

(Chapter ONE)

The Nation of Free Peoples #

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Jake soared through the warm desert air, the earth swiftly passing beneath him. On his back, he could feel Nacomi shifting slightly between his spikes as she peered at the shifting sands for any sign of the enemy or strangers. Jake, for his part, felt extraordinarily happy, even giddy. They didn't get a chance to do this nearly often enough, he thought, and lately, it had become even harder.

The first crops back at the farms were nearly ready to harvest, and people were eagerly anticipating the bounty. Nacomi and her family had shown everyone how to weave tightly-knit baskets from long reeds that grew at the river's edge, while Stacey discovered that she could ask certain trees to grow long limbs that they shed, allowing a primitive form of lumber to be harvested from them. While the widest they could manage was a two-inch piece, as they grew greater and larger in stature, she hoped they could manage larger timbers to help shore up their defensive plans.

Jake realized he let his attention wander, and turned back to flying.

"What's that?" Nacomi leaned forward and shouted.

Jake focused where she'd pointed. Far in the distance he saw a thin plume of smoke maybe a hundred miles away. With his sharp eyes, he could see it was actually the smoke of cook fires inside a small town of tipis.

"It appears to be a group of tipis." He told her.

"Tipis!" Nacomi said in surprise.

Jake instantly recognized what she thought.

"I don't think it's humans." He told her comfortingly. "I suspect we've found one of Mausi's people."

"Oh, of course." She didn't, quite, keep the disappointment from her voice.

Jake started to turn away, but Nacomi stopped him. "Let's fly overhead. We could use a better guess of its size when we plot it on the map."

Jake hesitated, not really seeing the need for such things, but shrugged and turned back to the camp; they were nearing the end of their scouting flight, but he wanted to spend more of this precious time with Nacomi.

Winging silently over the desert, he came upon the camp and passed overhead, so slowly that not a breath of air did he disturb in his passing. They wheeled and kited on the warm thermals, watching the curious happening below them.

In the camp, hundreds of Brissons bustled about; the older children and adults worked dozens of chores like skinning deer

and other creatures that Jake had seen before but had no name to describe them, repairing tipis, making clothes and beads and other articles, and tending the fires and preparing the meal; the younger children darted and played around the legs of their elders, rolling hoops along the ground and throwing wooden darts through the brightly colored squares strung in their center or at the edges, depending on their proficiency, or launching brightly ribboned hoops at one another and trying to catch them on two arm-length rods also brightly wound.

"It's beautiful." Nacomi remarked, looking wistfully below.

Jake rumbled, "It reminds you of the way your people once were, back in the days before the settlers moved through the West?"

She nodded. "I can't say that I ever witnessed it first hand, but I've heard the songs the elders sing, of the days when buffalo roamed in vast, uncountable herds and the deer were so plentiful that even the poorest hunter could bring home dinner."

"I've read histories of those periods." Jake said, studying the spectacle. "And seen paintings and art depicting Native Americans and the land the way it used to be...I think I managed to save some of the artworks, placing them in the vaults. My favorites were the ones that came from ruined visitor centers for the greater National Parks and Guest Lodges with the landscapes and historical paintings."

"Really?" Nacomi asked, surprised. "I hadn't known they were there."

"I haven't bandied it about much." Jake admitted. "After all, there are far more important things to focus on, and reclaiming the lost arts haven't been as important."

"They are very important!" Nacomi rejoined immediately, passionately. "Art shows us the soul of the people! It transcribes the thoughts and hopes of civilizations, what they've seen, what they experienced, how they've lived! Art is as important as living, it allows people to express themselves in beautiful ways."

Jake stayed silent, surprised and moved by her words.

"I had no idea the subject meant so much to you." He said.

"I was never much good at it myself." She admitted. "But that doesn't mean that it isn't important to me! Every basket I weave I make as a work of art, a tale told of the dedication of its maker and the methods of her people! Not one of them is stamped out by a heartless machine, it is the culmination of expression of the maker."

"Still, it doesn't put food on the table." Jake pointed out. "Nor does a painting hanging over the fireplace build the house around it. We must focus on making the house before we learn to make such things."

"I suppose you are right." She said after a long silence in which Jake spiraled downward two hundred feet until they cruised about another two hundred feet above the tops of the tipis. "But

it is hard, not to think of the soul of the people. We can't let their spirits die while trying to live."

"Then don't." Jake said. "You say that every basket you weave is an expression of the soul of the people? Use that as your starting point, show that artistry doesn't have to be sacrificed against the practical."

She fell silent, thinking about the proposal while she sketched on some of their precious paper. Jake left her to her thinking as he took them on another pass of the camp. Below, he spotted the red fur and fox-like features of Lana and knew they had found Mausi's camp. She looked perfectly at home amongst the desert wolf tribe, smiling and laughing with some children at a jest or riddle that he couldn't hear.

When Nacomi signaled she'd finished, they left the camp southwards, just in case someone had noticed them and had tracked their movements.

They had not gone very far, not even out of sight of the tents, when Jake noticed movement. In the shadow of tall stones at the top of a nearby hill, he spotted three goblins, staring down at the camp. A chill came over him as he realized they were scouts, and they were making their own maps and diagrams; for more sinister purposes he didn't doubt.

"Nacomi, there are three goblins there in the shadows." He said.

He felt her tense and scan the ground intently. At last she cried, "I see them."

So late did the warning come that they passed overhead. Jake immediately circled back, telling her what he surmised. He heard the intake of her breath.

"They are going to attack Mausi!" she said.

"I think so. Or at least, are making preparations to do so."

"They cannot be long," she pointed out. "Tribal camps only stay put for a season at longest, these look like they've been here a long while. They'll soon be packing up and leaving for their summer grounds."

"Well, we'll have to ensure that these goblins don't report back." Jake said, the light of battle coming to his eyes. They were lidded so they didn't give him away.

"Right. Just pass by again nice and slow, so I can get a clear shot." She told him, grabbing her bow.

They came sailing across the ground, going as low and slow as they possibly could. The goblins hadn't noticed them, even though Jake feared he was now flying so low that Nacomi could be seen from their vantage point.

There wasn't anything for it, but he needn't have worried. Nacomi's bow twanged behind his head, and her first arrow sped into the breast of the forward-most goblin, casting him backward onto the ground from the force of the shot. The other two stared at the corpse in surprise and wonder, giving Nacomi the chance

to shoot once more. Her aim proved true, and the mapmaker fell to the ground, transfixed through the brain.

"Damn, a little high on that one." She grunted.

"Don't let the last escape!" Jake warned, seeing the other one grab the maps off the ground and bolt. He sprang through the stones with the surety and speed of a mountain goat, though he cursed and groaned in pain as the sun struck his eyes. He tried to go from shadow to shadow towards the bottom of the backside of the hill where, Jake didn't doubt, a secret tunnel awaited him.

"Spirits, bless my aim!" Nacomi cried as she loosed another arrow. It struck the goblin in the back near the heart and he fell forward, dead as stone.

"Great shot!" Jake praised.

"Indeed! Now let's get that map." She said.

Jake landed some distance away, and she sprang from his back and ran up the hill like a gazelle, her faded military uniform (a gift from Volgelson as one of the last uniforms left) rendering her hard to see against the fading twilight.

While she fetched the map, Jake searched on the ground for any sign of the tunnel. At last, he found the reek of the creatures leading up the slope and followed it down like a hound until he located the entrance at the base, covered with a standing stone.

After staring at it for a moment, he abruptly jumped above it. The shock of his landing collapsed the tunnel. Faintly he thought he heard a shriek from inside, and thought there must have been a door guard to keep out anyone that might stumble on the hidden entrance. Jake stomped more and more earth down, raising a dirty brown cloud that floated above them. With a curse, he knew it would soon be seen by the village, but in the end, he thought it would work out to their advantage.

Nacomi came speeding down the slope, the prize clutched in her fist as she leapt onto his back, not bothering to speak.

Taking a running jump, Jake threw himself back into the air, his wings spreading wide with a great boom that definitely had to have been heard.

Gliding south for a few minutes, Jake began to pump his wings to gain lift. Slowly he came up several hundred feet and turned back to the camp.

A hundred warriors now surrounded the dead bodies, poking at them with their spears and searching around on the ground for signs of who had slain them. They seemed puzzled, and looking closer Jake could see why.

"Where are your arrows?" Jake asked.

"That's what took so long." Nacomi admitted. "I raced to all of the bodies and pulled my arrows free. Not just because they are good arrows, but they're a lot longer in the shaft than any the goblins or Brissons use, which would point to something else having killed them."

"Hmm. Good point. Better to maintain secrecy for now." Jake said, flying back towards the mountain, leaving the milling warriors none the wiser below as they studied the collapsed hillside, his tracks obscured by the stones on the ground and the deliberate sweepings of his tail that obliterated the ones not destroyed by the rubble.

"Still, we have to warn Mausi and Lana." He said. "They should be made aware of the possibility of the attack.

"How do we do that?" she asked.

"I would probably suggest Tom." Jake said after a heartbeat. "He's tiny enough that he wouldn't be noticed, without the glow, and I could drop him from a great height so he has time to glide down and get with Mausi when she steps into the privacy of her tipi or something."

"That would work." Nacomi said, glancing back again as they left the tribe behind. Jake thought that she had experienced some sort of connection to them, but remained quiet. She would have to work through her feelings herself; he would be unable to help her with that.

Together they made their way back to the mountain.

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When they arrived at the mountain, they found it slumbering peacefully under the rising moon. Jake revealed himself in the light of the crescent moon and landed at the entrance, striding past the door wardens as they stood calmly at their posts, the moonlight glinting off the heads of spears and the barrels of their guns.

Jake paced down the tunnel to the first hall, where his bed lay glittering in the light of torches, and past it into the Great Hall. Once it had all been one chamber, and before that two chambers and lots of smaller passages had sprung from them, but one day while everyone was outside helping in the planting, the chamber had changed into two again, leaving Jake a single, solitary chamber outside the main and near the entrance, sealed off by a pair of great doors gilded in gold relief, and many columns carved with the images of animals, people, and trees. On the inner side, the handles were of two gold dragons with ruby eyes whose heads arched up into the handle and ended in two heads made so life-like that people swore they moved when touched, or flexed as they approached. On the outer handles, they were of two rearing unicorns, their proud necks arched till the horns pointed down at the floor, forming the grip.

It was this set of handles that Jake grasped to open the doors; they were hinged in some marvelous fashion that they swung open with as little effort as opening a kitchen drawer.

Inside the hall, he spotted Tom and Stacey sitting with their families on the four farthest tables. These had become, by necessity, the tables shared by Jake and the changed, and their families. It was here that Jake could at least sit on the ground and join in the meals, though he never took much there, (his

appetite and needs were so great that he could eat the entire larder and still hunger) so he preferred hunting food on the plains and only bringing a tiny portion back to consume, to be polite.

Walking through the crowded hall, everyone hushed as he neared the main table. Realizing that his report could cause anxiety, he decided to make no mention of the goblins, and instead sat comfortably on the floor, Nacomi taking the seat beside him despite the open chair next to her father at their table, at the last table in the room. Her father noticed and glared hotly at Jake.

Jake dipped his head at him, uncomfortably aware that the efforts he'd made had in no way diminished the nervousness of Nacomi's father.

"A good flight." He announced to the people. "It is easy to lose track of time up there, in the moonlight."

At that, the assembled chuckled and went back to their dinner.

Once he was sure that no one would bother looking at them closely for a while, he dipped his head to the others and spoke as quietly as a murmur.

"We came across Mausi's camp, and discovered it being scouted by goblins." He reported. "Nacomi can share more, but it seems they were preparing for a large attack on them very soon."

Nacomi drew out the goblin map with distaste, tossing it on the table while everyone peered at the strange symbols and diagram drawn on it.

"How did you get this?" Volgelson asked nervously.

"Nacomi slew the goblins with arrows and I destroyed the tunnel." Jake told her. "I was careful not to leave tracks or any identifying features and she brought back all her arrows, but I'm concerned; that tunnel was large, big enough that a good number of goblins and their slaves could come out of it rather quickly and charge over the hill. Mausi and her people would have almost no warning before they were attacked."

"But you destroyed the tunnel, correct?" Brian asked intently.

"Yes, but who knows how many more exist? We could not search for them, as the tribe was alerted and sent warriors out. They may find other tunnels, but they may not."

"What can we do?" Rachel asked practically. "We can't warn them of our suspicions..."

"Ah, but we can!" Tom said eagerly. "I can fly to Mausi or Lana or both of them, and warn them of the attack. The tribe will already figure that something is going on with the bodies of the scouts and the tunnel. All Mausi has to do is bring up the possibility of a large-scale attack on them, and they can be on their guard."

Volgelson was frowning as she studied their map. Jake noticed her hard thoughts and spoke.

"What troubles you, general?"

She started at being quietly addressed, and turned her eyes back on him, speaking equally quietly.

"An attack on a large group this size would take a lot of soldiers, regardless of surprise being on their side." She pointed at the cluster of tipis. "According to the goblin map, the camp is roughly the same size as a western town; that would suggest a population of several thousand."

"At least four, I would say." Jake nodded. "Probably more."

"If I were carrying an attack against such a foe, I would want no less than fifteen hundred warriors, preferably closer to three thousand." Volgelson told them.

"Why so few?" Brian asked.

"The goal of any mission is to break the enemy's will to fight. Without that, they rout and the mission's a success. With a surprise attack, you have a great start to this goal, and if a small force moves fast enough and causes enough damage quickly, then the enemy breaks and flees before they realize they hold the advantage of numbers."

Jake thought her reasoning sound and nearly relaxed at the fact that a good warning and vigilance on Mausi's part would nix the attack in the bud, but something gnawed at him, though it occurred to Serena quicker.

She sat in human form and appeared very grave and thoughtful at news of the impending attack.

"I don't think that would be their plan." She said. She looked harder at Volgelson who straightened under the gaze of her piercing blue orbs. "How many soldiers would it take to completely surround her camp and ensure none escaped?"

Mary bent her head to study the map again, thinking.

"It would take nearly eight thousand men." She said at last. "To encircle the entire camp with enough density to ensure that no one could fight their way free."

"That would be their plan." Serena said softly, "Backed up with sorcerers and other magic users. They would not be satisfied with simply driving the tribe away and killing a handful of its people; they want to kill everyone and Lana most of all."

"Why her?" Brian asked.

"I do not know." Serena admitted. "The story that Mausi told is compelling to say that she holds the secret or is believed to hold a secret deadly to our enemies, and they want that secret buried. Or else she has potential power that she hasn't unlocked yet."

They fell silent, contemplating the horror of such an event as the attack Serena suspected.

"But what can we do?" Volgelson said. "We don't have the strength or numbers to match such a host as you describe, and we don't dare reveal ourselves or those hosts will march down on us!"

"Perhaps." Jake said, his mind racing with thought. "But the logistics that such an attack as that one would take are mind-boggling, and more than could be expected in those tunnels. No, there must be a city or base somewhere nearby where they can gather such troops and carry out the attack."

"Where could it be?" Volgelson asked, "We've seen no sign of them on our scouting missions."

"Goblins are nocturnal and shun daylight. I should think, then, that they must have cities underground somewhere, where we aren't going to spy them out from the air. The most they'll leave on the surface would be air shafts and exits for their foragers." Brian said.

"Interesting." Jake nodded. "We shall have to search these air shafts out, but we'll need time to do that."

"Plus further training of soldiers." Volgelson stressed. "What you're talking about would take special scouts or snipers to be able to accomplish, and I've only got one sniper left and he's busy training scouts!"

"Have him keep at it." Jake said with a large sigh. "It shall have to be up to Mausi and Lana and their people to delay the attack long enough for us to train up enough strength to risk any sort of aid."

"We may aid them." Serena reminded him.

"True, but inevitably that will lead to questions, questions will lead to a search for answers, and the search will lead to the discovery of our home, either by our allies or our enemies." Jake told her. "We shouldn't interfere, as hard as that may be, until we are certain we have no choice. If that host appears, then we will fight but until then, we must move circumspectly."

"Agreed, and our first move should be warning Mausi and Lana." Tom said firmly. "I've already eaten, so let's go!"

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They left the mountain and soared back to the camp, as the moon started to reach the highest point of its travels. Nacomi held tight onto Tom as they both shivered in the cold air of the heights.

Tom, for his part, enjoyed the warmth of her hands keeping the chill at bay as he looked below for any sign of where they were going. When they cleared a small hill, Tom saw the camp clearly, lit by hundreds of fires near the tents, and a nearly solid ring of fire around the outermost. The flickering shapes that appeared and disappeared in front of the flames told of the strong guard set, and Tom had no doubt that they were fully ready for any attack.

"This place is strong." He remarked to Nacomi.

"Not strong enough." She said worriedly.

Tom patted her hand, then crawled to the very edge. She stuck out her arm and Tom felt the wind threaten to suck him off. He clasped her fingers as tight as any man on the edge of a

cliff might cling to the branch of a tree to keep from falling off the edge. When the fires were just below him he let go and tumbled down a hundred feet before he regained his balance and floated on the air.

Jake, being invisible, had never truly been in his sight, but now even Nacomi had seemingly disappeared into thin air.

Tom didn't waste time searching for them though, he tucked his wings and plummeted. Pulling out of the dive a bare dozen feet above the tops of the tipis, he flitted from tent to tent, peering through the vented tops to see who was inside.

He found wolf-folk of all sizes and shapes, but no sign of Lana or Mausi. For nearly an hour he searched, his frustration and fear of discovery mounting.

At last, thinking that as a warrior Mausi might be standing watch, he flew to the outer circle of flame and began his search. When he'd gone more than halfway and lost another hour, he found her standing watch on the northern watches. She stood with another dozen brissons however, and so he alighted on the top of a cart to wait for her to finish.

The night grew long and the moon neared the horizon before fresh warriors appeared to take their place. Tom figured he'd sat there about three hours and guessed that they were taking four-hour shifts.

He got up and, after stretching the ache in his muscles, flew high above Mausi as she made her way to her tent.

Darting inside after her, Tom felt like cursing as he abruptly pulled up to the top of the tipi, seeing that her father and mother were awake and starting a small fire.

He spoke to her in a language that Tom couldn't understand but suspected that had to be her native tongue.

She nodded wearily at whatever question had been asked and threw herself down on her blankets.

Tom spotted his chance, a water bowl sat nearby, placed by her sister, who pulled up her spear and left to take her turn with the watchers.

Tom made the water leap from the bowl, but only lightly wet Mausi's nose. She gave a start, but no further sign.

To her wondering eyes, the water flowed and twisted into words. Tom watched with satisfaction as the liquid obeyed his commands, spelling out:

MAUSI; LANA AND TRIBE IN GREAT DANGER. GOBLINS PLANNING ATTACK. COME TO THE SOUTH MOUNTAIN PEAK.

Mausi nodded slowly, so as not to be seen, her eyes searching for him. At last she raised her gaze up towards the roof and spotted him circling near the vent.

Tom watched her extend two fingers from her right paw, and figured that she meant two hours.

He flew out of the tipi and raced towards the sky, risking a little light. At about four hundred feet up, he felt a buffeting wind and was jerked left as Jake caught him in his

paws.

A few minutes later, they had landed on the backside of the southern ridge. Settling down, they examined their surroundings to ensure that they wouldn't be seen.

They did not have long to wait, Tom thought, maybe an hour and a half had passed before Mausi crept over the ridge and down to where Tom glimmered like a firefly. He led her the short distance to where Jake had curled into a shallow depression around Nacomi, effectively hiding her from any unfriendly eyes. Tom brought her inside the tail, and Jake brought his tail back down, rendering them effectively invisible to the outside world.

Before they could speak, Mausi beat them to it. "Did you kill the goblin scouts this afternoon?"

Nacomi nodded. "Yes. I killed them and Jake here smashed the enemy tunnel."

Mausi nodded. "I had thought so, though of course I couldn't be sure. But what did you find that claims Lana is in danger?"

"Serena believes she is in the gravest danger." Thom told her, "She will be, at least, one of the main goals of the attack."

"What attack?"

"The scouts had very detailed maps of your village, as well as diagrams and other information that Brian is trying to decipher as we speak, though we believe it's estimates of your current population," Tom said urgently. "From that information, and the fact that Nacomi thinks you will be moving to your summering grounds fairly soon--"

"In two months." Mausi confirmed.

Nacomi looked surprised. "That long?" she asked.

"It won't be wet enough to plant crops in the farmlands yet." Mausi explained. "They are far to the east, where the sea meets the land."

"Sea meets the land?" Tom asked.

"I suspect near the Grand Canyon." Jake rumbled. "I remember reading an article that suggested in several thousand years, the splitting of the canyon would be deep enough that the waters of the Gulf would pour down it and nearly split the country in two."

"Hmm." Tom thought. "That much warm water from the gulf should give a very large area enormous moisture, making the fertile heartland of America even more bountiful."

"True, and I flew over it when I took Gavin, Annabel, and Matcha back to the port cities." Jake nodded, "Though only at its northern border. While wider than the Grand Canyon in our own time, it isn't as wide as I would have thought, so perhaps it stopped splitting and instead sank deeper. Regardless, the ocean forms a very long finger going up the canyon nearly to its terminus, but there the land slopes upwards and forms a very small shore near the mouth of the canyon, which has crumbled at

that point."

"Interesting." Tom shook his head. "It's amazing how much the geography of our world has changed."

"Yes, but that is not the point of this discussion." Jake reminded them. "We must make sure Lana is safe, Serena suspects her people held a deadly secret against our foes, or that she has untapped power that the demons fear. We must ensure her safety."

"The tribe will be alerted, and news of this will travel to all Fourteen Tribes of the Nation of Free Peoples." Mausi promised.

Everyone looked at her in surprise. "Fourteen tribes? Are all of them as great as yours?" Nacomí asked interestedly.

"Ours is one of the greater tribes." Mausi said proudly.

"How soon can you muster aid?" Tom asked.

"It would take a month to summon the tribes to a council and convince them of the danger. My people are mighty, we can kill any attack against us." She said proudly.

"Against a like number, certainly." Tom agreed. "But Volgelson suspects that they wanted to use the element of surprise."

"Which is gone now." Mausi said firmly. "Now that we know of the tunnels, our warriors search for them in the daytime. We will find them and destroy all of them."

"That's good." Jake rumbled. "But we can never be sure that we get them all. And there is further news of a dark sort."

They looked grimly at her. "It is our belief that, in order to ensure Lana's death, they will seek the death of your entire tribe."

"They would have to be mighty indeed for such a feat." Mausi scoffed.

"We suspect that they are marshaling a host underground for such a feat." Jake told her. "And we believe that they would launch the attack with no less than eight thousand goblins, along with their most powerful sorcerers and perhaps lesser demons, to ensure the complete and utter annihilation of your people."

"Eight thousand!" Mausi said in horror.

"Perhaps more." Jake said as gently as he could.

"But...but, surely that is impossible!" she whined, "No host that size could march here unobserved."

"That would be what the tunnels were for." Jake said. "But now that we have uncovered them, they will either wait to dig new tunnels and give time for your warriors to lose their nervous edge, perhaps wait for you to return from your summering grounds to the winter grounds when all is absolutely ready and you have no warning, or they will launch the attack overland, seeking to destroy you even with warning, and send their swiftest soldiery to cut off your retreat before you could break camp."

"Hey, that's an idea, actually." Tom said, the idea sparking in his brain. "Maybe Mausi could convince her tribe to leave early to the summer grounds, and while they're gone we search for any tunnel that the goblins make and mark them on the map, and when the tribes return, we should be strong enough to risk a quick action against the enemy, and strike them before they are ready, and bring the roof down on them."

Mausi had been shaking her head through his speech.

"I could not convince them to leave early. Only the shaman could do that, and she says the winter is still holding sway over the summer lands. We could not grow any food or hunt enough game to keep our people fed. They will wait in this rich hunting area until the time is right."

"Damn." Tom sighed. "Well, I guess we'll have to figure out something."

"Could you join your strength with ours?" Mausi asked hopefully. "Together we could prove mighty enough to throw the Dolna back."

"No." Jake told her sadly. "We do not have the strength yet to risk open war with the demons, or to reveal our existence, or our home yet. My heart yearns to join in open battle with you Mausi, but the time is not yet right. If our people were revealed, we would be beset by the demons who would seek our extinction. We cannot fight now."

"But if you don't fight, then what about our people." Mausi cried, her anguished face looking back to where her camp sat.

"I promise you this," Jake told her gravely. "By the strength in my blood and sinew, I will not let your people tumble into darkness. If there is no other outcome then certain death, I will come to your people and fight."

"And I as well", Nacomi cried. "We are sisters, after a fashion, after all!"

Tom stared at them in awe, the scene struck him as one of those moments that history books tell of and yet utterly fail to convey properly. He noticed how proud and kingly Jake seemed, even while resting, considering every possible outcome of his choices. Nacomi, too, stood tall and straight, her burnished skin shining in the moonlight like copper, her uniform alien on her and yet she wore them like the finest silk dress and her face and manner spoke of determination and strength.

In contrast, Mausi looked like a careworn warrior at the end of her rope given a lifeline at the last minute.

"Thank you." She spoke in strangled whisper. "For this."

"You are most welcome, but now we need to speak of Lana, for she figures centrally in all this." Jake said. "She should not ever be allowed outside the protection of her people, either on hunting or work detail, unless she is brought in secret to the mountain. There, I believe, she would be safe."

"She wouldn't go." Tom rejoined before Mausi could speak. "She is proud, like Mausi, and has a score to settle with the

goblins for the deaths of her friends, and her near death at their hands. Plus she has more friends and family here that would be in danger, and she could not abandon them to their fate any more than we could our own family. Not willingly at least, and we should not kidnap her to salve her conscious that it wasn't her choice. We are not equipped for prisoners, nor do I believe we should start, even for saving someone."

Nacomi and Jake nodded at the same time. "Still, what is to be done?" Jake asked. "We must protect Lana at all costs, and she runs too great a risk of being killed in the attack."

Mausi trembled at the thought of her sister being killed.

"What shall we do?" she asked plaintively. "I will bow to your wisdom in this; I don't want my sister to die, though nor do I want her to become a prisoner of friends!"

Tom didn't know what to say to comfort her. But then an idea came to him.

"Mausi, what are some of Lana's skills?" he asked.

Not expecting such a request, Mausi's eyebrows shot to her scalp, while Jake and Nacomi regarded him with curiosity, wondering at his game. Tom remained closeted from them, for now.

"Well, she is a skilled huntress and fighter, despite her young age." Mausi began. "She can weave well, and is skilled in spear making and shields"

"Then perhaps that could be the solution." Tom suggested. "We are still relearning some of the necessary skills to equip ourselves to this new world. Nacomi has some knowledge of spear and bow making, but those skills weren't necessary when we last roamed, so perhaps there are secret arts for such things that we don't know, certainly nearly all of our people don't. If she could be convinced to come and aid Nacomi in teaching..."

"Of course!" Nacomi laughed and clapped, instantly seeing the cleverness of the plan. "I gain a fellow teacher, and Lana is kept safe under the protection of Lady Serena and Jake!"

Tom nodded. "We gain her valuable knowledge, in exchange for her protection."

"She wouldn't go just for that." Jake said thoughtfully, "though she might be willing if we say our need is great enough. But perhaps we might be able to offer payment?"

Mausi smiled and nodded. "That could work." She said in relief.

"Alright." Jake nodded. "We shall have to work out the details. How soon could you convince her of the need?"

Mausi looked thoughtful. "I might be able to convince her by tonight; she knows I left the tent, she saw me leave and I couldn't prevent that, and she will want to know what is happening."

"Then tell her nothing of the impending attack," Jake instructed, "but say that we came to you seeking your knowledge, but you have too many responsibilities with the guard right now.

Suggest that she goes, and with luck, she will come to the solution herself, and go in your stead."

"All right, where shall we meet?" Mausi asked.

"Here, tonight." She said.

"That sounds good." Jake said. "I will be here to meet her."

"Do you need me to go with you, Mausi, and light the way?" Tom asked her.

She smiled at him. "Never in a hundred years will I forget this land." She told him. "I have lived here as girl and woman and explored all around this dell. I will be fine."

She turned and scampered under Jake's tail, as he raised it high enough for her to pass under without scraping her ears.

"And now it is time for us to return, I think." Jake said.

He lifted Nacomi onto his shoulders as she could see nothing but his eye, which quickly lidded and became invisible in the dark, so that she seemed to float thirty feet in the air or more.

Tom flew to her and settled in the pocket of her uniform, as he felt and saw Jake take wing beneath him, speeding far into the blushing sky or morning.

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Upon returning to the camp that evening, Jake carried no passenger (despite Nacomi's protests, her father had hauled her off to bed, saying that she had to sleep sometime), and Jake felt the loss keenly.

Spying the hill from earlier, he risked sliding the lenses back over his eyes. Shapes dulled by night leapt into sharp relief, the shadows seeming to vanish as if at high noon. People and animals gained a special attention, flaring like living beacons on the cooler grays of the earth around them.

He searched and found the ring of watchers in the camp, and a handful of patrols searching the night for signs of goblins; a careful search himself before he lidded his eyes revealed no sign of goblins, and only the warm lights of Mausi and Lana could be seen on the southern hilltop.

Braking gently, he landed with a thump and clatter of loose stones, despite all he could do to land silently. Ahead of him, he could see the women jump at the unexpected noise.

"I am sorry about that." Jake apologized when he'd come to a stop, not daring to drop his camouflage yet."

Hearing his voice, they looked a little to his left as Lana and Mausi bowed.

"Hello, Lana." Jake greeted her. "I trust Mausi has made our need plain?"

"She has." Lana said. "And I am eager to go; I love being amongst my family and the tribe, but I miss my friends! Spending a few weeks helping Nacomi will be fun."

"Excellent. What tale did you tell the elders?" Jake asked.

"I told them that my half-brother had found more work for

me, but I didn't want to leave the village after the goblins had been found, needing to take my turn with the scouts." Mausi grinned. "I sent a message to my brother, asking him to say so if questioned, but I doubt it will be needed; he's not popular with the elders."

"Hmm." Jake grunted noncommittally. He sensed a story there, but they didn't have time to hear it.

"Well then, let us be off." He said, clutching Lana about the waist. She gasped in surprise but stilled and let him place her on his back. Jake could see the worry in Mausi's eyes as she looked up at her sister.

"Do not worry about her safety," Jake assured her as best he could, "I will not drop her in flight, she will be waiting for you at the end of our business!"

Voices in the distant dark turned his head, and in the distance he could see a patrol coming, alerted by his clumsy landing.

"Go Mausi," he whispered fiercely. "A patrol is coming! You must get back to camp!"

Mausi ran into the darkness, while Jake used his tail to obliterate her tracks and his as he lunged into the air, Lana holding tightly to his neck.

The avalanche of stones and small rocks brought the patrol of seven straight to them, but by the time they arrived, both Jake and his passenger were long gone, and Mausi had slipped back inside camp unnoticed.

The fox-girl gasped in wonder as he soared into the jewel-bedecked sky, her arms loosening and coming free as she looked at sights she'd never seen before, with the land so far below and clouds passing beside her like dreams in the night.

Jake, sensing her wonder, flew slowly to prolong her enjoyment, a slight smile on his face.

"Everybody loves the dragon," he misquoted.

Together with his friend, he made his slow, steady path unerringly to the mountain.

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