

Chapter 18

Marcus rode with me, but Brutellas walked alongside. He pointed out sensibly that he was too heavy for either of the horses Talitha and I rode. His endurance astounded me, especially considering the torture and abuse he had undergone over the last few days. Both he and Marcus bore fresh scars all over their bodies, though neither of them was inclined to talk about their captivity at first.

Toward morning, the Lord again intervened in a miraculous way to meet our need. We rode into a draw, a rare valley in the plains of Kore. There, grazing peacefully on one of the few patches of dry grass that had escaped the fires, stood two horses. They were lean, but not sickly.

Talitha let out the shrill whistle that all Korei use to call their mounts. Usually, a horse will respond only to its master's call, but both of these raised their heads at the call, and trotted over to Talitha in unison.

"I recognize one of them," she said, in astonishment. "He has a distinctive white mark on his left hind leg. God be praised, but these are *Horse-Eater* ponies."

One of the horses was stout enough, we hoped, to hold Brutellas. The miracles were not finished; as we prepared to ride out of the little valley, Mazi's sharp eyes caught a glint from a hole off to our right, in the side of one of the low hills that lined the valley. We knew then why the horses had chosen to stay here; there was a spring, and it still had water!

As we approached, two startled rabbits sprang away from the spring; Talitha's arrows brought both of them down. We stopped long enough in that place to water the horses and fill our water skins, then made a fire to cook the meat. It was the first food the two men had had in three days, and we gave them the greatest shares.

There was no safe place to rest in the little valley, and we still didn't feel safe from pursuit or discovery. After a brief rest after we ate, we sat out again. Marcus was so tired we had to tie him to the saddle so he wouldn't fall off his horse. This was still the land of the Horse-Eaters, and Talitha and I knew a place we could stop to sleep.

We saw it soon after leaving the valley. After a few more hours of riding, as the afternoon waned toward evening, we came to it. It was called Salvation Rock, because in ages past it had served as a refuge for the Horse-Eaters in times of great trouble. It wasn't a really high hill, but it stood seventy-five feet above the Kore, and it was visible for miles all around.

The path to the top was only wide enough for a single horse and rider, which is what it made it so defensible. At the top was a small mesa, no more than fifty feet on each side. It was no place where a group of people could survive for any length of time, but as a place to make a stand it was without equal in all of the Kore.

Mazi, who was young and vigorous, kept the first watch; in daylight it wasn't necessary to defend the path, because anyone approaching could be seen long before they arrived. She settled in near one edge of the mesa; from there she would make a circuit from time to time to make sure we slept undisturbed.

The rest of us collapsed on the ground, Marcus and I sharing my bedroll, while Talitha and Brutellas took the other two. I didn't realize how tired I was until I laid my head on my husband's shoulder for the first time. Sleep found me at once, and when next I awoke it was to find Talitha shaking me gently. Night had fallen, and I had the feeling of having slept through part of one day and all of the next.

I disentangled myself reluctantly from Marcus, and rose to my feet.

"How long did I sleep?" I whispered.

"The sun will soon rise. Mazi woke me earlier, and she's had a few hours of rest. We need to decide if we want to stay longer, or head out again."

I thought for minute. Though Salvation Rock was a great place for a temporary refuge, it held no water or grass, and no shelter from the heat of the sun. We had ignored the sun when we arrived in the afternoon, but a whole day here would be unbearable.

"We need to keep going. There's no shelter from the sun here, and if we even lit a fire for cooking it could be seen for miles around. I'll awaken Marcus; you go rouse the other two."

Going down the path from the top was a bit risky at dark, but we just let the horses find their own way. The moon afforded a little light, but for much of the descent it was hidden on the other side of the hill. We got down with no more trouble than a little slipping and sliding on loose stones.

Marcus was finally alert enough to talk, and as we rode along he shared his story, in low tones.

"I know now I shouldn't have left you, Lysia, but I thought at the time I was doing the right thing. I didn't want you exposed to danger, and I knew very well the trip would be a dangerous one. We made it through the badlands without any trouble, though we knew we were being watched along much of the way. All of us were armed, and I guess the outlaws just didn't want to tackle us.

"When we got to the Mardath, I remembered what you said about the secret path, but the swamp had dried out so much it wasn't hard to pick out our own path. It's a nasty, ugly place, and I was glad when we saw the last of it. We heard some kind of creature howling off in the distance, but it never came close to us. It gave me the shivers every time I heard it.

"When we got to the Kor, I could hardly believe my eyes, after the way you had described it. It wasn't much wider or deeper than a brook. The ground on the other side was still smoldering where a fire had burnt the grass down to the river. We waited a day to let it cool, then headed up river several miles to see if there was any grass left. The fire stopped at a rocky ravine, which we followed for a whole day to the northwest, letting our horses eat as much of the dried grass as they would. Finally, the ravine petered out, but the fire hadn't come that far north, so we swung back toward the northeast, where I thought Tirzah must be. The Korei ambushed us at night; they killed all of the men with us except me, Brutellas, and three other men."

He let out an involuntary sob here, then resumed after he regained a measure of composure. "They – ate the dead bodies, like so many wild animals. We couldn't figure

why they didn't just go ahead and kill us, too, but they had something special in mind, we discovered later. For the first couple of days, they fed us, but, like I said, the last three we were given nothing. We were kicked and beaten repeatedly in the days before their devilish festival, but not badly enough to kill any of us. I actually wanted to die and get it over with it, but death wouldn't come.

"The night of the feast, whatever they called it, was worse than the pits of Hades. We watched the other three poor wretches get set on fire one by one; I hear their screams every time I close my eyes. They were just starting to carve up their victims for the evening meal when you showed up. I didn't know it was you I saw; you looked like some kind of avenging goddess when you rode in, all covered with light and fire. Your voice sounded like a gong, not a woman's voice at all."

At that, he fell silent, and I drew my horse close enough to his to pat his thigh. In the dim light of the early dawn his smile warmed me like the morning sun. I smiled back, letting all of the longing, love, and relief I felt shape my mouth. Something occurred to me.

"Have you seen Crispan and Nociar?"

He shook his head. "I knew they were following us, but we lost them a couple of days out. Why?"

I told him my own story, up to the point of my ride into the Grass-Weavers camp. His face grew alternately pale with fear and dark with anger as I related everything that had happened.

When I finished he said, "I must know more of this Jesus of yours, darling. If he has delivered you so many times, and saved Brutellas and I as well, he's someone I'd like to know."

Right there, as we rode on through the night, I told him the Gospel story, repeating much I had told him before. This time he listened, and asked questions. My heart was pounding as I spoke, and my breath came out in gasps. I had shared Christ many times before, especially among the Korei, but never with such a sense of urgent passion.

When I came to the point of asking him whether he wanted to accept Christ as his Lord and Savior, he said "Yes," without hesitation. I asked the others to stop, and told them to come near. Talitha and Mazi were exuberant; Brutellas just seemed puzzled about all of the fuss. With Talitha on one side of me, and Mazi on the other side of Marcus, we all held hands, except Brutellas, and bowed our heads together. Marcus repeated the simple prayer of confession, and asked Christ to come into his life as his Savior and Lord.

I never saw such a look of peace and joy as the one that came over his face as he turned toward me. "So this is what it's like?" he said, freeing his right hand from Mazi so he could lean over to kiss me. "Why did I wait so long?"

My joy surpassed even his, I thought, and tears flowed down my cheeks in rivers. When we rode on, I thought once more of the promise that I would be carried to my bridal bed, and wondered when it would happen. At least now I had no doubt that the day would come.

That boundless joy was tempered a little later. We found a depression in the plain deep enough to afford us some cover if we lay down, though we couldn't hide the horses. This

was just before dawn. While I stayed awake on first watch, with the horses tethered nearby, the others lay down for a few hours rest before the sun. Before Marcus went to sleep, we embraced, with a passion that left me breathless with desire.

As he started to settle down, I asked, "Darling, now that you've found Christ, do you still want to find the treasure of the Hagath?"

He frowned, and said, "Why, of course. Why wouldn't I? We still will need money, and I sold everything I owned to finance this trip. You know that. I don't want to live the rest of my life in poverty, especially not now."

I said nothing, but tears came once more to my eyes as I turned away. Somehow I hoped that, now that he had accepted Christ, every thing would change at once. God hadn't told me that; I just assumed it. My turn at the watch was not filled with all of the happy thoughts I expected to dwell on.

The only water we had at the camp was what we brought from the little valley the day before. I had faith that God would provide, but neither Talitha nor I knew of any permanent springs along the route we followed.

Marcus was happier than I had ever seen him, actually whistling as he rode. From time to time he would urge his horse ahead to tease one or the other of the girls, or fall back to share some jest with Brutellas. With me, he was sweet and attentive, and seemed puzzled at my reserve. When he asked me what was wrong, I just smiled and said, "Not a thing, dearest," but he wasn't convinced.

When we saw the ragged camp of a Korei band in the distance, as we topped a rise, our first impulse was to give it a wide berth. As we prepared to turn away, I felt a strong stirring in my spirit.

"I believe the Lord would have us go there," I said, scarcely believing the sound of my own words. "There's something he wants us to do."

Marcus and Brutellas were inclined to argue. "We've had our fill of the Korei," Brutellas said, his face transformed from its usual expression of calm and contentment to one of anger and fear.

Marcus agreed. "We've spent the least several days trying to get away from them. Why do you want to put us all at risk of being murdered now?"

"Just look," I said pointing. "There are dead cattle scattered over the plain around the village, and I'd say that most of those left are little more than skeletons. I can smell the stench of death from here, and not just from the cattle, I think. Our God has shown us mercy; can we do any less?"

I set my horse toward the village, and Talitha and Mazi joined me. For a few moments, there was silence from behind, then I heard first one set of hooves, then two, following from behind.

It didn't take long to spot the first of the bodies outside the village. As we drew closer, there was no sound, not even a barking dog. I wondered if anyone was still alive there.