

Chapter 7

There came the Ghost Talkers, the speakers to the dead, with faces adorned with hideous masks of demons and monsters. By the stories and traditions of the elders, they were the first of the People, the ones from whom all the others sprang. In their midst lay the Forbidden Place, the home of the dead, the burial sites of the forefathers. The Horse-Eaters came to the Great Congregation in their hundreds; the Ghost Talkers in their thousands. For days and weeks the Korei came to the Valley of Gathering, their tents and herds spread from horizon to horizon, their campfires glittering like a field of stars come to earth at night.

The day came for the Great Talk, and the elders of the People gathered before the Fire of the Congregation. Rumors of why they had been summoned ran through the vast camp, and already there were angry murmurs. Tribes like the Ghost Talkers had not so much as heard of this god Jesus, or the two other gods said to be worshipped with him. Seers and shamans had already been casting bones, and reading intestines, to see if they could catch any hint of the dark events said to be falling on the People.

Each tribe named its representatives to the Great Talk, usually the chieftains and elders of the bands, but this time including seers and shamans as well. Five, and five only, could be named from each band; since the Ghost Talkers had the most bands, they had the most from their tribe seated around the Fire. Kratze came for the Horse-Eaters, and with him went Portius, now adopted into the band, along with Nkata, Tazut, and one of the last of the elders to sit down at the Talk, Strohas. Women could attend if invited later by the Great Talk, only if all there agreed.

Talitha and I were not far from the Fire, standing with others of the Horse-Eaters. We were not close enough to hear what was being said, but a chorus of angry shouts, unusual even at a Great Talk, soon told us the news was not being well received. Eventually the noise died down, only to rise again to a tumult later. Hours after the Talk started, I saw Portius, his face grim, shoving toward us through the crowd. He beckoned me to him.

“Come. They want to hear your vision. It does not go well. Unless the Lord intervenes, Lysia, we’re as good as dead.”

Portius took me to the Great Fire, glowing hot in the afternoon sun. He led me to stand beside Kratze, who gave me a weary smile belied by troubled eyes. Kratze turned toward the circle of men, many with hostile faces, who stared back at him – and at me.

Placing his hand on my shoulder, in the prescribed manner, he said, “The Great Talk has called this woman for a Talking. This is Lysia, daughter of Portius, and daughter of the Horse-Eaters.”

After I bowed my head in the attitude of submission, he continued. “Lysia is a Seer of things to come. She will tell us now the vision she saw two moons past.”

I recounted the vision as vividly as I could. Some of the men shifted uneasily, but most listened with hard faces. Only Borza of the Cloud Walkers, and a few who sat near him, gave any appearance of sympathy or belief. Inwardly, I prayed that God would give me the words to say, that through me the might somehow convince these stubborn people of the truth.

After I finished, a man I recognized as Laksu stood to his feet, and stood with outstretched arm toward Kratze. Kratze nodded gravely, and said, "Talk, Laksu of the Spear Raisers."

Laksu's face was a sneer, and his voice held a note of ridicule. "I would ask a question of the one who claims to be a seer."

Kratze's face clouded, but he could not refuse. "Talk, Laksu, and the seer of the Horse-Eaters will answer."

"I would know which of the gods of the ancestors revealed this great – *vision* – to this woman."

There was a murmur of approval from the circle, though they obviously already knew the answer.

I bowed my head, then lifted it proudly. "I serve the true God of Heaven, who made all that is, and besides him there is no other god."

Men sprang to their feet all around the circle, and the angry shouts rose to a greater pitch than earlier in the day. Cries of "Witch!" and "Cast her out!" rose above the rest. Kratze could only wait for the din to subside before his repeated shouts for order were finally heeded.

His voice was icy when he spoke again. "Many of you speak of the traditions of the ancestors. By which of those traditions do you shout threats in the Great Talk? By which of the traditions do you propose to kill one who came here under our own invitation and protection? Shame! Shame is what you bring to the Great Talk of the Korei."

Almost as one, the circle of men returned to their places, sitting once more on the ground. One of the painted men of the Ghost Talkers rose to his feet. Kratze recognized him.

"Pazat of the Ghost Talkers, talk, and we will listen."

His voice was like a deep resounding bell; I knew him to be the high chief of the Ghost Talkers, not a man to be lightly dismissed.

"You have talked truth, Kratze of the Horse-Eaters. The actions of those assembled bring shame on our forefathers, and they are even now restless in their graves. Send the woman away; she will come to no harm in this Congregation. We have heard all of the seers of the People proclaim that they have seen no such vision, and those who serve these false gods have forsaken the customs of the forefathers. The time has come for a decision. When the woman leaves, the Ghost Talkers call for an end of talking."

Portius hustled me away, back to Talitha. He whispered in my ear as we walked.

"It is not to be, daughter. The Great Talk will vote to reject the call for the Great Congregation. The Horse-Eaters will be judged, and you may well be sentenced to death. We will speak tonight, but you and Talitha must be ready to run. Kratze can't protect you; only God can do that now."

Talitha grabbed my arm tightly as Portius turned to go back to the Talk. "What happened?" she whispered, her voice taut with anxiety. I told her in quick sentences, adding what Portius said at the end.

“Leave?” she gasped. “Leave our home? Leave our people? I would rather die with them.”

I could not answer; my thoughts were the same. It was in God’s hands.

Portius rejoined us as the sun was setting, and we went together back to the camp of the Horse-Eaters. He did not speak until we were back in our tent, where he drew us down to the floor with him. His voice was a hoarse whisper, his face creased with worry and the first hint of fear I had ever seen there.

“The Horse-Eaters have been cast out from among the People; this has never happened before. Their herds will be taken from them, and they themselves will be driven to the Mardath to die. You are to be turned over to the Ghost Talkers as soon as we leave the Congregation, to be judged and burned as a witch. Kratze and I will not allow this to happen. Tonight, after the camp is asleep, we will escape, with all of the men who volunteer to go, and our horses. The women and children will be left behind; under the traditions of the forefathers they cannot be abandoned. The other tribes will have to absorb them.

“There is a secret path through the Mardath, which we will describe to you.”

I could listen to nothing else. “But, Papa, what about you? What about the families of the Horse-Eaters? How can they leave them?”

“My place is with my flock, child. The men of the Horse-Eaters are giving life to their families; if they leave with us, they will die.”

“But it’s all my fault, Papa!” I was weeping now. “Why should I live, and Talitha, when everyone else we know and love has to die? First Mama, now you. Why should we want to keep living?”

Talitha echoed what I said, wrapping her arms around her father’s neck and refusing to let go.

Portius’s voice was very soft now. “God has kept both of you alive for a reason. He has a plan for you both; I am not a prophet, but He has shown this to me very clearly. Kratze sees this as well, and he loves both you and the Lord enough to die for you, if he must.”

After that, there was no more talking. Portius left us, and we sat huddled together, desperately looking for comfort, and finding none. Portius returned with Kratze a long time later.

“Hurry!” Kratze hissed. “We have cleared a path, and taken care of the guards. Our horses are waiting outside the camp.”

The Valley of the Gathering was an oval-shaped bowl, and the Horse-Eaters camp was at the south end, near the edge. That was no accident, I decided. Most of the herds were left behind when the tribes came to the Congregation, in the charge of old men and young boys. Even so, the cattle brought for milk and meat, not to mention the horses, numbered in the thousands. We were led through the rows of tents without torches, but there was a bright moon overhead – perhaps a little too bright. As we approached the horses, most of which had riders already, we saw several men lying about on the ground. None of them

moved, and I shuddered, wondering if they would ever move again. Their faces all bore the wild designs of the Ghost Talkers.

Every male among the Horse-Eaters old enough to carry a weapon was there, almost 500 men. Some of them were spread out up the hill that formed one side of the bowl, keeping a path open for us through the restless herds of cattle that dotted the slope. The Horse-Eaters had done their job well; no one raised the alarm. I knew it was only a matter of time, though, before we were missed, and we were too large a group to hope to hide our tracks.

Every rider led one or two rider-less horses, only some of which carried packs of food. We were almost 200 miles from the River Kor, and our only hope of outrunning the certain pursuit was by riding fresh mounts for as long as possible.

Portius came up beside Talitha and me when we were some distance away from the valley, as the eastern sky gave the first hint of dawn. "It will take them some time to decide what to do – at least we hope. They will send a large force after us, and send another party to the south to try to cut us off. They know as well as we do there is only direction we can go; the Parnath lies to the north and west, and Tirzah to the east. They will watch the approaches to the Tirzah, but they know we fled from there. Kratze will keep scouts spread out around us, so they can spot our pursuers. There are few places to hide in the Kore, for them or for us."

We pushed our horses as far as we dared, then stopped about midday for a quick meal, and an all-too-short nap. By late afternoon, some of the scouts returned to report that a large party was, indeed, coming up behind us, pressing hard. Somewhat later, more scouts reported another group of riders was riding on a path parallel to us, to the east.

At nightfall, we had to call a halt, or risk running our horses into the ground, and exhausting ourselves. We camped without a fire, with scouts spread out wide to warn us of approaching danger. Our pursuers, whether they had more spare mounts or not, would have to rest at some point as well.

Before we lay down for a brief hours of rest, Kratze called us all to him. He seemed cheerful, almost exuberant, as if he thrived on danger and the threat of death. I knew him well enough to know that this was exactly the case.

"Some of the scouts have been down to the south of us. There's a narrow valley there, running north to south. On either side, there's rough terrain, so it's the quickest way to get to the river. This is what we plan to do: We'll set out before daylight; we can reach there by mid-morning, a few hours ahead of the Ghost Talkers who are chasing us. The horses will go on through the valley, but a hundred archers will slip off in the way, and hide on the rims of the valley, fifty on each side. At the far end of the valley, far enough away so it's not obvious, we will send horses around and back, so the archers will have a way of escape. They'll do as much damage as they can, then escape on the mounts we bring them. They'll join up with us later."

Nobody said anything for a while. Everyone knew that few, if any, of the archers would ever leave the valley alive. There would be no lack of targets, but even if every arrow found its mark, there would still be thousands of angry warriors eager to avenge their comrades. It was a suicide mission, designed to buy us a little time.

“I’ll go.” It was Talitha.

“No, daughter, you will not.” Portius was firm.

“But, Papa, I am the best...”

“Silence! All of this is designed to keep the two of you alive. Would you make it all for nothing? Don’t cheapen love, Talitha.”

My sister hung her head and turned away, but not before I saw the gleam of her tears in the moonlight. I followed her to our bedrolls, and went to sleep with her sobbing quietly in my arms.

The call to get up came far too soon for my aching body. Accustomed as I was to riding for long hours, I had come near the limits of my endurance. The Korei seemed not to notice, and neither did Talitha, but Portius was dragging even more than I. We rode steadily until we came to the valley, assured by the scouts that the pursuers were still well behind.

It was a thrilling sight to see the young archers vault from moving horses, and head for the high ground. At the same time, my heart ached to think these young men, so full of life, would never see another sunrise or ride another horse across the Kore. I knew each one by name.

South of the valley, two strings of horses, connected together in advance, broke away from us from either side. We were too far away, over the horizon, to see or even hear the battle, once it was joined. Toward dusk, the scouts brought in two blood-drenched warriors, all that was left of the brave group left us that morning. One of them died before he could tell his tale; the other was treated for his wounds. Later that night, when we finally stopped to rest, he revived enough to share his story with us.