

Chapter 17

We had seen Mazi several times during the years we spent among the Korei. She always had a bright smile and a friendly word, especially after we learned her language. We also saw her briefly at the Great Talk, though the Cloud Walker camp was on the opposite side of the valley from the Horse-Eaters. Why she should be here, alone, just at the moment we entered the Kore, I had no idea. The answer came quickly.

When she saw us, she tried to urge her pony to a faster pace, but the poor thing was too tired to respond. We rode toward her once we recognized her, and she held out her right hand, palm up, in the traditional greeting of friendship. Her face, usually so alive and full of life, was haggard and drawn.

“Greetings to you, my sisters in Christ, beloved and longed for.” The tone of her voice spoke of great trial, and unspeakable sadness.

“And to you, little sister Mazi, blessing and comfort in Jesus Christ. What brings you here, so far from the tents of the Cloud Walkers?” As I expressed my greeting, her eyes filled with tears.

“The Cloud Walkers no longer dwell in their tents. After the Horse-Eaters were slain, the Ghost Talkers attacked us as well, since we were branded witches along with you. Every male of our band was killed, along with many of the woman and children. I was taken by the Spear Raisers, and forced to be a wife to Laksu.

“No drop of rain has fallen on the Kore after the Lord sent your vision to warn us. The grass began to die, and the waterholes dried up one by one, not just in months, but weeks. Wildfires burned over the face of the land, from horizon to horizon, and many of the People perished along with their cattle and horses. The false prophets of the old ways gathered together, and decided that, perhaps, there would be a drought after all, and that all of the People should move to the Kore for water and food. About two months ago, a great movement began, and many thousands of us moved south, with our flocks and herds. We got here, only to find that the Kor was already disappearing into the sands. The other bands turned back, but Laksu decided that the Spear Raisers should move into the Mardath. He thought that if the witch could escape there, so could the Korei.

“I know you’ve seen the bodies. Everyone who drank the waters of the Mardath got sick, and many died, as did many of the cattle. We found a trail which must once have been hidden. We found an island deep inside the Mardath, and sat up a camp there. It was in that place that the devil entered into Laksu, and he became as a madman. He attacked poor Marat, and tore his face off with his bare hands. Marat grabbed the medallion around Laksu’s neck, but it did no good. We stood by like statues, unable to move or to believe what we saw. When he had killed Marat, Laksu grabbed one of the women, and ran off with her into the swamp. We heard her screams for a while, then there was silence. A few people and animals ran on into the Mardath; most of us headed back toward the north. Laksu killed two more of us on the way, and others died of the poison, but when we left the Mardath, Laksu did not follow. We did not stop at the Kor, what was left of it, except to quench our burning thirst.”

Mazi paused here for breath, drawing her tongue over dry lips. Talitha gave her the water skin she carried. After quenching her thirst in long, greedy gulps, our friend continued her story.

“Several more people died of the poison of the swamp in the following days, and many others in the great fire that burned all of the way down to the banks of the Kor. I stayed with what remained of the Spear Raisers until one night seven days past. An angel of God came to me in my dreams, and told me to rise up, and go to the Kor, to meet you. There is more to tell.

“On my way here, just three nights gone, I heard the noise of men fighting, with shouts and screams and the neighing of horses. I got close enough to see what was going on. The warriors of the Grass Weavers were attacking a group of men, strangers to the land. It had been a large group, but most of them were already dead. The only ones still alive were a few gathered around a man who seemed to be the leader, and a giant with an axe who struck down anyone who drew near. He was finally set upon by a dozen Grass Weavers with clubs, who swarmed over him like flies on a corpse, and finally struck him down. All of the men, even the dead ones, were carried away, and their horses were taken as well.”

My heart dropped like a dead weight to the ground. “The one man – did he have dark brown hair?”

“Why, yes, I suppose it could have been brown; it was dark, so I’m not sure. Do you know him?”

“He’s my husband, and the giant is his best friend Brutellas.” My voice was a whisper, and I felt all the color leave my face.”

Mazi’s face went pale as well. “Then this is why I was sent. We must hurry, and trust in God’s mercy than we are not too late. The Grass Weavers, and some of the other tribes, have started eating human flesh; that’s why they took the bodies with them. Two nights from now is the Feast of Burnt Flesh, and the sacrifices that night, as you know, must still be alive. Before, they were animals, but now...”

“Dear Lord God, why are you allowing this to happen?” My cry came out of my mouth unbidden. Talitha and Mazi tried to comfort me, but for a long while all I could do was wail in agony. I fell from my horse, and rolled around on the ground, pushing away the hands that tried to comfort me. Finally, Talitha slapped me solidly in the face, which brought my senses back to me.

Her voice was soft, but stern. “If we are to save them, Lysia, we have to leave, right now. This doesn’t help Marcus and Brutellas, and it won’t help you either.”

She looked at Mazi, who was seated on the other side of me. “We need to go down to the river and get water for you and for your horse. There’s still some dried grass near the Mardath. If our horses don’t have food and water, they’ll never make it, and neither will we. Ours have eaten a little, but they’ll need more. Let’s go, and we’ll set out as quickly as we’re able.”

Maxi’s horse was almost gone. Its head was drooping, and we had trouble just leading it down to the river. We soon decided we’d have to leave it behind. My horse was larger

than Talitha's, but hers was easily the toughest, so we decided Mazi would ride with her. We would trade off from time to time.

The ride across the scorched Kore was sheer agony, not so much because of the fatigue and hunger we faced, but because I was sick with fear. I knew I was supposed to trust God, but right then He seemed very far away. We rested no longer than absolutely necessary to keep the horses alive and moving. There were occasional clumps of grass they could munch on, but no water to drink. We gave them a little of our precious supply, but we couldn't spare what they really needed. Our meager supply of food dwindled and disappeared; I felt no sense of hunger, but the other two forced me to eat a little.

The second night we reached the Grass Weaver camp, which had probably been moved to a safer area far from their ancestral home. The place was familiar to both Talitha and I; with a shock I realized their campsite was the one inhabited before by the Horse-Eaters. Part of the overpowering fear that had dominated my mind gave way to anger. Among the Korei, building campfires over the fires of the murdered dead was sacrilege.

As we approached the village, we could see the fires leaping high into the air, and hear the exultant screams of the revelers. In a word spoken to my mind, I knew what I must do.

"You must ride into the camp, alone," the Lord's voice said clearly. "Trust in me."

The other two didn't question my leading, simply saying they would pray while I was gone. Minutes later, I was riding my horse into the camp, at a fast walk. I felt a sense of great warmth all about me, and a glow that lighted my way. Three men were already tied, screaming, to burning stakes, and I thought for one awful minute I was too late. An instant later, I saw two men tied to nearby stakes, surrounded by brush that had not yet been kindled.

The Grass Weavers were intent on watching the torture, and some of them were already brandishing knives, set to cut strips of living flesh from their victims. When some of the beasts saw me, they let out screams of a different kind, and soon the whole village knew what was in their midst.

"It's the witch from the Mardath!"

"She's come back from the dead!"

"Oh, spirits of the night sky, protect us!"

Those clustered around the stakes of burning scattered when I rode my horse into their midst. I stopped in front of the stakes to which Marcus and Brutellas were bound, and whirled my horse around to face the frightened Grass Weavers. The light about me seemed to grow stronger as I turned toward them.

"I am the servant of the most high God." My voice had a ring and a resonance I never knew it possessed. "The two souls you would burn belong to me. You will release them to me, or I will curse your souls to burn for all eternity."

Almost to a man, the Grass Weaver warriors leapt to the stakes, and cut the leather thongs that bound Brutellas and my beloved to the stakes. Marcus almost fell, but Brutellas wrapped a great arm around him to steady him.

“I will leave, and these two only will follow. Remain here until the rising of the sun, or you will all surely die!”

Brutellas half led, half drug Marcus along as they followed my horse out of camp. Behind us there was crying and screaming, and wails of fear mingled in, but no one spoke or tried to stop us as we departed. Once out of sight of the camp, I got down from my horse, and took Marcus from Brutellas. He all but collapsed into my arms, and our tears mingled as I showered his face with long-deferred kisses.

Both Mazi and Talitha were laughing in excited glee. “The light!” Mazi said, a sense of awe in her voice. “Did you see the light that was all around you? You looked like a flaming angel of God!”

So that was what I was feeling, more than seeing, there in the camp. I had been obedient; God had done the rest.

“We must keep moving,” I said, at last content to release my husband for a few minutes. “I don’t think they’ll follow until morning, but we have only two horses for the five of us.”

“But – where can we go?” Mazi asked. “We won’t be safe anywhere among the Korei. The Grass Weavers may not dare to follow at all, but the other tribes may not be frightened so easily.”

“We go to Tirzah,” I said firmly. “And, from there, across the Parnath to Berith. My husband sought to go there for all of the wrong reasons, but that’s where the Lord wants us to go.”

A long silence greeted my pronouncement, but no one spoke out in argument. Marcus was the first to speak.

“We go to Tirzah,” he echoed.

It was settled.