

(Chapter ONE)

The Rider #

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The doors at the far end of the chamber burst open, and a scout ran into the hall. His old uniform bore the white starburst on the breast pocket that denoted him as one of the survivors of the Great Battle, but on his shoulder patch, underneath the American Flag, a gold dragon patch, clumsily hand-stitched on, could be seen.

This must be one of the dragon rangers, he thought. He started when he realized the scout's greaves were black with blood and his rifle bore the remains of a snapped bayonet under the cordite-blackened barrel.

"Goblins!" he cried. "Some dozen at least at our northern patrol! We killed all we saw, but most of the guys are hurt bad! I was sent for help!"

At his announcement, everyone in the hall leapt to their feet. Screams of fear, shouts of "What do we do! We've been discovered! What shall we do?" filled the room.

"SILENCE!" Jake roared, making the floor shake and goblets of water to spill across the tables. Like darkness filling a room when the last torch was blown out, everyone fell quiet and looked at him.

"This is a day we have known would be coming." He rumbled. "It is important that no one panic here. Parents, take your children to the halls below. Volgelson, assemble your army here and send groups along our entire border as best you are able to see that no enemy sneaks in. I will depart immediately with three of our best marksmen in the dark, no rifles but bows; if the noise from our scouts goes unmarked, we shall be lucky, but if it is then we shall not worry or blame them," he added sternly as the scout began to look abashed. "They did exactly as they should, and have earned our thanks for bringing the word quickly to the stronghold lest we be taken unawares and the goblin scouts escape to their holds to bring word of us."

"Volgelson," he said, turning to the general who looked up from where she'd been giving orders to her aides. "Select the best marksmen and have them ready to fly in five minutes."

"Make that two, for I'm going." Nacomi announced, glaring up at Jake. "I'm the best marksmen here, and I've shot from your back before, so it only makes sense."

The look in Jake's eyes showed his indecision; on one side he wanted to protect the girl he loved, but her arguments were true and irrefutable.

"Fine." He said.

Brian looked up. "I will take a moment to get some gear. Select another soldier to go with me, and I will run to the aid

of the soldiers, and bear the wounded back." Brian said.

"As will I." Rachel told him.

"I had hoped you would." Brian said. "It made the most logical sense."

His heart rebelled against the truths he spoke, but he firmly told it to remain quiet in his chest.

While Jake hurried from the hall, Nacomi already calling for her bow, dodging her father who sought to stop her; Brian and Rachel hurried to the uppermost armory. There they pulled their dwarf helms from when they'd last marched against Cassandra and the Demon Chief, and girded their belts with their swords; the great sword Brian wore that he called *Lightfang*, and his dwarf shield with its hexagonal shape (he wished he had a round shield like he'd had before for riding swift and far, but it had been destroyed in the Great Battle, and the dwarf shield could turn any arrow and even magic aimed at it), while Rachel slipped on a golden belt that contained two slim rapiers that seemed to have been destined for some elf prince as they were not like any dwarf-piece in the hoard. These she called *Windfree* and *Firelight*. She bore no shield, and neither had any armor that they could wear, beyond the old armored vests that the soldiers had brought with them, but there weren't any to spare from the army, Brian knew.

Finished, they raced to the exit where Jake had already left with his riders. Two soldiers waited for them, while Volgelson gave instructions and Serena pranced anxiously, her white hide glimmering in the moonlight.

"Where's your armor?" Volgelson asked when she saw them.

"We have none." Rachel replied. "For there is nothing in the dwarf armories to fit us."

At this she frowned, and then to Brian's amazement, she unbuckled her vest and handed it to Rachel.

"Wear this, then. I won't have need of it tonight, I think. This will be fought by you."

One of her aides unbuckled his harness and presented it to Brian.

Neither of them could refute the logic so regretfully took the armor, promising to bring it back unharmed.

"Never mind that, just bring yourselves back unharmed." Volgelson snapped. "You two are too important to lose. All of you are." She said, glaring at Serena, "Which is why you shouldn't go, milady. We have too many of our leaders out this night as it is."

Serena shook her head and gestured with her horn. Upon her mane Brian could see Stacey dressed in regal green with her oaken staff that amplified her magic a hundredfold, and Tom stood beside her, blue light flickering on his palms. Brian knew that he could form a sword in an instant; Tom had demonstrated once when asked about his adventures; so Brian felt confident that they were the most powerful soldiers.

"We have no choice." Rachel said before he could tactfully suggest they remain behind. "We know not what we face, but we cannot allow even a single goblin to escape, and our men, our people, are in grave danger. We cannot let them stand alone. We must go now."

She looked at the slight woman that stood nervously nearby.

"Mount, soldier."

Brian turned to his scout and gestured to his back. The man nodded and swung up easily, showing he had some experience with horses. In a flash, Brian wished he had a saddle or something, for the journey would have to be swift and their riders would be bounced unmercifully.

Nothing for it, he decided.

"Forward the mountain!" he shouted, surprising the others as he sprang forward, charging down the slope. His rider expertly clung to his back, and Brian could feel his eagerness for the fight matching his own.

Behind him he heard Rachel shout, "The Mountain and the Forest!", her hoofbeats hard on his heels.

Fast as they were, they were painfully slow compared to Serena who overtook them almost immediately and went into the lead. Down the mountain they flew, and then under the eaves of the forest. The trees rustled and moaned while animals shrieked and called after them. The trail they followed seemed to appear in front of them and disappear behind them, and Brian knew the forest sped them on their way, whether on its own will or in answer to some call from Serena or Stacey, he didn't know.

All too soon they were out from under the trees and on the sucking desert sands. The particles clung to his legs and threatened at every opportunity to pull him down. His forward progress found itself checked to a walk, though he burned with impatience to run. Serena dropped back next to him.

'Some evil is against us here.' She told him. 'It calls on the sand to slow us. I fear that we may be discovered already.'

"Do nothing!" Brian instructed her. "We dare not reveal you just yet, or they might fall upon us with all their might. In fact, I do not think that they know of us at all just yet. I suspect that this magic is in answer to the loss of their scouts, and they seek to slow any relief to those who slew their soldiers until they can destroy them or learn about them. We must put our trust in Jake's invisibility and Nacomi's skill with the bow to thwart them."

Falling silent, the three runners fell silent and struggled against the sand to the aid of their friends and people.

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It took an hour for them to reach the patrol. Jake had already flown overhead and took up the search for any goblin in the area. Brian hurried to the singular man gesturing to them

The patrol had taken shelter in a rocky amphitheater formed by two hills meeting each other and partially swallowed by two

large dunes on either side, their sides so steep and treacherous as to be impossible to scale. Thusly anchored, they need fear assault only from in front of them, where the dunes dropped into a narrow mouth. In the center stood several large stones, arranged in a broad circle and hedged with thorny barricades and lots of stakes arranged outward. Brian realized it had to be an old Brisson scout camp for Mausi's people, but as they hadn't ventured this close to the mountain in more than twenty years, according to Lana, it seemed to be a logical stop for any patrol that could be caught in the open.

When they entered, they discovered just two men left on their feet, nursing small wounds on their arms and legs that slowed them to a walk. The rest of the five men lay behind them with scores of cuts to their arms and legs, and one lay panting shallowly, blood bubbling from his lips in his final agonies, half his body scorched by fire. Brian realized these men had faced at least one goblin sorcerer, though they had no magic of their own.

These soldiers have great courage, he thought, humbled.

Serena passed like the wind in the grass through the other soldiers and came to a stop above the dying man. Her horn touched his breast and there she stood, unmoving while his black skin slowly turned pink and healthy, his breathing turned steady and strong, and his pained movements ceased.

She stepped back and he opened his eyes to stare in wonder at the image of the unicorn in front of him.

"Milady." He got to his feet and nearly toppled back, his weakness showing. The others moved to steady him but he waved them away.

"I'm all right," he said. "It's passing."

He had sergeant stripes, and he looked at one of the lighter wounded, who had tears in the corner of his eyes as he struggled to master his emotions.

"Good to have you back, sergeant." He said at last, and Brian saw his lieutenant bar.

"Good to be back sir." He said briskly.

Serena snorted in amusement, turning to the other men and seeking to heal them.

Brian turned to question the lieutenant about what had happened when a cacophony of cries outside chilled his blood. Running to the door, he looked out and saw goblins burst from the sand of the dune where they had tunneled and charge towards the shelter. There had to be two dozen at least, and not the least of them seemed wide and very strong; the moon glinted on thick shields and crooked swords.

Brian looked over his shoulder. "Guard Serena, and do not let them see her! Stacey! You must find Jake, tell him that we are under attack. Tom, you have to ensure nothing escapes back up that tunnel!"

"I understand!" Tom shouted. He sped away, streaking

towards the tunnel.

Drawing Lightfang, he leapt from the walls and charged down the ranks of the oncoming goblins. Beside him raced Rachel, Windfree and Fireheart glinting. On her back her rider had pulled her own short-sword, brandishing it with a shout of her own. Brian had no time to check his rider but thought that he might have done the same.

The goblins, having thought they'd trapped a large band of Brissons, were utterly confused at the great figures attacking them.

Brian used the precious seconds their charge had won them to cross the final distance and ride down the lead ranks. A great chief, recovering his wits, lunged with his blade. Brian turned the stroke with his shield while his rider leaned to the right and stabbed. The chief fell under Brian's hooves.

Cutting their way through the now disorganized mob, they circled back around and went through again, swinging his sword and blocking with his shield.

When they emerged from the other side, all of them were cut and scored, their blood dripped freely onto the gold sands, turning them red; but behind them they left almost a dozen bodies.

Now, however, the goblins had regained their discipline, and they stood apart, their swords glittering in the dark and their eyes mad with hate.

Brian knew that he might not survive the next assault but also knew for certain that they dared not let the goblins make it back to their tunnel. They were angered now and seemed intent on killing them, but soon they would break and try to make it to the gaping maw of their tunnel. Their charge back had led them to come back towards the walls of the outpost, and he knew that way lay safety for himself, but not for the colony.

"Dismount." He told the man behind him.

"What?!" He cried, looking at Brian.

"We cannot win against that horde, but neither can we allow them to retreat to their tunnel." Brian explained. "We must get through them somehow and hold the tunnel against their coming. I doubt we'll make it, but Rachel and I must try. You should go back and guard Lady Serena." He suggested.

"Then I will go with you." The soldier insisted. "An extra sword and shield might make the difference."

Brian knew better, but how could he deny the man's claim? Brave as Brian was, he didn't want to lead someone into certain death as this would be.

"Are you certain of your choice?" he asked softly. "I do not order you to take this risk."

"It is our risk to take." The woman said stubbornly.

Brian was touched at their courage.

"What is your name?" Brian humbly asked.

"Roger. Corporal Roger Miles."

"Corporal Bethany Wilkes." Rachel's rider said, a quiver in her voice but her gaze was firm and steady. "And I'm going with you, ma'am, whether on foot or not."

Brian and Rachel nodded. "It will be our honor to bear you." They said as formally.

For a moment Brian felt magic spring up around them, and he wondered. A sensation, almost an extra awareness, came to the back of his mind, but he had no chance to pursue its answer. The goblins came at them to kill them and he knew he had no time.

Grasping their weapons and shield, Brian and Rachel bunched their muscles for the last race, and lunged like racehorses from their gates. The goblins snarled and held their ground, their eyes alight with delighted malice at what they felt would be the suicide of madmen.

When they collided with the line, they fought with wild abandon, their blades darted and stabbed, deflected blows aimed at their legs or bodies.

They won through, and leapt up the sands towards the tunnel entrance. Halfway to the yawning mouth they stopped and spun, turning towards their foe and halting.

More dead lay where the goblins struggled to reform their line, fear now in their eyes when they realized their only escape lay behind the blades of the creatures who had done such damage to them.

Yet they did not break, and there were still more than a dozen remaining, and all were the largest of their kind.

As they neared, Brian gripped his sword and prepared to sell his life dearly.

Jake didn't make it in time, he realized dimly.

He wanted to say something to Rachel, to tell her *he* loved her, that he wished he could have spent the rest of his life in peace with her. One look at her eyes though stilled the words on his tongue. She already knew, and in their final glance, they said all they needed.

The goblins ran the final paces to them, and in the light of the full moon the swords flashed like lightning in the mountains. Brian swung Lightfang, cleaving a goblin helm before slamming his shield into the brow of another. A swing cut the head off another, but unexpectedly Brian found a searing pain in his leg as a goblin axe clove deep to the bone.

In agony, he stumbled, the left foreleg useless as he struggled to remain on his feet. He turned another blow from his other leg and stabbed at a goblin that came too close, but more were closing in, sensing his weakness.

Roger spun around on his barrel, his sword darting left and right to keep the goblins from striking Brian from behind.

A look to his left showed Rachel struggling with her own knot of goblins, her left arm hung uselessly while Bethany swung too far and fell off her back. She let out a startled shriek, but came up from the floor swinging at the goblin that attempted

to cut her head from her shoulders, a fierce snarl on her face. A heavy boot slammed her down again, but more goblins cut them off from his sight.

Brian wanted to go to them, but his injured leg would not obey his command, and so he stood there, trying desperately to hold off against the tide, and wondering how many would run over his corpse when a blow knocked him entirely off his feet, spilling his own rider to the ground.

The vest had absorbed the impact, but the goblin grinned as it aimed the next stroke at his head. Lightfang rose in answer, but too slowly it seemed.

The goblin gave an awful howl and fell to its knees, pierced by a white horn. With a mighty toss of her head, Serena threw the body off and leapt lightly over Brian, striking the goblins that stood in her way and casting their broken bodies aside.

Behind her came the patrol, slamming into the teetering rank of goblins with hoarse shouts. Their swords gleamed as they fought, and Brian noticed, somewhat dimly, that the length of the roman-sized swords was insufficient to extend past the reach of the greater goblin swords.

I will have to extend the blades, if I get the chance, he thought.

The last of the goblins fled before them, but Serena moved faster than the mortal eye could follow, and the last of them fell far short of the foul tunnel, from which issued blue flashes that showed Tom in deep trouble.

The soldiers, having dealt with the assault force, charged into the tunnel to aid Tom.

Brian felt the darkness closing in on him, but then a cooling sensation, like being doused with water, doused the fire of agony, and he looked up to see Serena standing over him, her horn on his wound, which closed and vanished even as he watched.

Serena left him suddenly, and he struggled back up to his feet. The first person he saw was Roger, holding the wound on his arm closed. Brian wondered at that, but then his heart seemed to close up in terror.

Rachel! He cried in silent terror. Spinning around, he beheld one of the most horrible sights he'd ever witnessed.

Rachel lay on the ground, her head bent with weeping, covered in the blood of her enemies, holding in her hands Bethany's lifeless body. Her helmet had fallen from her head and long, strawberry-blond hair tumbled to the ground where it turned red from her own blood. Her vest had been scored and pierced many times in the fight, but the deathblow had come from a torn strap shifting the vest, and a sword had pierced her stomach through the back.

Serena touched Rachel, removing wounds and weariness, but whatever passed between them in her silent talk, Brian did not know.

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Jake landed nearby nearly ten minutes after Tom had emerged from the tunnel, the missing patrol with him and the tunnel destroyed. He took one look at the scene and he grew very grim, saying no word, but glowering at the tunnel.

"Have any escaped?" Brian asked, keeping his tone carefully neutral.

"No." Jake growled, his voice thick with rage and shame. "We discovered seven of their battle casters with some groups wandering the sands nearby, making maps and charts of the terrain. We killed them all as quickly as we could, but one managed to evade us for some minutes before we could kill him, and that was after Stacey had told us." He hung his head. "I knew we could not allow him to slip away, and I knew you would hold as long as possible." He looked at Bethany's fallen body. "I did not know how great your odds were though."

"Don't be sorry." Rachel snapped, looking angrily at him. "She was a soldier, to the bone! She fought at our side even though she was afraid, and kept her courage till the end! Don't dishonor her by belittling her sacrifice!"

Jake stepped back from her tone and the tears on Rachel's face. He appeared not to know what to say, and just stared at her.

The patrol knelt to lift Bethany up and place a blanket over her, but Rachel threw their hands aside. With infinite tenderness, she lifted the limp corpse and set Bethany on her back.

"Gather her weapons, and those of her enemies." Rachel commanded. "We'll bring those with us."

"Aye. Take everything from the battlefield that you can find." Brian said. "We will ever leave no trace of our fights, if we can help it. Take the bodies and pile them for Jake. If ever you are unable to have Jake aid you, bury the bodies secretly so none may find them. Go."

The soldiers were silent as they hastened to their duty. Quickly one approached with the broken short sword and helmet of Bethany, and gave them to Rachel, and also Fireheart, which she put into its sheath.

Without another word, she turned and marched back to the mountain. Brian expected Serena to go with her, but found her looking at him.

"Come on, Roger." Brian said as he turned to follow. "We must go back."

"Yes, sir." He said, very subdued.

He swung up on bareback, and Brian hurried to catch up. Meanwhile, the patrol they'd come so far to find fell in behind them, while at the sand's edge, a bright flame sprang up under the speckled sky.

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When they sighted the eaves of the forest, the small band

stepped easier, the sand relenting to their passing, and becoming firmer underfoot, speeding them on their way. But no sign of home or easier pathway could lighten their hearts.

Brian and Rachel followed Serena under the eaves of the forest, the lost patrol behind them and Jake and the three Rangers soaring above; soaring, but not landing.

When they approached the Unicorn's Glade, they found a reception already assembled at the base of the mountain. The workers, soldiers, children, everyone had come out to triumphantly greet their heroes; word had come from the watchers on the eaves of their return, but either no word of their injuries or losses had come with, or Volgelson hadn't told them.

The band stopped, not expecting such a greeting, but then marched grimly forward. Their hard stares and closed faces wiped the smiles off those that saw them first, and the cheers in the back were quickly shushed by those in front.

Volgelson frowned and hurried up, looking at Serena.

"Milady, what happened?" she asked.

Serena made no answer, but continued past. Tom looked up from her back where he tenderly held a tearful Stacey and said shortly, "We won."

Volgelson frowned, caught by surprise that such news would be bad.

She caught sight of Rachel's face, however, before she could say another word, and her mouth closed rapidly. All gave way before the tear-stained, blood-soaked centaur, carrying her burden with her head high. In her hands she held Bethany's shattered sword, its edges still black with goblin blood.

Solemnly, the crowd let her pass, then followed her as she made her way to the Unicorn Glade. There Serena stood, waiting for them. The sounds of night died, no wind stirred leaf or tree; the animals were silent.

Brian wondered what would happen, for no one had ever died like this with them, and now they were making up a ritual as they went along, but he could not deny how *right* it felt.

Rachel dropped to her knees in front of Serena, and laid the broken sword at her feet. Then, drawing Bethany herself off her back, she cradled the limp body and kissed her cold brow, silver dots appearing in the glimmer-light of the unicorn, reflections of the tears falling on her cold face. Then Rachel set her to rest beside her sword, but not for long. The broken blade she picked up and placed on Bethany's chest, then gesturing behind her, she took the goblin swords from the men and placed them at Bethany's feet; a great many swords.

Serena bowed her head low, her horn touching Bethany's brow, while the assembly followed, silent forms standing tall in the gloom.

Rachel stood, then drawing her swords, saluted the fallen. Brian drew Lightfang in salute, and he could hear Roger do the same, but no other blade was drawn; this was for those that had

served with her in her final hours.

"Bethany was my Rider, a Centaur Rider," Rachel's voice, harsh with sorrow, came suddenly to their ears. "She fought against impossible odds with courage that we should all wish for and conquered. If ever we should doubt our hearts, or why we fight this war, remember Rider Bethany, remember her."

She fell quiet, overcome by emotion or not knowing what else to say, Brian didn't know.

Then from the trees dropped hundreds of white blossoms, covering Bethany in a white shroud.

Serena turned human again, and spoke.

"We have lost a soldier, a friend, a comrade. Let us raise a tomb over her and then leave her to her rest, knowing that she has found her peace and hope she will watch over us and shelter us from harm."

Many men and women stepped forward, but none faster than Rachel, who placed the first earth over the body. More followed, until the mound was raised.

On the hill in later days, green grass grew deep and lush, covered with small white flowers like diamonds in the green, and in the center lay a solitary centaur, wrought in bronze, with the name of the fallen Rider upon it, and a worn path leading to it, with the impressions of hooved feet.

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