

(Chapter ONE)

The Maidens of White #

(PROOF COPY -- Not for distribution.)

Brian strode through the mountain, the sweat on his black hide drying into strange patches. Under his worn shirt, his thick chest and broad arms gave mute testament to the strength he'd acquired in the long months he'd spent in the forges and at the archery targets.

He came up to the dining hall where Jake sat behind the main table with Serena beside him. Tom and Stacey were there as well, Brian saw, but no sign of Rachel, Shyla or Asbiorn. He made his way over to his accustomed place where a small saddle-chair had been fashioned from living wood by Stacey for his use. He never felt more grateful for her present to him then now; his muscles practically groaned in relief as he took the load off his hooves.

"Hello Brian." Jake said, seeing him at last. "How goes the work in the forge?"

"Not too bad." Brian admitted. "Lana is helping considerably, but she'd never been interested in blacksmithing, so she is helping the carpenters in fashioning spear shafts and arrows."

"Well, we should be getting a goodly supply of those now." Jake commented.

"One armory is nearly full." Brian said. "It's very useful that Stacey is able to convince the trees to give up so many of their limbs to us; it is aiding our stores of bowstaves and arrows greatly."

"Well, that's all to the good." Stacey said. "But I think the trees are getting tired of giving up so much for so little return."

"What do they want?" Serena asked, looking at her in interest.

"Well, it is a little difficult to fully understand what they want." Stacey admitted. "Their thought is very slow and deep, but I think they would be appreciative if we could tend them better, bring them more water and fertilizer to grow. Your magic is strong, Serena, but it has a tendency to pull nutrients right from the ground itself, and while your magic can sustain them, it isn't nourishing to them."

"Of course." Serena said. "We can see about bringing treated waste to them so they may feast well."

"How will we treat the waste, however?" Brian asked, his mind starting to work on the problem. "In the past, we had enormous structures similar to nuclear reactors that took the solid waste and let them sit with specialized bacteria that broke down the waste and rendered it fairly harmless. We do not

have such a system here, as far as we've been able to determine. What does appear to happen is the waste from the toilets and baths are washed out of the mountain on the far side; there are brown stains there on the ground, but the grasses and trees grow too thickly there to be certain."

"Well, it seems to me that you are probably right." Jake nodded. "Although too much waste all at once would poison that part of the land and make it hazardous for us to dare approach. We'll have to see what we can do to collect the waste and use it as fertilizer. We could use some animals for their manure, but we won't have that option, I think."

Brian sighed. "Another chore, and such a filthy one that I doubt we will have any volunteers for such work."

"Wait," Stacey piped up. "Could we see if there are more pipes for their sanitation? Perhaps we could find a way to spread the flushed waste to different sections of the forest. The trees will consume it far more rapidly than they did in our time, and other plants as well."

Brian thought about it and shrugged. "We shall have to see if Shyla and your sisters could do another search of the mountain and find the control station if it exists." He said. "We won't be able to do anything until after they've had a chance to look."

Jake nodded. "Of far more concern is the movements of the goblins." He said quietly to them. "I've done overflights of Mausi's camp, and seen more and more scouts falling prey to the patrols, or vice versa, though I usually intervene with an avalanche or dropped stone before they become overwhelmed, and it gives them the badly needed edge."

"Well, we can't hide that something is helping her people." Brian sighed, feeling old and weary, "but at least the exact nature of the help has remained hidden."

"That will not last." Jake warned. "With the constant probing, they are searching for something before they attack. I think Serena's guess is good, they haven't seen Lana for some days and are looking desperately for her before they attack."

"Well, we can't keep her here if she wants to go back." Brian pointed out. "But will the delay caused by her absence be enough for the Tribes to realize the danger they are in and come together? They will fear that most of all, I think, and that could be enough to keep any attack from happening."

'No.' Serena said suddenly, shaking her mane. 'That won't be the case, they will attack, but they want Lana most of all, as I've said.'

"Why do they want her so badly?" Brian asked. "She is a skilled carpenter, and well-versed in the lore of her people, and on the practice fields she can win against all but our most experienced soldiers. Yet none of these are important traits individually or together to single her out from her adopted family or any other person."

'I cannot answer that question either.' Serena said. 'Not yet, at any rate. There might be something that I can try, but...oh no! What are they doing here?!'

Brian turned at her mental sigh and saw perhaps four women in long white robes approaching the table.

"Who are they?" he asked, frowning. He hadn't seen them before, though he had been busy down in the forges.

He found his question answered when the women curtsied before them, bringing a bowl of fresh greens they laid on the table in front of Serena, not seeming to notice the others, and taking away the half-eaten bowl that had sat in front of her.

"Lady." They murmured, bending at the waist. One of the smallest, whose robes concealed what Brian could only guess had to be a young girl, said instead, "Lady Ki'Lin".

Serena said nothing, standing regally as she watched them depart. The others suppressed glares of annoyances and sighs, feeling Serena's magic bring peace to the table.

"What was that all about?" Brian asked when he trusted himself not to laugh.

Jake sighed. "They're people who think they are Serena's Handmaidens. I'm not sure how this silliness began, but nearly a week ago now, they appeared in those white robes and begged to serve, bringing Serena a bowl of fresh greens picked by hand, right here in front of everybody. We didn't know what to say, honestly, and Serena took the bowl offered but said they did not need to serve, for she had no need, but that just seemed to make them more stubborn. Since then they show up wherever she goes, offering to brush her mane, take over whatever chore she might be doing at the time, or begging just to be in her presence."

Brian shook his head. "It sounds like a cult." He said. "Or the start of a religion."

"We don't know what to do about it though," Jake said. "We don't want to be worshiped, but neither do we want to erode our authority by punishing those who are following us. Volgelson thinks we should simply humor them for now, thinking that as time wears on, perhaps it will just blow over."

Brian frowned, shaking his head. "Strange," he commented. "She should know just like I do that cults rarely wither and die, especially with such a powerful object of their desire so close at hand. They just grow stronger."

'That I don't want.' Serena announced, 'Despite the fact that their antics are not harming anything, I don't want to be worshiped.'

"What else are they doing?" Brian frowned, listening.

'Well, some are apparently doctors or nurses, and they've started teaching everyone that joins their cult their "healing arts", but some have started asking me to show them how I heal as if they could perform the same miracles.' Serena snorted.

'None of them have grown horns and tails that I've seen, so I doubt they could magically heal, and it's not like I know

anything about being a nurse or a doctor.'

"Well, at least they are forming some sort of medical corps." Brian mused. "That would be very useful, especially in the future battles we will invariably face. You alone could not heal so many soldiers, even if you weren't engaged in combat. Perhaps this cult could become a medical discipline with Serena at their head? That would give them purpose, and perhaps school them not to become her, er, handmaidens." He felt a smirk struggle onto his face and Jake chuckled a little as well.

'Oh shut it,' Serena growled at him, shaking her head warningly like she used to when human. 'You have your own groupies too, moron.'

"That I do." Jake agreed, his humor deflating. "Although they are calling themselves Dragon Rangers. They are more along the lines of a martial discipline, growing out of the scouts that we've been training." Jake sighed. "Nonsense really, just naming yourself Dragon Ranger doesn't grant you magical strength and keenness, only training will do that for them, but they still have taken the name for themselves."

"Are they any good?" Brian asked.

"They are our best fighters." Jake allowed. "It seems that part of becoming that group is that you must prove yourself in a trial of combat against one of their members, and they have to prove themselves worthy long before they get the opportunity."

"What are they doing to the rest of the people?" Brian asked, thinking of other closed societies like the Knights Templar and other religious orders, that had gone from being servants of the people to thinking themselves superior by simple virtue of being in the group, charging ridiculous tolls to cross their lands and becoming little better than mercenaries.

"They know better than to cross me, or turn down my words." Jake growled. "So, right now, exactly what they need to be. For whatever reason, they are taking Nacomi as their captain."

"Nacomi?" Brian asked, feeling that he'd missed an awful lot while buried in his place at the forges.

"Yeah, I don't think she's particularly thrilled about it, but they follow her orders, and she's promised to keep them in check for now." Jake sighed.

Brian shook his head, wondering what else he'd missed; it seemed like weeks since he'd heard news other than concerns for the forge.

The door opened and Rachel walked in, sagging only a little with weariness as she made her way across the hall to them.

"Just finished harvesting the wheat." She announced. "We'll re-sow the field tomorrow, and then start bringing in the potatoes."

"How are the Thorgoods doing?" Jakes asked, remembering the first people (besides their family and Volgelson's officer corps) brought out of Dragon Ice.

"They are a blessing." Rachel said fervently. "Their

knowledge of crops and planting and farm work is second to none. They've been the ones pretty much running things administratively, while I help pull the plow blade and other things."

"Hmm." Jake mused. "I wonder how hard it would be for Mausi to acquire us horses? I've seen the ponies that Annabel and her party came with, but they were much smaller than the horses we are used to. Perhaps they have horses? It would be useful in the desert; but no, I saw no horses in their camp when I flew overhead."

"There must be horses in the towns that are nearby. After all, Red Dog came on a small horse or overlarge pony when he came to kill the others." Brian pointed out.

"Hmm. Having some beasts of burden like horses would be very useful for farm work, and mounting some of Volgelson's troops and the Rangers." Jake said thoughtfully. "It would give us increased mobility."

"Well, after the current crisis is solved, then perhaps we can see about acquiring some horses." Rachel suggested. "For now, we will make do with the labor that suits us best, and I have an easier time pulling the plow than the others do."

"Just don't overwork yourself." Brian scolded.

"Ha! Look who's talking!" Rachel retorted. "How long have you been working in the forge, pushing yourself harder than anyone else to learn what you've never been taught and make it perfectly the first time? I've heard the reports from your men, Brian. They love you for your care and concern for them, but they worry that you will burn yourself out long before you find success."

Brian froze, caught off-guard. Then he threw his head back and laughed. "I had no idea I was so well thought of!" he admitted. "Well, perhaps I will try to ease off a little, but there is still so much to do that my people would drive themselves to exhaustion if I let them; better to let me take the burden with my extra strength and let them concentrate on learning their trade."

"You're both stubborn fools." Stacey announced. "But bless you both; with people like us, we can survive this world and build a place that will be home for everyone."

"That is the end goal." Jake said.

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As he finished speaking, Lana walked into the hall, her red fur damp with sweat but her broad grin spoke of a well-spent day. Next to her walked Nacomí, chatting quietly with her.

"Ah, it seems Lana has come from her basket-weaving classes." Jake announced.

"Well, at least it looks like they've had a very good day." Brian observed.

They came up to the main table, while around them the last workers straggled in, filling the chamber to bursting with

conversation, laughter, and the general clamor that accompanies any crowd.

Nacomi took the seat next to Jake while Lana took the open chair next to where Serena stood. Shyla and Asbiorn took chairs on the far side of Brian and Rachel, while Volgelson, after a glance at Lana, took a chair next to Shyla.

With their arrival, the doors to the kitchen were thrown open wide and those whose turn it was issued forth bearing trays laden with fruit and nut, berry and roast venison, cooked fish, and some sort of creature that looked like a cross between a pig and cow! Its meat turned out to be utterly delicious, and it had quickly become a favorite dish for everyone; a boon as it turned out to be extremely destructive to the forest, and very populous.

Once the boards were set, the hall commenced to feasting, and silence reigned as they plates were quickly cleaned of even the tiniest crumb of food.

Jake polished his great stone plate that held half of whatever the strange beast (he refused to eat a whole one in the hall when food was still tight) with every sign of satisfaction, though Brian knew that he could never be satisfied with such a small portion. Serena nibbled her greens delicately, consuming them all.

Driven by curiosity, Brian scanned the hall and found no less than twelve women robed in white. Before them sat small bowls of salads and fruit, but no meat.

Aha, I thought that would be the case, he thought with satisfaction and worry. The cult had progressed farther than he feared and might lay beyond hope, but he just hoped that his suggestions would prevent disaster further down the road.

Brian thought to ask about the scouts, but caught himself in time and glanced at Lana. He knew that while she had been officially invited here to teach desperately needed skills, the real reason had been to protect her from the goblins. He would need to speak privately with the Jake or Serena or someone more familiar with the situation than him.

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