

## Chapter 6

It was hard to believe the girl riding the horse out there was my own sister. After four years among the Korei, the only way you could tell her from one of them was by studying her face. At the moment, she was standing up in the stirrups, and loosing arrows at a wildly swaying ball of hide being held aloft by another rider. If an arrow went a little low, the other rider would be a dead man, but Talitha never missed.

She spent more time atop a horse than on the ground, sometimes going out for wild gallops by herself, just for the sheer joy of it. Wiry, quick, and strong, she could best most of the men in the wrestling contests that passed for tests of strength among the Korei. It was almost impossible to get a good grip on her to throw her to the ground. Though still a strong Christian, she could recite all the legends of the Korei, and of the Horse-Eater band, by memory. Every eligible male in the band, not to mention surrounding bands, had his hat set for her. She laughingly ignored them all, which only made her that much more desirable.

I wasn't as athletic as my sister, but I could hold my own at horseback riding and archery, if not at wrestling. I spent many of my hours in prayer, and in studying the Scripture scrolls Portius managed to reassemble, painfully, little by little. Where Talitha liked being alone because of the joy of riding, I liked being by myself to spend time in prayer and meditation with my Lord. Somehow, I had gained the reputation as a prophetess and a seer, though I never did anything but share the truth of the Word as I understood it applied to specific situations. Portius – I still can't think of him as "Papa," though that's what I called him to his face, and to others – said I had gifts of prophecy, wisdom, and knowledge, though I never believed that at the time. It seemed to me that any believer could do the things I did, if they only had the faith to do it.

Through with her practice, because she was out of her arrows, Talitha came galloping toward me, bringing her mount to a rearing halt a few feet from my head, and leaping off the horse even before its front feet hit the ground. Her darkly-tanned face was flushed with excitement and sheer glee.

"Did you see it, Lysia? I shot *all* of them into the target. Not even Kratze ever did that? Did you see?"

"Of course I did, sister mine. You are the best archer among all the Korei, and I am *so* proud of you!"

She leaned over to where I was seated, cross-legged, on the ground, gave me an exuberant hug, and ran off, I knew, to tell her father – and Kratze no doubt.

I was sitting there still, in the grass, when the scene before me swam before my eyes, and changed to something strange and terrible. The grass was burning, and before the flames ran skeletal cows and horses. Too weak to outrun the flames, they were consumed by them. Before my horrified eyes, the flames swept on into the village, a village populated by the walking dead who had already lost hope of living, and walked into the encircling fire with dead eyes.

I screamed, or thought I must have, and the vision faded before my eyes. As it did, I sank to the ground, and knew nothing else....

“Lysia! Lysia! Can you hear me? Are you all right?” The voice came from somewhere beyond the blackness. As the words were repeated, over and over, the voice grew closer, and I recognized it finally as the voice of my sister, Talitha. With difficulty, I opened my eyes, and saw her face bending close over me. My head was cradled in her lap.

“I – I guess so. What happened?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” my sister said, relief flooding into voice, and her face. “I was running to find Papa, when I heard you scream. I ran back here, and found you lying on the ground, on your side with your legs still drawn up.”

Portius arrived at that moment. “Talitha! Lysia! What happened? I heard a scream.”

The vision that I had seen moments before came flooding back to me. I began weeping uncontrollably, and it took some time for me to regain enough composure to tell what had appeared before my eyes. By that time, Kratze and several others of the Korei were there.

“What does it mean?” Kratze asked when I finished. “Famine? Why? What is God trying to show you?” None of us had any doubt about the source of my vision, only its meaning. The answer came to me in a flash of intuition – or inspiration – as stark and vivid as the vision itself.

“The Lord is telling us there will be a great drought, worse than any we have seen, or that our fathers have seen. The grass will catch fire because it will have no rain to nourish it; the cattle and horses will die of starvation and thirst, as will we all. This is a warning, not of what must happen, but of what will happen if we do nothing.”

Every face around me turned ashen, and Kratze’s voice was grim as he asked, “What must we do?”

I didn’t have the answer, not yet anyway. “The Lord says we must fast and pray, and he will reveal the answer to us. The time is not yet, but it will come. We can prepare, but he hasn’t shown me how yet.”

Kratze called the band into council that evening, but as the body of Christ, not just as a “Talking” of the Korei. All the camp knew about the prophecy by now, so it wasn’t necessary to go through it again. Portius had long since become the spiritual leader of the flock, so he took charge of the assembly without question.

“As you know, brethren, the Lord has given the gift of prophecy to my daughter, Lysia. What he has shown her will happen, if we do nothing. We are God’s people, the sheep of his pasture, and he cares for us. Now we must pray for his guidance. I call for a fast from now until the sun sets tomorrow. Except for babies and small children, all of us must refrain from eating food. We will do what must be done to care for the flocks, but beyond that, we must all spend the day in prayer, alone or with others. Tomorrow, after the sun sets, we will meet again, and the Lord will reveal his will to us.”

I spent the next day with Talitha and Portius, in constant prayer and meditation. The heaviness on my spirit lifted about noon; I knew then what we must do, but the Lord would have to confirm it with someone else. Not long before sunset, Talitha and Portius lifted their heads at the same time. All three of us looked around at each other, and Portius nodded.

“I just hope the others of the Horse-Eaters will agree,” he said. “This goes against all custom and tradition. I have no hope all the other bands will go along.”

After Portius rose to his feet and prayed, he looked around at the expectant faces in the circle around the Fire of Talking. “The Lord has shown us what must be done, but it is a hard thing. I have talked with no one what the Lord has shown me, because I didn’t want to be influenced by someone else’s thoughts. He has spoken to my daughters and me. Has he revealed his plan to anyone else?”

A few scattered hands went up; Kratze’s was not among them, I was disappointed to see. Without his agreement, none of what we would propose would ever happen.

“This is what we will do,” Portius said. “I will go and whisper in the ears of Kratze what the Lord has shown me. After that, you, Nkata, and you, Tazut, will go in turn; have each of you spoken to anyone else about the Lord’s guidance?”

The two pointed out, a man and a woman, shook their heads in the negative. Portius leaned over to Kratze, who was seated beside him, and whispered the plan to him. Kratze looked startled, and looked around quickly as if seeking affirmation – or escape. Portius stepped back away from his friend, and the two others came in their turn, and whispered in the chief’s ear. His look grew more incredulous, then a look of shocked disbelief settled over his countenance. He looked at Portius after Tazut resumed her seat.

Portius put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Kratze, my brother and chieftain, did all three agree in the testimony of this Talking?”

Kratze nodded his head, a bit numbly, I thought. His voice was hoarse and strained as the responded aloud. “Yes, Portius, my brother and pastor of this flock, the words spoken agree with each other, in every detail. It is a true Talking, and you may share it with the assembly.”

Portius crossed his arms over his chest and spread his legs wide, the traditional stance for a proclamation of great importance. “Brethren, thus sayeth the Lord, by his Spirit as manifested to his people: At the time appointed, the people of the Korei will move south to the river Kor, the lifeblood of the Kore. There you will water your flocks when the drought becomes severe. When even the river begins to fail, you will cross over with your families and your flocks to the Mardath, the Cursed Waters. There I will sustain you until the rains come.”

The reaction was immediate. Loud voices were discouraged in a Talking, but the a loud buzz erupted now.

“The Cursed Waters?”

“But we will all die!”

“No one can drink the waters there!”

“We will sink into the bogs. “

“We will all die there.”

“This can’t be from God!”

“Silence!” roared Kratze. “Such shouting must not be in the Talking.”

The chorus of voices stilled at once. When he had his people's attention once more, Kratze rose to his feet beside his friend, and placed one hand on Portius's shoulder and raised the other in the air, the sign of unity and agreement.

"We must not question God. If he has called us to do something, we must obey, and trust him to provide. Our God is able to make the waters of the Mardath as sweet as those of the Kor, and to make the bogs as firm as the earth of the Kore. This I know; if we disobey, if we do nothing, we will all surely die. Does anyone here dispute that the word we have heard is from the Lord. If so, rise here in the assembly, one at a time, and we will hear your talking. Let no man whisper in secret what he will not say aloud in the presence of all. We must be as one, or we will perish separately."

No one spoke. After several minutes of silence, broken only by occasional barking of dogs and the lowing of cattle, Kratze turned toward me.

"Lysia, daughter of Portius, and prophetess of God, what will you add?"

I stood and bowed to him, as was the custom for a woman permitted to speak in the presence of men. "The Lord says that he will indeed provide a way to sweeten the waters of the Mardath, and he will reveal it when our need is greatest. He says as well that the Horse-Eaters are his chosen flock among the Korei, but it is not his will that any should perish. He bids you, my chieftain, to call a Great Congregation of the tribes, so that all may be warned. Many will not heed the warning, but all who do so, will be saved. Do not delay, for the time grows short."

Kratze took this rather staggering request in stride. No one had called for a Great Congregation for a generation. Normally, it was done only with the threat of invasion from a powerful foe, or some other general call to arms. The last time it had been used, the Korei had attacked Tirzah in force, and all but succeeded in breaching the walls. Thousands had died, both of the servants of the Great Bear, and of the Riders of the Life Mother, as the Korei called themselves.

Any band, or tribe, of the Korei could call for a Great Congregation, but any who called one without good reason, in the judgment of the Congregation, would face grave consequences. These could include the execution of the tribal leaders, or even the confiscation of their flocks, a sentence of slow death.

Kratze turned back to the circle of waiting faces around him. "I, Kratze, Talker of the Horse-Eaters, and Keeper of the Way, do hereby announce that I will send word to all the tribes of the Korei, to every Talking by every fire, that a Great Congregation should be held. All Riders of the Life Mother will be called to attend, or their lives will be forfeit. What do you say, Hearers of the Talking? Will you Talk these words with your own voice?"

Each adult present must now stand to show support, or remain seated. Several people, including Talitha – I was still standing – sprang to their feet at once. Most of the others stood up, more slowly, alone or in clusters. Finally, only half a dozen people, all of them old men who had never accepted the new faith, remained sitting on the ground. They knew that Kratze would never call for a Congregation unless all of the tribe expressed agreement. Under his steady gaze, and at the prodding of those around them, even these also stood to their feet.

Kratze raised both hands in the air, in affirmation of universal agreement. “So be it. Amen, Lord Jesus. The Shepherd will pray for the flock, then we will bring food to break our fast. Let there be joy and dancing in our midst, for the Lord has visited his people this night.”

I was famished, and almost completely exhausted. I slept little in the night before, and even during the time before the vision, I had eaten little. I had already been fasting after breakfast that day. As I ate now, with great relish, and too fast for my own good, troubling thoughts tumbled about in my mind. Laksu and his Spear Raisers would certainly reject anything we had to say, as would the Grass Weavers. The Cloud Walkers would probably be willing to listen, but might not agree. There were fifteen other tribes of the Korei, some of whom had probably never heard of us or of our foreign gods – it was hard for the Korei to conceive of God as being one in three. If we got any kind of majority agreement from the Congregation, it would have to be God’s doing, not ours. Unlike the Talking for each tribe, it wasn’t necessary that agreement be unanimous, but if there wasn’t a strong majority, nothing would be done.

Of one thing I was sure: If the Congregation found our reason for calling it together was not worthy of consideration, we would be as good as dead, famine or no famine. For just a moment, my faith wavered. I went to sleep, though, with the sweet assurance that God was still in control.