

Chapter 19

No one greeted us as we entered the village. In the first few tents we checked, there was no one alive, and some of the bodies had already begun to decay. The stench of death was overpowering. Finally, we found someone who still breathed, then another, and another. Out of the two hundred or so people in the camp, about a hundred were still alive. They were from several different Korei clans, and most of them were women and children.

We ministered to them as best we could, but we didn't have enough water for so many people; those who were still conscious pleaded for it. Even after giving sparingly from our water skins, our own supply was soon exhausted.

"There's nothing we can do for them," said Marcus, "except bury the dead. As it is, we have no water left for our own use. We're going to be in the same state, if we're not careful."

"Let's pray about," suggested Talitha, something I should already have thought of. "Perhaps the Lord will show us something we haven't thought of."

While Brutellas looked on, the rest of us joined hands in a circle, and bowed our heads, outside one of the tents we had just visited. As we sought the Lord together, a vision came into my mind, of a pool of water hidden just beneath the surface near the village. When the "Amen" ended our prayer, I shared my vision with the others. Marcus was skeptical.

"I know there's water below the surface," he said, "but you usually have to dig a well to find it. It seems to me that, if there's water that close to the surface, the animals would have smelled it."

"It's no more than four feet down," I replied, a little insulted to be questioned by my own husband. "I know there are spades for digging here; we've all seen them. All of us can help; it's the only chance these people have, and maybe the only one we have."

Once Marcus agreed, Brutellas followed suit; he rarely disagreed with any decision his friend made. I knew the other women would have no problem following the Lord's leading. We hunted around for a little while, and found five spades.

The soil was baked hard, and breaking it up was hard work, especially in the heat of the midday sun. We persisted though; all of us taking frequent rests except Brutellas. He was strong as an ox; he never rested, but just kept swinging away with great, clod-shattering blows.

The hole grew steadily deeper, especially the one around Brutellas. The further down we went, the less resistant the soil became, and the digging was easier. Finally, Brutellas struck one more mighty blow, and water began seeping into the hole where he stood. At that point, he traded places with Marcus and I, who were working together, and we dug further down into the wet mud while he brought our cut down to the same level as his. He did the same for Talitha and Mazi, and soon we were all standing in water. There was some pressure behind it, because after we clambered out it kept rising.

We filled our water skins; the water was sweet and pure as the mud settled. For the rest of that day, we went around the village, helping those to drink who were still able, and

dribbling water down the throats of those who could not. It was too late for some; five more people died before the end of the day. Some the cattle also managed to stagger to the new water hole; it wasn't big enough for them to get inside, but we had to keep watch so they didn't collapse on top of it.

There was no question we would be spending the night here, though we couldn't bear to go inside any of the tents. We unrolled our bedrolls outside, in the middle of the camp. One of us was on watch through the night, as we took turns. Besides keeping a watch around the outside of the camp, whoever was awake continued to make the rounds in the tents. Two more people died during the night, but many of the others seemed to be recovering a measure of strength and consciousness.

As I went into one of the tents to check on those resting there, one of the women opened her eyes. I could just barely see the movement with the dim moonlight filtering in from the outside, and only because I was looking down into her face at the time. Her eyes widened even further as she looked up at me.

"Why, aren't you Lysia?" she said, her voice a whisper so weak I had to lean over to hear her.

"Yes," I said, surprised. "Do you know me?" We hadn't recognized anyone among the people we checked, but this was a tent, I recalled, where Marcus had visited alone. We had split up at one point to cover more people at once.

"You don't recognize me," she said. "I have lost weight, and the night is dark. Do you not remember Kala, wife of Kratze?"

I fell on her neck, weeping. "He gave his life for me, dear Kala. How could I ever forget either of you? Rest now; we'll talk tomorrow."

After I gave her a little water, she closed her eyes again. I wondered if others of the Horse-Eaters had survived; perhaps the clan would not be totally forgotten. Once morning came, I would see if there were any others here.

As it turned out, there were ten more, besides Kala. There were three other women, ones I didn't know well, and seven children, three of whom were boys. We began the task of carrying off and burning the dead that day, a task we willingly left to the men while we women continued to tend to the living. There was still food in the village, in the form of dried meat and grain, and we made a broth of it which we fed to all of those able to eat. For the others, a few drops trickled down their throats was all we dared risk.

Marcus and Brutellas took a break in the middle of the day, eating some of the village's stores of food. After he had eaten, Marcus sought me out. After we shared in the affectionate offering of kisses and hugs, he looked at me in the most peculiar way. He obviously wanted to say something, but was reluctant to voice it.

"Alright, Husband," I said, with a reassuring smile. "I know you want to say something. Out with it!"

"You're not going to like it," he said, "but we need to get going as soon as we can. Almost a month has passed, and we still haven't made it to Tirzah. I don't know how much longer it will take, but we need to go on if we're to make it to the Hagath temple in time."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. “What? Is that all you can think of? Treasure? Is that more important to you than human life? Do you think that attitude pleases God?”

His temper flared. “I didn’t say we were leaving *today*. Of course, we have to wait until some of the people here are strong enough to take care of the rest. I’m just saying we should leave as soon as we can leave them on their own.”

Another sharp reply came to my mind, but I remembered the Scripture’s teaching about submission to your husband. Instead of carrying on the argument, I bit my lip, and said, “Yes, Marcus. It will be as you say; we’ll leave as soon as some of the people here recover.”

He gave me another hug, and went back to rejoin Brutellas in the grisly task of the day. It was impossible to dig graves for so many; and if they had left the bodies on the surface somewhere, under piles of rocks, the stench would soon be unbearable. Burning the dead in emergencies, such as after battles, wasn’t unheard of among the Korei. The smoke of the burning was itself sickening, but they did the burning downwind from the village. It would be visible for a great distance, but that was a risk we decided we must take.

That afternoon, I had a chance at last to talk to Kala. She shared her story with me, painfully and slowly, since the effort still cost her.

“After the Great Talk, when our men left, those of us of the Horse-Eaters who were left were split among the other bands of the Korei, except for the Cloud Walkers. I went with the Ghost Talkers, who were very cruel to us. Almost a hundred of us went, and we were beaten and humiliated all of the way on the trip back to the land of the Ghost Talkers. Most of the men were chasing our sons and husbands, but the women were even worse than the men. After a couple of weeks, the warriors returned, carrying many dead with them, and we learned that not one of the men of the Horse-Eaters had survived. We had already counted them as dead, but the news broke our wills and our hearts. If not for the children in our midst, all of the women, including me, would have laid down to die. It seemed that even God had forsaken us.

“When no rain fell for weeks, some began to say that, perhaps, the witch was right after all. They didn’t say it above a whisper, though, for the shamans were still insisting they were right. The streams coming out of the Parnath began to dry up, and with them the springs and waterholes that made the Ghost-Talkers so numerous and powerful. There was never any talk of going south toward the Mardath. Instead, the Ghost Talkers proposed to move toward Tirzah, where they believed there was enough water for all their flocks and their cooking pots.

“On the way, we met up with a band of the Wolf Head tribe, and a few of our women and children were with them. Some of the men went with the war party, but I managed to slip away when the Ghost Talkers left, and I found some of our Horse-Eater brethren here. I tried to get some of the other women to leave with me, but there was no spirit left in them.

“Once I got here, I soon found we had no water. We even tried to dig for water, never dreaming there was some so near the surface just outside the camp. People began to die, and we who were left were too weak to carry them away. I had already decided to just

close my eyes and let death come. It would be a relief not to suffer anymore, and I knew I would be with the Lord.”

That was all she could manage. Later, when she regained some strength from the broth, I shared my own story with her, including the valiant last charge of the Horse-Eaters. We both cried afresh before I continued with the story of the journey through the Mardath, escape and recapture in the Badlands, and my separation from Talitha.

When I told her about Marcus, and how we came to be married, she smiled for the first time since she had awakened. “I am so happy for you, Lysia,” she said. “You know I always looked on you and Talitha as daughters. Even though my husband and son are dead, in the Lord, at least I know that some of those I love and care for have found happiness in life. I don’t know why God has chosen to save my own life, but I must believe he still has a purpose for me.”

I kissed her, as I had so many times before over the last day. “My sweet sister in the Lord, God does indeed have a work for you still. There are many in this place who don’t know Christ, probably most of them who remain alive. I believe, and the Lord assures me, that the light of the Gospel will go out from this place and spread throughout the Kore. Many will be drawn here simply because there is water, but they will leave with living water, like the woman our Lord met at the well.”

I shared Kala’s testimony later with Marcus. His reaction was not what I expected.

“That’s not good news,” he said, a frown darkening the face I loved so dearly. “If there’s a large war party between us and Tirzah, it would be that much harder for us to make it through in time.”

I started to make a sharp reply when we were interrupted. Talitha came galloping up on her pony, and jumped off even before it had come to a complete halt.

“There’s trouble,” she said. “I was out doing some scouting, because I felt the Lord wanted me to go. I went a few miles out of camp, to the north. The first thing I noticed was a dust cloud off on the distance. At first, I thought it was just something whipped up the wind, but by the way it was moving, it was obviously caused by men, or at least by animals. It was too far away to judge how many people were involved, but it must be a very large party. I’m afraid the Ghost Talkers have returned. We must leave, or we’ll all be caught here.”

“It’s too soon,” I protested. “None of these people can even walk around yet.”

“We can’t help them if we’re dead,” Marcus put in. “Let’s at least move far enough away to stay out of trouble. If they leave, we can come back. With water here, they might not leave right away, and some of them are men who belong to this band. The water won’t last for a group that large, so they won’t stay long.”

I agreed, reluctantly, that he was right, and all five of us left the village, after hurriedly explaining the situation to Kala. I wanted her to go with us, but she insisted she was still too weak to travel.

We rode south, away from the oncoming dust cloud. Once we were safely away, we swung back to the west and then north, so we could keep our eye on the Ghost-Talkers.

When the cloud swept past us, we expected to see cattle as well as horse and men, and the ghastly death's head banner of the Ghost Talkers. What we saw instead astounded us all.