

## Chapter 20

“But – those are soldiers! They carry the banner of the Bear!” Talitha expressed what came immediately to my mind.

“It looks like they’re running away. Do you think...?” I dared not express my thoughts out loud. It was too terrible to think. If the Ghost Talkers had won, our hope of reaching Tirzah alive was all but gone.

Behind the onrushing soldiers, we saw another cloud of dust, closing fast. I had no doubt that these were the Korei warriors we had expected to see.

Before reaching the village, which we had given up for lost, the Tirzan troopers suddenly drew rein, as if by some prearranged plan, and wheeled about to meet the screaming hordes of the Korei. From an undisciplined mass, the soldiers of the Bear formed up into lines of battle, and awaited the onslaught. It wasn’t long in coming. Even at the distance from which we watched, we could hear the noise of the impact, as horse crashed into horse, and shield met spear and saber.

The Tirzan line gave way slowly in the face of the ferocious onslaught, but it did give way. The servants of the Great Bear were outnumbered at least five to one, and as the Korei fell, others always pressed forward to fill their place. At a point where it seemed as if the Tirzans were about to be overwhelmed, there was a sound of battle horns, and another cloud of dust appeared from the east. I couldn’t understand how such a large group could hide out in the open plain, but the size of the dust cloud told of another sizeable force. That these were of Tirzah I had no doubt; such stratagems were unheard of among the Korei, who always pressed the attack with every warrior they had.

If we could hear the horns, we thought surely the Korei must hear as well, but they were totally unprepared for the attack from the side, when it came. The Tirzans were still outnumbered, but the shock of a strong attack from a totally unexpected direction unnerved the Korei. Large masses of them broke away at the first shock of the attack, and the panic spread like a wave along the length of their lines. From being pushed back and in danger of annihilation, the Tirzan force suddenly found itself in pursuit of a foe that was running away as if pursued by devils. Many of them never lived to run away again.

“The village!” Mazi said, as the battle moved away from us to the north. “If the soldiers return to it, they will destroy it without asking questions.”

“Maybe they won’t come back,” Marcus offered. “By the time they stop chasing the Korei, they may just go on back to Tirzah. That is where they came from, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes, but if a group of them was waiting so close to the village, they surely know it’s here. If they suspect there’s water here, they’ll be back for sure. There’s probably no more for miles around.”

“What can we do now, any more so than before?” Marcus persisted. “We certainly can’t fight them, and I doubt they will listen to reason.”

“We’ll meet them out on the plain, if they come back. I will tell them the village is open and unarmed, and claim the peace of the Bear over the people there. They can’t reject a request like that without checking it out; the priests won’t let them.”

We talked it over for a while longer, then agreed that Talitha and I would wait while the others returned to tend to the sick and dying in the encampment. By the time Talitha and I made our way back to a point between the site of the battle and the village, a group of riders was already returning to the battlefield. We soon found out why; they gathered their wounded together in one spot, but they ran spears into every Korei body they saw, living or dead. They were taking no chances, because no Korei would pass up a chance to take one more enemy to the place of the dead with him.

The job lasted for at least a couple of hours, then there was a conference of some kind. Moments later, a smaller group of warriors made their way directly toward the village, and us. We both dismounted, and each knelt on one knee, with our right hands in the air in a gesture of parley. The troopers came thundering toward us as soon as they spotted us, and surrounded us, spears poised over our heads.

“What do you want, cursed Korei slut?” asked one of them, in Korei.

I answered him in Tirzan. “We are both daughters of the Bear, lost in this foreign land. The village you seek has water, but all of the people there, besides our three friends, are sick and pose no threat to you. We claim the Peace of the Bear over the place, as is our right.”

Another of the men, probably a priest since they went everywhere with the army, said, “If what she says is true, and she speaks the Tongue in the manner decreed, we must allow the Great Bear’s peace to rest on the place. Put away your spears, but keep them close at hand. If she lies, she will be the first to die.”

When we entered the camp, my three friends were waiting in the same kneeling position, as I had instructed them. The soldiers spread out among the tents, and it didn’t take long for them to return with a report. After conferring with them, the man I took to be a priest, a thin man with a face accustomed to frowning, walked to where we waited, guarded by several of the soldiers.

“You speak truth, woman. There are none but the weak and sickly here. What is your name?”

“Lysia,” I said, “and this is my sister Talitha.”

“And of whose house are you?” he said, in the same flat tone of voice he had used from the first.

My heart fell, but I could do no less than tell the truth. “We are of the house of Portius, once a merchant in service to the Bear, but now dead.”

A scowl replaced the habitual frown, and an evil light glowed in his eyes. “I remember the name. He was a traitor to the Bear, one who worshipped the false god Jesus. His kind still cause us much trouble. You will return with us to Tirzah, to be judged for your crimes. The Bear’s peace cannot be broken for this place, but it does not cover those who are his enemies from his own seat.”

All of us were taken to an empty tent, and guards were placed all around. The other three were guilty by association, despite my protests that they were not of Tirzah, and had committed no offense against the Bear. Despite the prospect of death in a torture cell, I felt a strange calm. This was exactly God's will for us, and I knew his hand was in it all.

We talked in quiet tones together in the tent. No one, not even young Mazi, was troubled or afraid. Marcus and Brutellas were confident in their own ability to escape when the time came, while we women were confident in God's watch care.

I did notice one curious thing, for the first time. Big Brutellas clumsily took Mazi's tiny hand in his massive one, by way of offering reassurance, and she made no effort to remove it. She even gave him a shy, sweet smile, which caused the giant to turn away in some embarrassment and confusion. Marcus placed his arm around me; Talitha looked somewhat forlorn, so I reached out to take her hand as well.

When darkness fell, one of the guards brought us water and dried meat, then left us alone again. A fire was lit outside the tent, and some of the light filtered in through the closed flap. Some time later – it seemed like many hours to me – we heard a great noise of men and horses outside. The main part of the army had arrived.

That night we were left alone, though there was a lot of noise of almost frantic activity in the camp around us. We heard scattered bits of conversation as soldiers passed by, or as the guards talked among themselves. Evidently the Korei had been scattered, and the talk was of returning home to Tirzah. We also heard talk of the waterhole; despite its small size, it was providing water for the entire army and all of its horses. That was a great surprise to Marcus, but not to me.

“The water came from the Lord,” I said. “He doesn't do miracles in a small way. His provision never fails. This waterhole will be here long after we leave. After all, the Lord told me it would provide water for many of the Korei, and through it they will receive the water of life.”

We slept peacefully that night, but we were roused from our sleep roughly early the next morning. The guards offered no explanation, but just herded us to a location outside the village. Several men were seated on chairs which must have brought from Tirzah, since there were none in the village. One of them was the priest whom I had encountered the night before; another was clearly a military commander, judging by his uniform and trappings. I had seen many of the Bear's lieutenants in Tirzah; this one was the captain of a field army, as many as a thousand men. It amazed me to think that so many men, with their horses, had found water in our little hole.

Talitha and I bowed with our heads to the ground as we drew near, as a gesture of respect to the Bear's authority. The others followed suit; if they hadn't we would all have been dead. I had rehearsed basic protocol with them the night before.

“Rise to face your accusers,” said the Bear's captain, and all five of us rose to our feet, with heads bowed. After a respectful interval, we raised our heads to face the men in front of us. The priest was already standing, his habitual frown even more pronounced than usual.

“I am Rechab, of the Truth Police of the Great Bear, may he live forever. Those two,” he pointed to Talitha and me, “are the daughters of a traitor, one Portius, who fled the Bear's

justice about five years gone. He was of the despicable cult called by some the Way, or Christians. They are self-confessed, so we need no witnesses of their identity. One of them, one Lysia, claims that the traitor himself is now dead, but they will have to be examined for the truth. Those with them are their companions, and must be presumed guilty as well.”

There was silence for a moment, then the captain looked directly at me. “Do you affirm what has been stated, as words that came from your own lips?”

I bowed my head, and looking back up, said, “I do, my lord. We do not deny who we are.”

“Very well,” he said, his voice icy, and his face an expressionless mask. “Those who commit crimes against the Bear must be judged in his courts. You will be placed in chains, and returned to Tirzah for his justice, along with your sister and your friends. May the Bear be merciful to you.”

The departure didn’t come until the following day. We left early, with the sun not yet above the eastern horizon. A few of the people in the village had gained enough strength to stand by, and bid us a weak farewell and blessing. If some of them were strong enough to walk about, they at least could care for the others. I was confident they would survive, and carry out the work God had set for them to do.

We were placed on our own horses, our hands loosely bound so we could hold onto the horses’ reins. Our feet were tied together underneath the horses’ bellies, and each of our horses was tied to a horse in front. To make certain we would make no attempt to escape, we were surrounded by soldiers at all times. I was in the middle of our little group of prisoners, with Marcus and Talitha behind, and Mazi and Brutellas in front. It warmed my heart to see Brutellas turn in his saddle from time to time to smile at Mazi. I knew from his response that she returned each warm glance.

I had mixed emotions of the thought of returning to Tirzah. I knew it was God’s plan, but I had memories of losing two of the women I loved most there. Lydia and Nyla were both alive and real in my memories and my dreams. I also thought of my mother, and a twinge of guilt ran through me as I remembered how I had spurned her after Lydia’s death. She deserved better of me, and I vowed to give her the love due a mother if I only got the chance to see her again.

For three days, we traveled without problems, other than the oppressive heat. We came to the land of the Spear Raisers, which was a blackened wasteland. The only good thing about our capture, at least from Marcus’s point of view, was that we would reach Tirzah more quickly than we would have on our own. We would not have to contend with roving bands of Ghost Talkers, and we carried sufficient food and water to reach the outskirts of the city. Alone, we would have had to scavenge for both, while trying to avoid capture.

On the morning of the fourth day, with the great plateau of Tirzah in sight, our good luck ran out. We heard a commotion in the rear of the column, and a rider came rushing forward.

“Secure the prisoners! We’re under attack!”

The Ghost Talkers had returned. This time, we were the ones surprised.