

(Chapter ONE)

A Positive Change #

(PROOF COPY -- Not for distribution.)

The morning sun peered blushing over the horizon, its golden face eying the dark tops of what appeared a young, vibrant forest that followed a black ribbon of water cutting through the empty lands beyond, going steadily up until they came to a halt at the roots of a gloomy, forbidding mountain. Its face, worn and cracked with age, glowered at the surround while the steadily rising sun brightened colors and vibrancy of the lands around.

Just beyond the outer edges of the greening forest, a shore of verdant grass and dense brush transitioned into a golden sea of sand that rolled far into the distance in any direction. Coming from afar and turning sharply towards the solitary peak, a blue river wound its way through the trees, seemingly vanishing entirely into the woods. Yet on the far side, in the old river bed, a lonely trickle of water, hardly more than a creek or rivulet, surmounted the rocky damn to continue down its ancient path.

Under the eaves of the forest, the clear water wound around the trunks of trees and through deepening gloom as it drew closer to the mountain's foot. Every now and then it would branch off in natural-seeming streams that disappeared in the murk. At last, it arrived at a basin set at the roots of the slumbering peak, where it pooled and bubbled as if a bathtub plug had been pulled.

On its fair shore, Jake stood at the water's crystal edge drinking deeply, his golden scales flashing scarlet in the morning light, his glowing red eyes moving ceaselessly in their armored sockets.

To his fantastically sharp eyes, he could see people striding under the branches, some gathering the bounty from the berry bushes and others digging roots and harvesting mushrooms. Further on, Jake knew, the first farms were already producing crops, though they had only been planted three weeks ago.

The reason for the mad growth, and the rapid appearance of a forest in a desert, trotted under the eaves and amongst the people, resting her horn on a person's shoulder and occasionally laughing in her whinnying, horse-like fashion. Wherever she went, people would immediately perk up, broad grins would break out on their faces and they would start laughing, or simply smile and bend to their work refreshed as if they'd had a full night's sleep.

Jake nodded to his sister as she worked and the unicorn trilled and flashed in the sun a moment before darting further under the branches like quicksilver, her footfalls so light he

never heard a sound.

Jake heard other hooves approaching from a different direction, and turning towards them, spoke a mellow greeting to Brian as the centaur came striding up to him.

"Hi, Brain. How goes it?" he asked.

"Not well, I'm afraid," Brian replied, his brow furrowed in thought. "The number of people I have working in the forge isn't enough to keep up with the demand. So many are bringing in broken equipment that we can't repair it all in time."

"I thought that we were using dwarf methods." Jake asked curiously. "Surely their metals wouldn't break under casual use?"

Brian grimaced. "It shouldn't, but remember that we are just starting out. We don't have the skilled labor to accomplish the levels of smelting and forging we had before (most of that labor was done by machines anyway) and the methods of hand forging had mostly gone to those who worked in small hobby forges. So far, I haven't found anyone who had one."

Jake saw the problem clearly, it had cropped up as a common theme throughout the colony; the skills needed in the new world were uncommon before, or not to be found. Men had depended on machines and automation to do the backbreaking labor, and now without them everyone was relearning how to do things the old-fashioned way.

"Perhaps we can do another search through the frozen." Jake suggested. "We might find someone who had such a hobby forge."

"That would be nice, but I don't think they would have brought their tools with them." Brian remarked. "So it would simply be a guessing game, hoping that this person or that will have what we need. Chances are, none of the people we brought with us will. Oh, they are probably skilled in welding and other classic farm skills," Brian waved away his argument before Jake could make it; an easy process for a centaur that prided himself on his quick logic. "but we don't have the welding machines anymore, nor the automatic presses, hammers, and things they would be used to working with. And hand working metal and welding it together is proving to be entirely different than machine welding. It's more involved, very complicated, and has to be done at a certain speed or the whole piece will lose its temper and become weak and brittle. That's the problem with the new tools compared to the stuff you saved; the welds aren't holding and sometimes the metal heads themselves become deformed after very little use."

Jake shrugged. "Well, we shall simply have to struggle through." He decided. "Eventually people will pick up the skills needed. The newer batches are showing improvements, yes?"

"That's right." Brian agreed. "But I'm concerned with our present rate of learning versus consumption. At this rate, it will be a year, perhaps two, before we can put out a decent product that won't break. And many more years before we could

even attempt the simplest dwarf methods; they have some extremely complicated recipes with ingredients I have never seen before, or they are given names which are so different then I am familiar with that it takes a long time to strike upon the right thing. And we are consuming the metals we use at an alarming rate."

"I thought you were recycling all the metals." Jake asked.

"We are, but each melting cycle reduces the amount we have by just a little, some of the metal won't melt uniformly, others won't mix together the way they should, and some things are just too difficult to melt as we haven't opened the larger furnaces to heat them to the required temperature. And we haven't touched the stuff in the vehicles yet; I don't have the first clue into working with aluminum, other than it requires vast amounts of electricity, which we don't have, and is extremely light. It could be that attempting to melt it to work it into a form or mold that we can use will ruin it and we won't have any kind of product we can use. The same with the steels; a lot of the steel used in the heavy equipment and the smaller cars and things are alloys, and we just don't have the experience and the training needed to work with them yet."

"It sounds wise, holding off reconstituting the vehicles until we can best use them to our advantage," Jake mused. "But might it be a case of a white elephant? Holding onto the metal stock so long that it becomes impossible to ever want to use it?"

"Perhaps." Brian admitted. "But I don't think so. I just think that we need lots more time before we can start working on them."

"You know that Volgelson wants to launch an expedition to find oil and construct a refinery to make fuel and oils for them." Jake mentioned.

"Yes." Brian admitted. "And while it would give us several advantages for long-distance travel and fighting, I think the risks of using them are too great. They are too large and noticeable, for one thing; the moment they leave the vicinity of the mountain they will be seen, or leave tracks that enable anyone to find us. Each of her fighting vehicles requires a sizable maintenance staff dedicated to that vehicle; we don't have the manpower for such projects, nor the resources to dedicate to repair broken parts, especially with our current capabilities. And trying to send people out to find a place to pump oil is likely as not to get us noticed very quickly. We'd have to have workers to man it, and soldiers to guard the pump station, the refinery, and the convoys that would have to pass between them."

He shook his head. "No, I don't think we should even attempt to find oil at this early juncture. The risks do not come close to the benefits."

"I agree." Jake said. "But she raises the point that we

have seen a lot of enemies in the Seeing Pool, and we don't have the ability to battle them face to face with sword and spear. She wants the tanks and the machine guns to keep the enemy at a distance."

"That would be nice, but like we know, thanks to our Brisson friends, sulfur is relatively rare in this world."

"I cannot think of why that would be, with any active volcano or volcanic activity on the planet, there should be sulfur found in plenty." Jake mentioned.

Brian shrugged. "Rachel and I have a working theory, that perhaps the demon people use sulfur in their spells, and so have, after all this time in sole command of this world, formed a monopoly on all sulfur. The darkest areas on the planet appear to be formed around geological hotspots, which support that theory. Or perhaps it is because they eat it as a form of sustenance; there is, or were, references in literature that claimed demons consistently smelled of brimstone, also known as sulfur. Perhaps it was formed from their breath, or from the spells used. Sulfur is a powerful component in gunpowder, one of the three main components. Perhaps they can use its stored energy as well."

Jake considered the likelihood. "It's as good a theory as any." He agreed. "And it raises disturbing possibilities. If sulfur is actually as common as it once was in our time, but the demons control the sole supply, then they would have enormous power available to them."

"Yes, which is why it would be a good idea not to be seen." Brian pointed out.

"Hmm. Well, keep working on the theory, let me know what else you come up with." Jake said. "In the meantime, I will see about our food stocks. If we have enough on hand, we can start releasing additional people. We should start collecting a list as to how large our next group of people should be."

"Don't forget the children." Brian pointed out. "We didn't do any children except for our families when we woke everyone up. There are some parents that have been working for months with their children still frozen in Dragon Ice. They will want their children now as a reward for their efforts."

"I have not forgotten them." Jake protested, smoke curling from one nostril. "And I had counted on releasing all the children of the workers at least. But children are small, I don't think we need to fear to add them into our calculations of a sustainable population just yet."

"That's where you are wrong." Brian countered. "Children may be small in size, but they make up for that with energy and enthusiasm, both of which require a great deal of energy to maintain. They will eat enough for a full adult, at least some of the larger ones. We must count each of them as one person, regardless of age."

Jake sighed. "I will bow to your wisdom on this." Jake

said. "I can hardly say anything, as I eat enough for forty people in a single sitting."

"True, but you don't eat as often as we do." Brian pointed out. "Your body can survive for weeks on short commons, or no food at all, though it makes you sluggish."

"True, true." Jake said with a smile. "But we cannot give everyone that ability, and you are probably right. I shall have to be better. Was there anything else?"

Brian shrugged. "Not really; simply a report from Shyla that the lakes are refilling nicely, and should reach full levels in three days."

"That's impressive." Jake said. "I hadn't thought it would be so soon. It has been only four months since Tom and Stacey and Mausi and Lana returned from the mountains."

Brian nodded. "The flow of the river is concerning." He said, looking at the pool thoughtfully. "Despite the initial surge caused by the melting of that glacier, it has remained strong for quite a while. But I worry that the little snow on the peaks will mean this river will not remain strong for much longer."

Jake shook his head. "Come on, Brian," he said as if they were sitting back at the table of their little flat by the college, arguing about a computer game. "We know that water does take a while to travel, but surely we should have seen something by now if the water wanted to taper off."

"Perhaps." Brian nodded. "But the accounts all agree that huge amounts of snow and water were consumed in the course of the battle. While most of that water poured into the lake and got captured, a lot of it wouldn't, meaning the lake wouldn't be at full strength for long, and there won't be water to replace it until who knows when."

"But then that is good news in its way, isn't it?" Jake asked. "After all, we are still worried about that trickle making its way down the old riverbed; imagine what the flow should look like if the lake were full and the pipes stopped draining that water to the reservoir? It should over-top the dam and pour down as a strong creek or small river and people will wonder where it all came from; if the flow from the mountain is smaller, perhaps it won't excite as much comment and our secret will remain safe for some years."

"You raise a good point." Brian said. "And one that I have considered before, but I rejected it as the canals are full and only the drain caused by refilling the lake has kept the river from overflowing. The marvel of the dwarves, creating a system of pipes that can fill the lake but not drown the cavern despite flood or storm." He slightly shook his head in awe of the dwarvish skill. "I wish I had just one to teach us their ways! Think of what we could accomplish with it?"

"Well, we shall have to make do without." Jake said heavily. "And glad am I in a way; what dwarf would be pleased to

see men living in the homes and halls that he'd made? I would fear that they would insist we leave, and give the fortress over to them."

"Hmm." Brian nodded. "Well, fortunately for us, I doubt any dwarf still exists; after so many millennia with the demons running free. We've seen no sign of them, even when men roamed Earth freely and poked into many of the hidden places that could be found."

"Doesn't mean much," Jake argued. "After all, we know this place is magic, and I suspect that Rachel's initial assessment was correct; the outpost had been placed inside a pocket dimension, inside another mountain, and only its long connection had brought it to this reality and merged with our mountain. If the other cities are still trapped in their own dimensions, then whose to say they've noticed the passage of time at all?"

"True, but I still say you worry over nothing." Brian said. "No doubt that if they were still inside such dimensions, they are unable or unwilling to intrude upon Earth again, so they are likely not to bother ever returning at this point."

"You are probably right." Jake nodded. "And I never counted it as likely either, but it *is* something to keep in mind as we move forward."

"Agreed." Brian said. "But let's not dwell on it until it happens. After all, there is so much else to worry about right now, that just adding something like this on could be the straw that broke the camel's back!"

"Right." Jake chuckled.

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After Brian returned to the forges, Jake wandered under the leafy boughs of the forest. Not far and protected by a long shoulder of the mountain grew a great tree, the Unicorn's Tree, that marked and sheltered her glade. A mighty oak, it towered nearly three hundred feet into the air with branches that were bigger around in some places than he was. Its crown twittered madly with the nests of hundreds of birds, while squirrels, raccoons, mountain lions and other arboreal creatures rested and frolicked further down. Inside the Unicorn's Glade no creature could harm another and so slept or played together in peace. The air smelt sweet and redolent of newborn grass and fresh, growing things, while the air sparkled with promise, humming with wonder and purity.

It was a healing place, his sister's glade, and those that came there left with lightened heart no matter the trouble that assailed them when they sought it out.

Jake felt the need for counsel, and as he strode lightly on the grass, he saw his sister appear as if summoned under the trees on the far side. They met in the middle, where Jake tucked his legs under his body and rested, bringing his head down to the level of hers while she settled gracefully down in the grass next to him, her snowy hide ethereal next to his great golden

form.

'What troubles you, brother?' she asked, her voice resonating in his mind rather than his ears.

"It's Nacomi's father." Jake admitted. "It seems that, no matter what I try, he has set himself against me, and does everything in his power to keep her from seeing me. I do not know how to get over his hatred of me."

'Hatred is too strong a word.' Serena scolded him. 'He does not *hate* you, any more than any father has *hated* the good men who seek their daughter's affections. All of them fear that they are going to lose interest and leave them broken-hearted and ruined. None of them ever want that, so they test and test the boy to see if he is determined and not easily dissuaded.'

"I suspect that is true for most cases." Jake rumbled with a grin, "Most people know or suspect that. But in this case, it seems more along the lines that he is terrified that I might actually eat Nacomi, despite my love for her, because I am a dragon, and dragons eat maidens."

'Well, there might also be a little of that.' Serena allowed. 'But he should recognize that you are not a pure dragon, or that those are fairy tales made by those wishing to frighten their readers. They aren't real, and you are.'

"True, but convincing him of that is proving to be a harder task than managing the whole mountain." Jake grumbled in frustration.

'Give him some time.' Serena advised. 'He'll come around when he realizes he cannot stop you from seeing her, and that she will go on seeing you whether he wishes it or no.'

"Thanks." Jake said dryly. "If I fail, all I have to worry about is him coming after me with a spear."

'It's a good thing you are so armored then.' Serena teased. 'Or you would find yourselves becoming inseparable!'

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Jake pondered her words as he made his way back into the mountain. They were good advice, he had to admit, and he wondered if they came from the unicorn part or if she'd had some actual experience with that sort of thing. He couldn't think of a single date his sister had gone on except the disastrous Tommy Horner Incident, but perhaps she'd snuck one by him? But no, she wasn't that kind of girl, hiding things had been foreign concepts to them until the change.

He passed through the doorway and sought Volgelson, who he learned had been seen searching some of the lower passages for signs of armories.

Jake descended the spiral stairs to look for her, wondering if she would have any success. In the mountain they'd found plenty of empty rooms that they guessed to be old armories stripped of weapon and armor, but they couldn't be sure. Only one stocked armory had been found, and from its stores had come Brian and Rachel's helms, shields and swords (those being the

only pieces big enough to fit them). It left them terribly exposed in combat, Jake knew, and he wished the dwarves had ridden horses, but it appeared that dwarves preferred their feet when walking, or small shaggy ponies for drawing carts and wagons and hadn't used any beasts when fighting.

He found her when she stepped out from another empty room, shaking her head in disappointment. Around her stepped five members of her staff, while around their heads Stacey flew regally, her light bright in the dark gloom.

"Hello Jake, what can I do for you?" Volgelson asked, spotting him immediately.

"How goes the search?" he asked.

A look of bitter frustration crossed her pretty features. "We've found dozens of empty armories, but the dwarves or whoever were pretty damn thorough when they cleaned this place out. Looks like they left that one armory full on purpose; we've got perhaps a dozen swords out of it, some spears and what looks like a skinny sword on a spear--"

"A glaive," Jake supplied, "Interesting."

"Well, whatever. At least we have some patterns for the swords and stuff we'll eventually make." She sighed. "I can't equip a fighting force yet; I simply don't have enough bullets and these primitive weapons are going to take some getting used to. John, here," he pointed at one of her staff, a dark-haired individual with a crooked scar on one cheek, "took some actual sword lessons a while back, and not the foil or saber, but actual broadsword sword fighting. That'll be a help."

"Excellent." Jake nodded. "Have him report to Brian immediately; he found a book sometime back in the library that the dwarves had put there that detailed sword styles for all the races. Having someone of our own who has familiar knowledge can take that and use it to set up a training regimen."

Volgelson cocked her head. "Not a bad idea." She said. "Sergeant, see to it, will you?"

"Yes, ma'am." The grim-voiced man said. He saluted Volgelson and Jake before hurrying from the hall.

"Something tells me sword work isn't what you had in mind when you came here though." Volgelson said, looking searchingly at him.

"That's right." Jake nodded. "I want to release more of the colonists, especially the children of those that are working now, plus additional workers and unskilled labor. I'm hoping that within the next year, we should be able to release everyone."

"So soon?" Volgelson furrowed her brow in concern. "What about food stocks? I don't think that we'll have enough on hand to last the winter."

"Ah, but you reckon without Serena." Jake smiled. "No winter frost will touch that forest, it will remain in eternal spring so long as her power remains. The crops that we've

planted are already looking nearly ready to harvest in a few weeks, and we should be able to get another three in before October rolls around."

"October! What month is it now?" Volgelson asked in surprise, checking her dead watch in habit.

"It is, by our reckoning, late January." Jake informed her.

"Wow." She said quietly. "But that would mean..."

"Yep. It will be a full year that we've awakened in June." Jake said.

"Excellent. What about the fridge room?" Volgelson asked.

"In operation again", Jake said. "It seems the water is pumped up from the lake and dropped in that waterfall to swirl around that room."

"Well, that will make the food last longer." Volgelson said thoughtfully.

"We should try and make crates or some sort of sealed container to keep out damp and mildew, sir." One of her staff suggested. "Or we'll have huge losses."

"The room is actually pretty dry," Jake reported. "We've seen it in operation before, but your suggestion has great merit, and it could make storage easier. But making crates could be difficult, because of the forest."

The men looked downcast, realizing the previously unheard of danger of trying to harvest any tree in Serena's forest. Stacey went round and round above them, obviously thinking about the problem.

"I'm sure you can figure out a solution." Jake said easily. "In the meantime, please find some people to search out fresh clothes and prepare a few of the houses and chambers. I want to bring out another hundred at least."

"So that will bring our total population to...what is it now?" she asked, turning to one of her aides.

The man answered promptly, "Two hundred and fifty-one, ma'am."

"All right. We can manage an additional one hundred and fifty-seven, I believe." Volgelson thought out loud, "counting the children of course. How many remain in storage?"

"There are about sixteen hundred left in stasis after this." Jake said. "I don't know the exact number off the top of my head."

"Hmm," Volgelson furrowed her brow in thought. At last she looked up and nodded firmly. "We will have it done." She said. "I'll go through and make up a list of those that we can use, plus those who appear young and strong enough to learn some of the more difficult chores around here."

"Please ensure your figures account for families." Jake rumbled. "I don't want to split up anyone again, if possible. It puts too much strain on those awake and causes stress when their partners are brought around, rather than bringing them out at the same time."

"All right" Volgelson agreed. "I will do my best."

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She remained true to her word: in two days Jake had a significant list of people to pull out of stasis, each of the selected marked with a streak of dirt from the outside placed above the selectee's head.

Jake walked around, viewing those that had been chosen. When he came to a pair of young women clutching at each other for support, looking up at him in wonder he paused, seeing the dirt on them.

"Nancy and Sara." He rumbled, staring down at them.

"Friends of yours?" Volgelson asked, standing next to him and peering curiously at the pair.

"Somewhat." Jake allowed, thinking of their meeting so long ago. "We met some time back when Nacomi mentioned that a young girl had been kidnapped. Serena searched for her in the Seeing Pool and saw her sheltering in the arms of Nancy here, while a skinny weasel-faced man beat them and tried to tear them apart with the chains he had on their wrists and legs. Serena rushed to the cabin, but I got their first, just after Nancy had gotten stabbed with a knife. I came in through the wall and killed the monster, while Serena healed them. To keep our secret safe, we withdrew all memory of us, though apparently some still remained, as they vaguely remembered the Lady helping them. We removed the PTSD from the kidnapping and abuse, but left the memories to help guide them and prevent them from falling into the same trap, despite Nancy's request to completely wipe her memory of that day."

Volgelson had ceased looking at Nancy and now stared up at him, very still.

"She can remove PTSD and memory?" she asked in a low, intent voice.

"Yes." Jake nodded, not really noticing her shift. "We've done the same with the victims of Cassandra, and even Sam. You can ask her about it."

"Perhaps I will." Volgelson said very quietly. She seemed focused on something else now.

Jake studied her a moment, wondering at the sudden change before it dawned on him.

"General, her power has grown in such things," Jake mentioned casually, "Though she hates having to touch the minds of others; it leaves her with a copy of their memories forever inside her, no matter how dark they might have been. But if some of your soldiers are truly suffering, she can ease their troubles if asked."

"Do you think so?" she looked at him.

"It would be her choice." Jake said. "You'll have to speak to her about it and see if she is willing to agree. It...is a heavy burden."

She smiled.

Letting the matter drop, they continued their inspection of the general's choices. He smiled at the sight of the pair of librarians he'd once spoken to marked for release while frowning at the inordinate amount of children that had been selected; he hadn't realized how many had parents awake. At the back, Jake came across the little Chinese girl and her parents. All of them were also smeared with dirt.

"Why them?" Jake asked, pointing to them.

"They appear to have skills associating with wealth and politics." Volgelson pointed towards the small pile of belongings at their feet. "Their clothes are designer brands, they've got expensive watches and jewelry in that pile, and see that briefcase? That's a top of the line courier model with extra security measures to it, or I'm a private. I'm hoping they own a bank or know the system we used to have. We haven't set up a currency system yet, but we're going to want to think about it, and maybe these people can help."

"Perhaps," Jake said quietly, his mind now tackling the problem. "They are Chinese diplomats, I think. At least, I thought it had to be the case. They are extremely wealthy, the three (or was it four? I can't remember) million dollars he offered for Serena's capture certainly proved that." He studied the faces in front of him, not noting how quiet the cavernous hall had gotten as he continued to speak in thoughtful tones. "So he could certainly understand how vast sums of money can be made and distributed to the workers. Still, without a smelting plant for gold, we'd be forced to use what is in the mountain, and we don't know what spells lie upon these treasures. If we seek to unmake them, we could trigger something that we do not want."

He remained silent in thought for a minute or two before he abruptly nodding. "Your choices are good." He announced. "I hadn't thought of currency and a proper economy, nor do I think the others have as well; we've been too busy with other matters more urgent. Having someone who is versed in economics might prove a boon."

He turned to leave, only narrowly avoiding stepping on Volgelson.

Jake looked curiously at her, wondering why she looked angry and upset.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"They put a price on Lady Serena's head?" she asked softly, a curious fury building in her voice; a glance around showed black hatred blooming in the soldiers around him.

"You misunderstand." Jake said hurriedly. "They did not want her dead. To them, she was the Ki'lin."

"The what?" Volgelson asked, her anger momentarily stalled as she looked up at him confused.

"Ki'Lin. It is a Chinese word for Unicorn." Jake explained. "They were revered for their wisdom and good fortune. If a

Ki'Lin lived with the royal family, it would bring wealth and happiness to the country. If it lived with a peasant family of its choosing, that family would reap the benefits and not know sorrow or hunger for a century."

"You can see why they were seeking so hard for her." Jake continued. "Whether it would be for the Chinese government or just for themselves, I don't know. I encountered them after the child's limo convoy encountered slick ice on a bridge and slid off. I pulled them from the abyss and talked to them. They'd agreed to withdraw the reward money. However the next day we started taking our families to the mountain to keep them from Cassandra, and I never found out if they'd done that or not."

"I guess it doesn't make a difference now." Volgelson said thoughtfully, turning back to the family. Despite her words, she seemed to be regretting her decision to select them.

"Don't." Jake advised her. "Your reasoning was sound, and they are likely to be a help and not a hindrance. They will come to grips with the changed reality, and not go the way of the lost."

Volgelson winced. Jake himself felt grim; some of the people couldn't handle the stark change in reality. They'd grown despondent and frightened, despite Serena's help. A very small number, six so far, had cast themselves from the top of the mountain's sole cliff to their deaths, resulting in the dark name, Despair Cliff. Serena had taken the losses personally, checking on everyone in the mountain at least twice a day no matter where they were, and she made sure she could be reached at any time by anyone seeking help.

"It was expected." She muttered. "Frankly I'm amazed more people aren't suffering, Lady Serena is a miracle worker."

Jake noted the emphasis on the title, thinking it strange for a devout defender of a republic, but let it be. If it helped Serena in her role as authoritarian figure, then perhaps it would be for the best.

"Shall we begin?" Jake asked, walking back to where Nancy and Sara waited.

"Sure." Volgelson nodded. "It can't be much after lunch anyway. We should get about thirty done before dinner, and pick it up again before tomorrow."

"With luck." Jake agreed, looking down at the girls once more.

Stepping back, he yawned; a white fog billowed from behind his teeth and fell to the floor, creeping across like a living creature, it seemed to devour the crystal rock imprisoning Sara and Nancy together. It reached the very top of the cave where a slender column attached them to the ceiling where it had stayed through the long millennia, keeping them from tipping over in the intervening years.

It thinned and vanished, leaving the two naked girls blinking in the unaccustomed light of the torches, their hands

flying to cover themselves as best they could until their clothes could be freed and they were allowed to dress behind the privacy of a curtain held by two female soldiers.

When they stepped out, Jake noticed how close they stayed to each other, standing apart from everyone else, even the statues, as if nervous around crowds. He briefly wondered if that had something to do with their torture and wasn't addressed with Serena's magic or something else.

"Nancy, Sara. It is good to see you again." Jake said.

They looked shyly up at him, wonder in their faces. "Have we met before?" Nancy asked, curiously.

Oops. Jake smiled. "We have." He confirmed. "Though you do not remember it, we had need of secrecy at the time and you agreed to forget all about us."

"Oh." She said uncertainly. She looked around at the soldiers.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Jake explained to her the situation, in as few words as possible. When he finished, the two were shocked, but Jake saw few tears in evidence.

"We cried our tears when we came here." Sara whispered when he asked. "You guys were amazing...but a lot of people were outside the shield when it came up. My parents, my brother...none of them made it." She quietly sobbed.

"My father was coming to see me." Nancy said to no one in particular. "He'd only just let me go back to college on my own and was on his way from Portland when...it all went down. I never found him."

"Did you find anyone?" Jake asked quietly.

Nancy shook her head.

"Well, just because you didn't find them then, doesn't preclude a possibility that they might be here. We have many here still encased in ice and more than a few walking free. Please search through, and if you find your families, let me know."

They thanked him, but he could tell they were unconvinced. He couldn't blame them a bit if they thought his words were hollow.

After all, we knew we couldn't save everyone, no matter how hard we tried. I should have realized the inevitability that some families would be separated by much more than distance. He realized sadly.

Two soldiers came up to them and led them to the tables where others waited to take their statements and direct them to where they would be staying.

Jake watched them go, wondering how many he released would have similar stories, before placing the thought firmly to the side.

What does it matter? He thought to himself. *If they have survived, then that is their good fortune. They will grieve and*

move on. It will take time, of course, but with Serena's help they will have a better chance.

Feeling the matter settled, he turned his attention back to his work. He decided to release whole families next, and he came to one he recognized; the little girl Serena had rescued from the woods. Jake delightedly unfroze them and waited politely for the family to come back to their senses.

"What's happening?" The father spoke slowly, seemingly watching himself for any sign of sickness or slowness caused by the suspended animation.

"The Dragon!!!" The little girl squealed in delight, spotting him immediately. She bounced on her feet and ran towards him like a child to her puppy not caring that she'd not donned any clothes, or her mother racing after her in fear and embarrassment, trying to catch her wayward daughter and cover herself at the same time. Her father simply stood there, stunned to immobility.

"Hello to you too, little Sam." Jake rumbled, lowering his head amusedly. "I remember your name even if we haven't met but why don't you let your mother dress you first before we meet properly, eh?"

"You know my name!" she shrieked, apparently not hearing the rest of his words. She latched onto his front leg tightly, as if afraid he'd disappear in a puff of smoke.

Jake looked down at her and saw her mother hanging back, terror in her eyes at his size and ferocious appearance yet dreading leaving her daughter close to him regardless of the civility of his speech.

Jake spoke, "Go and dress young woman and I shall keep safe watch on your daughter. Return when you are able and we shall see about prying her off for her clothes."

Despite the soldiers in the room still turned away she looked shame-faced around at the dim shapes in the dark.

Abruptly Volgelson appeared at her elbow and grabbed her arm firmly, steering her back to her husband who looked bemusedly around as if wondering when he'd wake from the fever-dream.

"Come on, girl; let's get you decent and hubby over there too. Jake isn't going to harm your Sam in the slightest. He's really a big softie."

"Flatterer", Jake giped before turning his attention to the child at his feet.

As Volgelson and one of her male aides presided over the parents, Jake played with Sam, much to the young girl's delight. With the very tip of his tail he placed her firmly between two spikes. Once she'd been securely seated he swept his tail around slowly, never far from his snout or feet where he could catch her, moving ever higher when he saw how unafraid she was. The whole time she gasped, shrieked, laughed and howled with delight.

When he found her mother below dressed in a worn shirt and ragged pants next to her husband, Jake left off playing and brought his tail back down to earth, nearest the mother.

"Mommy! Look at me!" she cried on seeing them.

"Yes, I see. Now let go of the dragon." Her mother said nervously, gripping the child tightly at the waist. "We've got to go get dressed."

"All right mommy!" the girl hopped down and followed a short distance with a wistful expression on her face. She turned abruptly and waved cheerfully at Jake before vanishing behind the curtain.

When she returned, she stood in a neat little skirt with matching blue blouse, and a red ribbon tied at the waist. Her hair had been brushed out and a small pink flower now decorated her golden locks.

"Greetings, and well met." Jake boomed, making the adults wince and the child bounce on her feet again.

"Mommy, can I go play with the dragon again?"

"No dear, I'm sure he's got things he's got to do." Her mother scolded.

"As do we all, Miss...?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Bethany Davenshaw, and this is my husband Teagan." The flustered woman said hurriedly.

Teagan started to hear his name, then gave a weak wave, as if he wasn't sure what to do.

"Uh, hi." He managed in a strangled voice.

"Hello to you both. I am Jake." Jake said in a slow, solemn voice.

He studied the pair in front of him. Bethany stood a hair over five and a half feet, with dark brown hair, green eyes, and dimples on her face. She would be what was called a "looker", with the body a model might envy. Jake could see the resemblance with her daughter and thought Sam would grow to be a heartthrob in the mountain.

Her father stood in stark contrast to them both. Where his wife looked willowy and toned, he seemed broad and squat. Hardly taller than his wife, he had broad shoulders but thin arms. Long dexterous fingers stuck out of his hands like wires out of Styrofoam, and his entire complexion seemed pale and waxen.

Jake looked concernedly at him, wondering if he'd been ill before they'd been frozen.

"What did you do for a living before?" Jake asked, mostly to buy him time to see if his guess was correct.

However, the man spoke normally, without a cough or sign of flu.

"I was a computer game tester for a start-up." he said. "I checked the speed and smoothness and looked for errors in the code. Some I could fix on my own, and send a report back to the lab, but others I had to take notes on and send the version back to the programmers." Teagan explained.

Jake nodded; the waxen skin and skinny arms made perfect sense now. However, it would mean that his prior skills and knowledge were worthless in this time.

Still, with time, he could become a great asset. He could certainly find work to do.

"I'm afraid there aren't computer games left," Jake told him gently, "or electricity, or much of anything we took for granted in the old days."

They started, looking around as if to confirm with their own eyes. When they saw the nods of the others their reactions couldn't be more different. Samantha simply looked curious--she wasn't old enough to fully realize what that meant (with luck, Jake thought, she would never know what she missed) while her mother looked downcast and her father seemed to become positively ill. Jake hoped he wasn't the kind to believe himself good at only one thing in life and give in to despair and anger when he found it taken away from him.

"It's not over yet." Jake said firmly. "You still have your health and use of your limbs, and we need workers now more than ever. You will have to report to the panel," he pointed, "and see which positions you would like to fill and what is available. We have to start anew now, and we have little time in which to do it."

"Yes, of course. Thank you." Bethany said weakly. Teagan looked like he'd never speak again. Samantha simply bounced on her toes and looked up at Jake with eager, excited eyes.

"Will I get to help you?" she piped.

Jake chuckled. "Perhaps." He told her. "I do a lot of different jobs around the Mountain. You might help me if you wish, or you could see if Brian and Rachel could use a hand. They're centaurs, you know."

Her eyes lit up. "Centaurs?!" she shrieked. "Let's go see! Let's go see!" she tugged her mom's restraining hand.

Her mother rolled her eyes and shot a wry glance at her husband who appeared not to notice.

Jake felt his ire rise; he knew he should simply direct Teagan to seek Serena but his temper got the better of him.

"Volgelson, why don't you escort Samantha and her mother from the hall." He said evenly. "I have something I wish to discuss with Teagan here."

Teagan jerked from whatever abyss he'd been staring in to look up at him in horror while Bethany looked fearful.

Volgelson ushered the others from the chamber, casting doubtful looks back as she shut the door.

Alone, Jake looked hard at Teagan, feeling his displeasure grow. He struggled to reign in his emotions though and pondered what exactly to say while Teagan trembled in terror.

"I'm not going to eat you." Jake snapped in exasperation. "I simply want to have a talk with you."

"You've woken in a world that's unfamiliar to you. I get

it, it's disorienting and frightening. Your skills that you prided yourself on are irrelevant now and it's a devastating loss. But it is NOT" he said forcefully, driving his point home, "the end of the world. You have your health, your wife and most importantly, you have Samantha. You will NOT give up on them, nor infect them with defeat. You need to start acting like a man and less like a mouse." At those words Teagan's head came up a little and a flash of anger came to his eyes.

Good, Jake thought. Anger will be useful here.

"You are going to have to adapt to an old way of living. Your ancestors survived such conditions before, so can you. It will not be easy, but it Can be done, it WILL be done, and YOU will do so. Am I clear." His voice dropped to a threatening grow. He wouldn't be taking no for an answer.

Teagan grimaced. He ran his fingers nervously through his hair, glanced down at his T-shirt that advertised what Jake thought might have been a first-person shooter video game, before slumping his shoulders.

"I understand." He said in a thin, reedy voice.

"Not good enough!" Jake said. "You are not weak unless you think you are! You must consider yourself strong to see yourself through this. If you do not, then I will help you so see it."

Teagan looked frightened but spoke more forcefully.

"I understand, sir. I won't let you down."

Jake thought he sounded more sincere this time.

"Very good. Go to your wife and child, speak with the officers and see what positions are available, then tell them you would like to help Tom and Stacey in their cleaning crew."

Jake figured that the best thing to do would be to have the man working in close proximity to someone else. If he had him tending the fields, that might give him too much alone time to think. By putting him with a partner in the cleaning crew, they might be able to get him to come around on his own. For now, he'd done what he could.

He watched Teagan step out and Volgelson file back in.

"How did it go?" she asked.

"Not as well as I would have liked." Jake admitted. "But hopefully better than it could be. I've told him to seek to be on the cleaning crew. If he doesn't want to be and tries for outdoor work, let him, but I don't want him to be alone. Supply him with a partner, someone who can keep a close eye on him and not let him spend too much time alone to brood."

"It will be done." Volgelson nodded.

"Excellent." Jake sighed. "Now hopefully all of the others won't be like...that."

#

They worked for several hours, moving steadily through the new recruits with little trouble besides the usual confusion and disorientation that the unfrozen experienced.

Halfway through, and close to midnight, Jake called a halt to the proceedings and told everyone to return upstairs to the sleeping levels. They would have to continue their efforts the next day or rather later that morning when they'd rested.

The company filed out, shutting and locking the doors thoroughly. Jake realized with some surprise that Nancy was amongst them and he fell in beside her, the others moving aside or falling back as he passed.

They walked slowly up the spiral ramps neither speaking for a long while. At last Jake ventured to break the silence.

"It seems you haven't found them." He guessed.

Nancy shook her head. "I didn't really expect it." She told him. "It was just an idle hope; he would never have made it into the city in time. In fact, I doubt he even made it near the state lines at all."

"How come your father lived so far away?" Jake asked curiously. "I mean...well, you know." He said awkwardly.

"You mean, how did I end up in the National Forest under the care of Gerald?" she asked lightly. "I suppose now I have you and the Unicorn to thank for the rescue. Thanks by the way."

"Your welcome." Jake told her gravely.

"Well, whatever you guys did, it came as a heck of a shock to the psychiatrists that saw us after the rescue. They couldn't believe how calm we were, and how little we seemed to have suffered. We hated the memories, of course, but it didn't scare us, or make us comatose, or perform behaviors out of the ordinary. Before I was rescued, for example," she explained, "I lived with a chain on my leg and handcuffs on my wrists at night. That way he could use me whenever he wanted and he didn't have to struggle with me. I hated those chains, more than anything, but eventually I got used to them to the point where I thought I couldn't live without them, bad things would happen to me if I took them off. When I was rescued, I laid down on the bed at the hospital, feeling perfectly normal; I couldn't understand why I felt so comfortable and yet thought that something was missing. It was then I realized, *I was comfortable without the chains*. It had to have been the Unicorn that healed me, the Lady of the Wood."

"I am very glad she was able to help you." Jake said, shivering mentally at the horrors she'd suffered and remembered in her short life. "But you were explaining about how your father lived so far away."

"Oh, right. Well, after I was kidnapped from soccer practice mom and dad spent years looking for me, losing hope as the case went cold. At last the detective working the case retired, and it ended up in limbo. At that point they lost all faith that I could be alive. Mom took pills apparently, and when she died my father couldn't bear to live in the house anymore or near the city where he felt his life and been ruined so thoroughly. He packed up and moved to Portland to try and start

fresh."

"When I was found, he called me that very day in the hospital room; he was crying so much I couldn't understand at first who was speaking to me. It took a while for him to calm down enough to talk. He told me everything that had happened to him, including the fact that he'd married again. He came up the next day, bringing her with him."

"What was she like?" Jake asked.

"Emma? She was kind, very shy and nervous around me. She was the same age as dad, and only a little older than mom would have been. She had an amulet she wore around her neck, which she gave me there in the police station."

Her hand strayed to her neck where a large gold circle with a blue sapphire sparkled. Beautiful wolf heads were embossed around the jewel and above a dove flew clutching an olive branch, so delicately wrought as to be invisible unless looked at closely or with the eyes of a dragon. Jake felt an instinctual stirring firmly suppressed.

"I told her she didn't need to give me anything, but she insisted. 'It saved my family in the woods of East Berlin, it's luck is very strong.' She said to me. 'As long as you wear it, you will never suffer harm again.'"

She sighed, her eyes turning misty as they looked far into the past. "I wish now she'd kept it."

"I'm sorry, I upset you." Jake apologized.

"Don't be." Nancy came back to the present and looked at him sharply. "I don't want them to be a memory only I hold. They were good people and deserve to be remembered for that."

"I think they would have been overjoyed to be remembered by so worthy a daughter." Jake spoke comfortingly. Inside he felt uneasy, the conversation put him in mind of his own parents and he made a mental note to tell them again how much he loved them.

Her smile flashed whitely in the dim light of the corridor.

"I hope so. Anyway, after going back to Portland for a while, I felt restless. I remembered telling someone about my promise to watch over and protect Sara and after convincing my dad, I came back to the city. Sara's parents were more than willing to take me in, and I went back to school and worked through remedial courses as best I could to catch up to the others; Sara really helped me in that regard. Soon I learned enough to take the SAT's and placed high enough I could go to college, only I never got that far."

Jake looked at her, amazed. "You made it through four years or more of high school, aced the SAT's, and were trying to go to college, after moving to another state and city and back again, in less than a year?" He shook his head. "You amaze me."

She blushed under his praise.

"Thank you." She managed to say.

"Listen, I would like you to talk to Rachel tomorrow; she could always use exceptional intelligence, and I fear you would

be wasted on a farm or in the work parties, though that might be all we have right now."

"I'm not afraid of a little work." She told him.

"That's good, as there's enough work for everyone for a very long time." Jake told her.

#

They were at it again later in the afternoon than Jake had hoped, though not as late as he had feared. This time, they had Serena with them, to provide her special brand of magic in calming people.

Then they came to the last family, the little Chinese girl with her parents standing behind her.

'So, these are the people that had put out the reward?' she asked.

"The very same." Jake told her. "Don't think too harshly on them; they wanted the chance to meet you very badly and hoped to convince you to stay with them."

'As an honored prisoner, no doubt. Still, I don't hold it against them, if they hadn't offered the greatest prize someone else would have and it probably wouldn't have stipulated my live capture as the only way of collecting the money.'

"Perhaps. I did not check to see if the reward was removed." He apologized.

'Things were happening fast in those days,' She waved her horn dismissively. 'No reason for you to have checked up on the situation.'

"Still," Volgelson said, coming up to stand beside them. "I think you should leave for now. These people may try something."

At that, Jake and Serena both shook their heads.

'It's high time I meet them.' Serena declared, remembering to lay her horn on Volgelson's shoulder so she could understand her.

"They could try nothing anyway, with your men and I standing watch." He declared.

Around them the soldiers, having heard his words, grasped swords and bows and tightened into a solid circle around them. They were grim-faced and hard-eyed as they looked at the three naked people in the ice. Suspicion and mistrust shone in their gaze.

Serena trembled, though whether with laughter or anger, Jake couldn't tell. Abruptly she shifted to human, dressed in a regal blue gown with her silver crown about her brow as she spoke.

"I am not exactly helpless either." She reminded. "I have no need to fear three naked people. They are weaponless and defenseless. What could they possibly do to me?"

Jake had to admit she had a point.

"Please, let us not treat them as prisoners or spies in our midst; we must let go of the past and look to the future. We must judge them by their future actions and words."

At this, the soldiers gave back a little, breaking the circle. But they did not go far, and the men with bows kept a hand on their quivers. The female soldiers did not retreat, but remained where they stood; a couple held blankets to give the family privacy to dress, while others stood with hands on hilts or the butt of a gun, ready for trouble.

Serena shook her head irritably, but said no more, recognizing perhaps, that it would do no good. She shifted back to unicorn and waited.

Jake, recognizing his cue, released them from dragon ice. While the family blinked and slowly came back to normal, he released their things, then waited.

The soldiers moved in with blankets stretched high, but they got only partway to their goal when the family spotted Serena first. The question of whether they would prove a danger to her was settled dramatically, much to their surprise and discomfort.

The father immediately bowed as deep as he could go, his hands pressed together towards her. His wife and daughter, their eyes wide with wonder and delight, cast themselves on the ground, muttering a prayer in Chinese.

Everyone stood struck dumb; no one had imagined this upon their waking!

Jake's gaze swung to his sister and then back to the family closely and they, seeing the red light move and shift around them, realized that something else stood there. Looking up they gasped in utter shock.

"A dragon!" they cried as one.

"Yes." Jake nodded, looking closely at the women. "We have met before, long ago."

They looked confused for a moment, but the little girl was quicker than her parents.

"You saved our lives on the bridge." She guessed.

"That's right." He said as he came closer down to her level. "You asked me to reveal myself then, though I could not for promises I had given others. I stand revealed to you now though; are you at last satisfied with my word?"

"Completely." They said, bowing to him. "Forgive us for doubting. We shall never make that mistake again."

"It is okay to doubt." Jake told them. "For it shields us from falling to trick or falsehood. But now, however, I have much to tell you. Yet I do not think it is time yet; you should probably dress first."

They cast startled glances down at themselves; they hadn't donned anything when they saw Serena or Jake, and now they stood revealed unashamedly to the world. The girl, Jake saw now, had just started developing into the beauty of her mother. He revised the estimate of her age from eleven to about thirteen.

Her mother was fair to look upon, he thought. She had long black hair that hung loosely from her head down to about the

level of her back. Her jade eyes held the spark of intelligence in them, and her face looked like a china-doll, delicate and fragile. He suspected, however, that she hid a core of steel behind sweet features, remembering how she had stood up to glowing red eyes with courage after a terrifying near-death experience. The rest of her body was modestly endowed, by the standards of the west, but Jake had no doubt that she was considered by all a natural beauty, well expected of the wife of powerful men.

The father stood tall under Jake's quick scrutiny. He had strong features to him, and the hard muscles of his arms and legs spoke of long hours training. Yet his movements were very quick and assured as he pulled his wife and daughter behind the curtain held by the soldiers. Jake suspected the training involved at least one and possibly several forms of martial arts.

When the family had dressed (the women wore fabulous kimonos of deepest red and green, with white herons while the male wore a tuxedo of western make), they presented themselves once more to Serena and Jake, taking no notice of the soldiers.

Jake decided to immediately redress the situation and turned to Volgelson.

"Were there any others left on your list, general?" he asked politely, knowing full well there weren't.

His efforts did not go unnoticed by the soldiers or the general, and there were nods and growls of approval from the men and women, while their commander smiled at him.

"No sir, there weren't. These are the last."

"Excellent." Jake nodded, watching the careful regards of the family. He also realized he had no idea what their proper names were.

"Now." He said, turning to the family again. "I realize I have been remiss; we are in the midst of our first official meeting, and I haven't given or received proper introductions. I am Jake, and my sister here, (he pointed to the Ki'Lin) is Serena. The young woman on my right is Mary Volgelson, and with her are the brave soldiers of her command."

The diplomat bowed very deeply at him, and then deeper still at Serena, and slightly less deeply at Volgelson. His family bowed deeper still at everyone.

"I am honored by your presence." He announced formally. "My name is Chen Cho, and here is my wife Mei-Yin," he gestured to the older woman, "And my daughter, Mulan." The young girl appeared grave and regal, bowing so low she nearly bumped her knees.

Serena considered her for a moment, then turned immediately into her human form, complete with dress and crown.

Curtsying to them, she smiled at their goggle-eyed stares.

"We welcome you to our home." She said dulcetly. "You will be a great help to us, we hope."

"How can we serve?" the family said at once.

Jake, Volgelson, and Serena took turns explaining what had happened since the battle. The news that their entire race had perished stunned them, but they recovered quickly. "After the fight with the demons, I wondered if we had seen the last of them." Chen said when asked about it. They nodded in comprehension when they explained the lack of economy in the mountain.

"As of this moment, it is a basic system of survival. We will eventually have to change that, and your input on financial systems of both our countries (which I'm sure you studied very thoroughly) would be a boon to setting up our own. However, that does not mean it is a free pass out of labor;" Jake warned them. "We have too many needs and one of them is a shortage of manpower. We cannot bring very many out of stasis right now because there wouldn't be enough to feed them. As more food becomes available, that will change. But for right now, we need people to help farm and harvest the crops, bring in the bounty of the enchanted forest, work in the forges below, or help the cleaning crews prepare the homes for future occupation." He explained.

"I know there has been a lot for you to absorb in a very short period." Serena told them gently. "But we do not have the luxury of time. There are foul enemies in this world as we've said before. Our hope lies in secrecy, but we must have numbers to withstand assault and siege; you will also be a part of the Home Guard, there is no choice in that matter, though you may request for specialty postings, or even join one of the other, more permanent martial services."

"You have the look of a trained fighter." Jake told the father. "I assume you have studied the Eastern Fighting Arts?"

Chen nodded. "I am a black belt in Karate, Aikido, and Tai-Chi Kickboxing, and a student of Kung-Fu."

"Excellent." Jake nodded. "We have others in our forces that have made serious study of some of those arts, except the kick-boxing. Would you be adverse to teaching what you know to the interested?"

"Never." Chen declared, bowing again.

"Very good." Jake nodded. "Then there is just one last thing to cover before you report to Volgelson for your options and duties."

Jake drew himself to full height, while Serena became smooth-faced, and Volgelson grew stern and forbidding.

The family, recognizing the import, straightened.

"The old world is gone, it cannot be brought back." Jake intoned. "Whatever your past, whatever your old allegiances, they are gone; forget them. Here we must work together as one people, one goal, to ensure the safety and survival of our children, and our children's children."

"Work with us, and you shall be rewarded." Serena told

them. "Witnessing the fruits of your efforts blossom and grow around you; side against us and you will be chastised, or frozen again until we have more time to be able to work with you."

"That is, assuming you survive your treason." Jake warned them.

"We shall not work against you, Ki'Lin, or you, most noble dragon." They murmured, bowing again with their hands over their hearts.

"See that you don't." Volgelson grumbled.

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