

Chapter 5

I had never seen the ocean, but looking out over the endless expanse of grass, I thought it must be something like this. The land wasn't flat; it moved away from us in undulating waves, merging with the sky in a distant blue-green line. We were still some few hundred feet above the plain, around a curve of the trail leading down from the plateau, when the sea of green first came into view. Tirzah, I discovered on this trip for the first time, lay on a plateau; we had been descending in a gentle slope for the last two days. The brethren from the last village we visited helped us to evade the guards who patrolled the trail at the top. We avoided the main roads, but even the most obscure trails were known and guarded; the Korei periodically invaded the environs of Tirzah, and sometimes attacked the city itself. In return, the city periodically sent raiding parties into the grasslands to harass the nomads and burn their villages. The theory was that fighting battles in the home of the enemy was preferable to fighting them in Tirzah.

The Korei did allow traders into their midst; that was the only way they could obtain items like tools, weapons and cloth. Tirzah was well aware of the trade, which brought it hides, meat, and even livestock. The Great Bear winked at the hypocrisy, and the nomads in their turn absorbed the occasional loss of life, exacting revenge just often enough to appease the hotheads in their midst. Portius had traded with them for years; they were his principal customers. It was on one of his more recent trips that he led one of the minor chieftains, Kratze, to Christ.

"Kratze's band has territory several days march from here," Portius told us around our campfire that night, at the edge of the Kore, as the inhabitants called their grassland home. "Always before when I came, I had men and packhorses with me, and I was welcomed without question. Now, though they may recognize me as a trader they've dealt with before, I'm a trespasser, along with you girls. Trespassers are killed without questions, unless it's near the time of one of the festivals."

In my childish innocence, I rose to the bait. "And when there is a festival, Papa, what happens then? Are trespassers released?"

Portius grinned wolfishly. "Oh, no, child! They're eaten, especially if they're young and tender."

Talitha and I both gasped, "Papa!" together. It was nice to hear him laugh once more. He was not quite finished with his fun.

"I understand they like to boil their captives with certain herbs and vegetables. They think it makes quite a good stew."

Talitha and I both sat in stunned silence for a moment, then my sister turned her head to one side and looked at her father's too-serious face quizzically. "Papa! You're making that up. I know you are!"

This time he roared with laughter, just like in the better days we had spent at home. "Had both of you going, huh? Well, don't worry; the Korei are savage warriors, but they aren't cannibals. I wear around my neck a safe passage, given to me by Kratze himself. We're in no real danger, as long as we don't get ambushed before I can show the medallion."

He pulled the metal orb, a simple brass circle with a horse emblem in the middle, from inside his shirt, then replaced it when we had both seen it.

“But this,” he said, beginning to braid his hair, “should prevent accidents from happening on the way. In a few minutes, he produced a most peculiar ponytail, then proceeded to do one for each of us. I learned to braid one of these in very short order without even watching what my hands were doing. Talitha and I both laughed at the effect, though soon enough it would seem commonplace.

We met the first band of Korei riders the very next morning, while we were still within sight of the path descending from the plateau. There were about twenty of them, wild looking men on horses, dressed all in leather. They yelled like demons, and waved their bows and spears in the air as the swooped down on us.

“Do exactly as I do,” said Portius, dropping to his knees, and bowing his head to the ground. “Don’t move from that position until I tell you, no matter what you feel or hear.”

We complied without question, too frightened to do otherwise. The horses thundered to a halt almost on top of us. For the next few minutes we endured a succession of kicks, prods, and pokes, and a tirade I could only imagine consisted of curses and obscenities. The noise ceases for a moment, and we could sense Portius moving next to us. He said something, in the same language as that of the horsemen. There was a harsh reply, and more yelling, but no more physical abuse. After a further exchange, Portius told us we could get up.

In a quiet voice, he said, “I have shown the medallion, which guarantees safe passage for us. I recognize the leader of the party; he is Laksu of the Spear-Raisers, and very bad medicine. Had it not been for our pigtailed, and the position of submission, he would have killed us all, very slowly. As it is, his band will provide us with horses and food, on Kratze’s account, and send us through to the next band. We’ll be passed on until we reach the Horse-Eaters, which is Kratze’s band.”

The idea of eating horse didn’t particularly appeal to me, but it was better than being the main course myself. The Korei were a peculiar looking people, in my eyes. Their skin had a yellowish tint, and their eyes were slanted. They looked perpetually angry, though I learned that was the face they always presented to enemies.

Four extra horses soon appeared from somewhere, and one of them was loaded with packs of dried meat and cheese. Five warriors were detailed to lead us on our way, to make sure we didn’t stick around too long. The other warriors in the group thundered away across the plain, on the lookout for more unfortunate travelers, no doubt.

Portius attempted to engage one or another of our guides in conversation as we rode along, but got only grunts in response, if any response at all. Unable to get any of the Korei to talk, he contented himself with talking to Talitha and me.

“This is the minimum courtesy due us as guests of another band. If a larger, stronger band were involved, this kind of treatment would be a major insult, and might invite retaliation. We should have been taken to the village, and offered a place to stay for the night, and a hot meal. Some bands would even have offered us a bath and change of clothes. If the brethren in Danath had not provided a change of clothes for us, we’d be wearing rags by now.”

“What will happen when we reach the Horse-Eaters, Papa?” Talitha wanted to know.
“Do they really eat horses there?”

He smiled. “They will treat us as brethren of the Way, just as our brethren in Tirzah do. Yes, they do eat horses, but only in times of great ceremony, like the installation of a new chief, or a wedding. They cook it with so many spices you’ll never know the difference, though it’s a bit stringy.”

We camped on the open grassland with our guides that night, near one of the rare streams that coursed slowly through the rolling plain. There were even a few trees along the course of the stream, but our food was cooked over a fire fueled with dried dung and a few stray sticks of wood. That fact didn’t help my appetite, but I was too hungry to turn up my nose.

The next band we encountered, the Cloud Walkers (I’m not sure where the name came from) was more polite and generous than the first band we met. They took us to their village, a collection of tents made of hide. The chieftain there, Borza, knew Portius well from past dealings, and he was very sympathetic on hearing the story of our flight from Tirzah. Portius had witnessed to him about Christ, and he was at least open to the message of the Gospel, if he hadn’t yet received Christ as savior. A few people in this band had converted to Christianity, though, and they were very kind to us.

The children in the village, like most children, were friendly and curious. Groups of them came up to Talitha and I, tugging on our clothes, and marveling at our light brown hair. They jabbered endlessly at us, not minding, I supposed, that we couldn’t understand a word they were saying. One of them was more adventurous than her comrades.

Her name was Mazi, Spring Flower in the language of the Korei. Portius, who was away talking to the chief at the time, told us later she was a daughter of one of the Christians in the village, no real surprise. She was about ten or eleven years old, just a few years younger than Talitha and I. Her most prominent feature was a wide, happy smile, a double row of milk-white teeth in a dark face.

Unable to make us understand what she was trying to tell us, she took a stick and drew the symbol of the fish in the dirt. Then, she pointed to herself, nodded vigorously, and pointed in a questioning way to teach of us. Talitha and I both nodded in the same vigorous way, smiling as we did so. That produced a golden peal of laughter from the girl, and she turned excitedly to her friends, filling them in on that bit of news.

She then pointed to herself, said “Mazi,” pointed to and named her friends in turn, then pointed expectantly to us. We gave her our names, and she repeated them in great delight to herself and to the other children. After that, she gave us both a hug, and a kiss on each cheek, and ran off with her friends. We saw her several times again before leaving the Cloud Walkers, and with the Portius’s help, carried on an animated conversation with her at some length. She had been a Christian for a year, and proudly recounted to us the story of the Gospel, more accurately than either Talitha or I could do. Portius explained that the Korei had no real written language, but a very strong oral tradition. Children learned from an early age to absorb and pass on the stories and legends of their people.

Starting that very night, as we lay in our tent, Portius began teaching the rudiments of the Korei language. It was a very complex language, and the first we could hope for at first

was a basic vocabulary of verbs and nouns. That was easier said than done; the Korei had fourteen words for “cow,” and twenty-five for “cloud.” The worst was “grass,” which had a whopping fifty-two alternatives in Korei. Some of the most uproarious laughter from the Korei, as we came to know them, was at our innocent misuse of words. Worse, the same word could mean different things from one band to another.

We bade an almost reluctant farewell to the Cloud Walkers the next day. We were anxious, though, to reach our final destination, so we could at least spend more than one night in the same bed. The guides, we found to our pleasant surprise, were drawn from the Christians in the village. They held an animated conversation with Portius through much of the day; he explained to us that they had many questions about doctrine and the details of the Gospel account. He was the closest thing thee had to a teacher and mentor, and they might not see him again for many months, if ever.

We spent two more nights with other bands of the Cloud Walkers, who had an extensive territory. They turned us over to the Grass Weavers, whose women sported elaborate and quite attractive belts, necklaces, anklets and bracelets woven from grass. This band was polite, and treated us properly, but there was none of the warmth we experienced with the Cloud Walkers. The chief here was a strong practitioner of the traditional cult of sky worship, and he wanted nothing to do with this false foreign god called Jesus. Among the Korei, the chief’s law was the law of the people, not to be lightly contradicted.

After our obligatory night among the Grass Weavers, we traveled a night and two days through their territory. Somehow word of our presence traveled ahead of us. In the evening of that day, as the sun sank below the western horizon of green, we heard a great shout ahead of us, and a band of men came rushing toward us. This time there were no shouts of anger, but of greeting. Portius set his own horse to a gallop, and headed straight toward the big, muscular man at the head of the oncoming riders. When he came alongside, the man, whom I rightly assumed to be Kratze, leaned over from his horse, and swept Portius from the saddle before his horse even came to a complete halt. He tossed our father into the air several times like a toy, still galloping toward us, and caught him deftly each time.

Talitha and I were both sitting on our horses, with open mouths, waiting. One of the Kratze’s men caught Portius’s rider-less mount, and brought him back toward us. Kratze brought his mount to a rearing halt near us, and, in the language of Tirzah, roared, “Welcome, daughters of Portius; well met in Christ!”

The long journey was over. We had found safety and shelter at last. We were home.