, he might have easily picked a more direct route. He knew about the secret path, but I doubted he could find it by himself.

Talitha was looking around on the opposite side of the island from where I was standing. “Come here, Lysia,” she called, a strange note in her voice. She pointed to a body half-buried in the mud near the island. “Isn’t that Laksu’s personal emblem?”

The body was lying face down, with an emblem and chain gripped in one bloodstained hand.

“Yes,” I said in a shaky voice, “but I don’t know if that’s him or not. It looks too small for Laksu.”

Talitha leaned over, and pulled the body out of the mud with little effort, flipping it over on its back. What I saw almost made me vomit. Even caked with mud, it was apparent the face was all but torn away. Who could have done that – or what? Talitha replaced the body as it had been before, face down.

We had little desire to spend the night in the place, but the horses needed rest, and there was no other place to camp before leaving the Mardath. Since there were rocks lying about from the fire pit, we took some of them, and some brush from the swamp, and covered the body. An air of death hung over the place, and Talitha said she saw demons dancing around in the forest. We agreed we should keep watch that night, and managed to find enough dry brush in the swamp around to build a campfire.

The sounds started some time after I fell asleep, with Talitha on watch. I awoke to what sounded like a hoarse scream, like some wild beast in rage, or in pain. Talitha gripped my shoulder, but there was no need for her to awaken me; my eyes sprang open immediately.

“What is it?” I whispered, a shiver running over my whole body.

“I don’t know,” Talitha whispered back. “I thought it might be a panther the first time it screamed, but it doesn’t sound like that. It sounds more human. The first time I heard it, the noise was farther away. It’s getting closer. We’d better be prepared, in case we have to run.”

“I don’t think running around in the swamp in the middle of the night is a very good idea. Maybe we should just stand and fight, if we have to. You still have your bow, and I know how to use a knife.”

For the rest of that night, we sat huddled together around the fire, an arrow notched and ready in Talitha’s bow, and my knife in my hand. The screams grew louder and closer as the creature approached the fire. The fire kept it at bay, though. We never saw it as more than a huge shadow creeping through the bushes. Several times, the screams of rage grew more distant, but they always came back again. The horses were whinnying in terror, and straining at their tethers throughout the night, but they stayed with us. The noises stopped at dawn, but we weren’t quite convinced it was gone. We took turns napping after that, but we were both dead tired when we took to our saddles in late morning.

There was no noise in the swamp in the light of day, not even the buzzing of insects. Even the horses’ hooves were muffled by the mud of the trail. The sense of foreboding never left me; something unspeakably evil was still out there. The morning wore on, and I began to wonder if the creature had left after all.

When the attack came, there was no warning. We rounded a turn in the trail, and the thing was there in front of us, waiting.

“Laksu!” I said, my voice little more than a croak.

Once I said the name, I wasn’t so sure. The creature was barely human, with hair over its whole body, in matted, filthy strands, and only a few strips of hide left hanging of what had once been the leather shirt and breeches of a Korei warrior. The face was a mask of hate, with eyes like black pits of Hell, and teeth curled up in an angry snarl.

“Demons!” The word had no sooner left Talitha’s mouth than the creature leapt forward and pulled me from my saddle.

“Die witch!” he snarled, as he flung me to the ground. I had no time for more than a strangled “Jesus!” as his huge hands wrapped around my throat. In my mind, I uttered a prayer that had no chance to pass my lips.

I felt the hands close around my neck, as I looked up into the demon-crazed eyes, but the death blow I expected never came. There was pressure, but not the crushing pain that should have come just before death. Laksu’s face showed first surprise, then redoubled fury, but he could not finish his kill. I felt his body jolt once, and again, and yet a third time, then I caught the flash of a knife blade in the mid-morning sun. A look of utter

surprise crossed the face above me, then I felt a rush of warm blood over my face and chest as the man's heavy body collapsed on top of mine.

I heard screaming from somewhere, and wondered vaguely if the voice was mine. Moments later, the heavy weight was rolled off of me, and replaced with the spare form of my sister, blood-stained knife still in her hand. She cast the knife to one side, and laid her tear-stained face on mine.

A while later, once the spasms of weeping stopped, we sat together on the ground, just a few feet from the hulking corpse with its spreading pool of blood. The scent of it was hot in the air.

"We have to bury him, I guess," Talitha said, in a shaky voice. "He had seven demons in him. I put three arrows in his back, but it was like I was pricking him with a needle. The angel with you wouldn't let him choke you, but I realized that the only hope I had of killing him was with a knife."

Both of our horses were standing patiently a few feet away. It always amazed me, with what I knew about horses and their tendency to bolt, that ours stuck with us. That in itself was a miracle of the Lord.

One of the hardest things I've ever done is help my sister drag the heavy body off into the brush. We had no shovel to dig a grave with, but there was a bog nearby. After we threw the body into the mud, which sucked at our feet as we walked to the edge, we both turned away without watching it sink below the surface. We checked before we left, to make sure it was gone. The blood was easier to hide; we just kicked dirt and rocks over it until it was no longer visible. It would take rain to wash it away completely, and only the Lord himself knew when that would happen. I washed off as much of the blood from my own face and clothes as best I could in a shallow, stagnant pool.

Darkness fell before we were out of the Mardath, but neither of us wanted to spend another night there. There was enough light from the moon now to provide a dim view of the path, and the horses had no trouble picking their way. Every so often, they would step gingerly over bodies, human and animal, which regularly blocked the way. When we saw the dark mass of the three-sided rock ahead, we both breathed a sigh of relief, along with a prayer of thanksgiving.

The horses were weary, but we were both near exhaustion. Somehow we managed to throw off the packs and saddles, but collapsed in the dirt without bothering with bedrolls. I fell at once into a deep, dreamless sleep, and awoke with the warm morning sun shining in my face. Talitha was lying beside me, her arm thrown loosely around my neck. When I removed her arm so I could get up and tend to necessity, she came awake as well.

"Good morning," she said, smiling as she moved to kiss my cheek. "Was it all a dream, do you think?"

"A nightmare, perhaps," I said, returning her smile. "The Lord is gracious; I've lost count of the number of times he has already saved us from death. I can't imagine what he has in mind that is so special, that he would deliver us over and over again."

"Oh, I think you do," she said, a serious look replacing the smile. "Didn't the Lord's angel tell you already? I think that Diotrophes was the first part of the fulfillment of the

promise. If not for us, he would probably never have come to know the Lord, and I think that someone who is already a bandit has the best chance at leading others of them to the Lord. Papa has already begun the work with the Korei, and others started the churches in Tirzah and Kirjath, but there is work for you in both places. You don't have to do great things; just let the Lord do them through you."

"And they call *me* a prophet," I said, smiling again as I arose to head for a nearby clump of bushes. We shared a little food together afterward; what we had brought with us, even supplemented with what Talitha could catch, was almost gone.

The River Kor was nearby; when we saw it, I wasn't sure we were even at the right place. After just a few months of drought, the river's flow was little more than a trickle. Here and there were pools of water, some of them already stagnant, and there were large patches of sand, rock, and bare ground. Rain must have stopped falling at the river's source long before it ceased to water the grasslands of the Kore.

The slope above the river, and the plain beyond, lush green only months before, were blackened and bare. As in my vision, fire had swept over the grasslands, and the ground was so dry that no new blades had poked their way through the charred earth. It broke my heart to think of all the death and suffering that could have been avoided. Surely there must have been something I could have done differently; I just couldn't think of what it might be.

Not knowing when we might see water again, we let the horses drink, a process that took much longer than it would have before. We also filled our water skins, and gathered what grass we could find on the unscorched side of the river. Not only would there be little or no grass for the horses for miles, but we didn't know if we could even find food for ourselves. Talitha dug up a snake and couple of lizards in the dry bed of the river, so we would at least have a meal for that day.

We crossed what was left of the river, and topped the slope beyond, our hearts torn by memories of the last, gallant charge of the Horse-Eaters. With a pang, I remembered we had already passed the spot where our dear Portius gave up his life for us. My mind had been so occupied with thoughts of what the Lord had done that I hadn't taken notice. I stopped my horse, and Talitha did likewise, her face asking an unspoken question.

"We rode by the spot where Papa was killed, and didn't stop. Do you think we should go back?"

"Perhaps," she said, then stopped, looking away from me and out over the blackened plain. "Wait – there's someone coming, just a single rider, I think."

The figure coming toward us was riding at a slow pace, and it took a while for whoever it was to approach near enough for recognition. We could tell it was a girl; we both recognized her face at once.

"Mazi!"