

(Chapter ONE)

Revelations #

(PROOF COPY -- Not for distribution.)

Jake growled softly to himself as he searched the whizzing sands below for more scouting parties. In the last several months that he'd run patrols, he'd personally destroyed six; the human soldiers had become far more adept and dangerous with their newer swords, ambushing the scouting parties and leaving no trace behind.

Jake banked left, feeling Nacomi and Lana shift to compensate on his back. They'd started running the patrols with him together, and while he disliked putting her in danger, he admitted he couldn't very well tell her no without a valid reason. And, as Nacomi pointed out privately to him, it kept her close and appraised of the danger while placing her in the safest place possible; on Jake's back.

Jake didn't feel like pointing out that while they hadn't seen any, he found it hard to believe the goblins didn't have bows and arrows, and probably some muskets unless the demons prevented pilfering of their food stocks.

As he continued his patrol, he mused about the changing conditions back at the mountain; Brian's forges were producing the first simple armors, and he knew the centaur really wanted to be able to produce mail and plate armor to provide maximum protection, but Jake would be pleased with just the mail; it would be lighter and faster for their soldiers, and less noisy than plate, a necessity when sneaking up on the enemy. When he wasn't running patrols with his rider, Brian continued working in the forge, searching in the library for all information on previous demon encounters and their foul pets with Rachel, and practicing his archery on the practice field, never leaving his bow behind now whenever he went. Rachel too seemed hell-bent on bringing in their third harvest, searching in the library with Brian (they spent a lot of time in there, Jake thought, and he'd caught Rachel eating strange herbs lately, he wondered if she was sick) and practicing on the range with her bow.

The others had been pretty busy as well, though he wasn't as up on what they were working on.

Movement below made him turn sharply. A second look proved it was one of the other patrols making its way back to the mountain. Jake didn't bother signaling them; he had other business to attend to.

Keeping straight on, he soared further and further East then they'd ever gone, keeping the river far to his left, a tiny ribbon of water snaking its way through the night.

"Jake, what are you doing?" Nacomi asked, realizing how far they had come.

"I grow more and more concerned with the lack of goblin activity." He called back to them. "So I am seeking to find one of their parties to follow it back to their lair."

"Why?" Lana gasped, suddenly fearful.

"I am sorry, Lana. I know it is an unpleasant experience," Jake apologized. "But as the worry has grown, so too have my concern for you and your people. Tonight only have I made up my mind to try such a desperate course. It is my hope though, that I do not find any such party, and we will return to the mountain in one hour."

Lana gulped and remained silent for a long moment before she spoke.

"I cannot deny that I fear going into such a den, but the number of patrols you have seen is worrisome, and in my time back at the village I have come to hear disturbing stories of hunters not coming back or finding many scouts near the camps. I agree it is time to find out exactly what has been happening. I will stay with you tonight."

"That is well." Jake said. "But I did not plan on going in! No tunnel could hold me but the ones at the mountain, and only because they are so large. No, I would merely locate the center of the activity, if I can, or what bolt holes they are using to hide from the sun in, then bring a report of it to the others. If we do this enough, we should have a fairly detailed map of the where they are strongest."

"Could we have a copy of that map?" Lana asked eagerly.

Jake thought. "I would desire nothing more." He said. "But we must find a way to convincingly tell how you got the map, and not reveal our secret."

Lana bit her lip, thinking hard.

"Speak with Rachel when the map is complete." Jake advised. "She may have some idea."

"Thank you." Lana said sincerely.

"You are most welcome." Jake told her.

They saw nothing for another hour, but made a gentle sweep towards the river as Jake began to turn for home.

"There!" Nacomi cried, pointing down in the night. Jake looked back to get a bearing, then turned his head in the direction she indicated.

He could see shapes moving in the desert below, hurrying on some errand.

Swooping lower, he hung barely a thousand feet in the air now, and he could tell that the creatures were certainly goblins and small for their stature. They bore large staffs topped with grinning skulls of animals while the largest and most evil held a black staff topped with the skull of a Brisson warrior. Their cloth was torn and stained with sand, and they carried large bags that Jake guessed held their spell ingredients.

He could feel the others tense on his back, but they did not put a hand to their bowstrings, nor did they speak any word.

Following their quarry, they watched the party bear left of the stream for nearly a mile before turning abruptly into the depths of the desert and bearing straight into the desert. They held that course for most of the night, crossing nearly six leagues before the sky started to pale.

From his vantage point, Jake could see the goblins had come to what appeared to be a circular dome of pale brown rock.

To his sharp eyes, it seemed the goblins had made a mistake; they'd not covered enough ground in the time available to them and would be caught in the sun. Amusing as it would be to watch, it wasn't what he was here for.

Then to his utter amazement, a door four paces wide and six tall opened into the dome, and the goblins filed inside, speaking words to an unseen guard.

The dome must be their city! He realized in a flash.

He felt a hunger awaken in him; to dive down and wreck that city, to grind it under his feet and burn the infestation out. So powerful was it that he felt the fire form deep in his chest, but he blew it out with a soft sigh. He could not endanger Nacomi and Lana; had it just been him, he might have struck.

He turned swiftly and bore west, heading for the river.

"What is it?" Nacomi cried in his ear.

"We found what we looked for." He told her quickly, ascending to two thousand feet. When he got to the river he followed its rushing waters to home.

"How can we have found them?" Lana shouted. "All that was there was bare rock!"

"Did you not note the strangeness of it? A great dome of rock, where no other mountain could be? And dunes warned off to either side, I would wager that as the sun comes up those dunes are drawn over the top of the dome, burying it from view and leaving no trace of it to be seen by air or land."

The others fell silent as they digested the implications of that.

"But that means there could be cities anywhere!" Lana cried out in horror.

"You see the problem." Jake said grimly. "These cities would only be visible in the night when their people are at their strongest and the armies are out in all directions, so no scouts could even get close. But in the daytime, when they are at their weakest, they hide in their cities and pull their hats on, and they are gone."

"But how shall we find them then?" Nacomi said.

Jake laughed. "How have we found this one? With searches every night and we shall follow them back to as many holes as we can manage."

"But what about their war?" Nacomi asked.

Jake could have kicked her. That would no doubt tip their hand to...

"War?" Lana asked sharply. "What war?"

Jake growled irritably to himself, but spoke. "We have suspected the increased movements were a prelude to a full mobilization, and we suspected that there could only be one target large enough to require so many troops."

"The village!" Lana gasped.

"Bigger, I suspect." Jake told her. "I believe they mean to strike at the entirety of the Fourteen Nations."

"We have to warn the elders!" Lana gasped.

"We have alerted Mausi." Jake told her. "And we've done all in our power to ensure that your scouts are apprised that something big is in the wind, but we dare not reveal ourselves. Not yet, unless we have no choice."

"But if we're attacked, will you come?" Lana asked desperately.

Jake was silent, he could feel by the tickle on his back that Lana was leaning as far as she dared to look at him.

Nacomi replied before he did.

"I don't think they'll attack your village, not just yet." Her voice inordinately gentle. "I expect that they are missing a key element...something they want more desperately than simply wiping out the tribe."

"What?" Jake could hear the confusion in her voice.

"You." Jake rumbled.

"Me?" he could hear the astonishment in her voice. "Why would they want me?"

"We don't know." Jake admitted. "It could be anything; perhaps there's a prophecy concerning your people?"

Lana shook her head. "Not that I know of." She said at long last. "I could ask the shaman, but she has never told me anything like this."

Jake shook his head. "I fear that matters have gone further than I ever expected." He said. "We must assume that your camp is being watched at all times, and the routes back from the town and the mountain have scouts searching for you; that is where Mausi has been telling people you've been going, is that not right?"

"That is...wait a moment...do you mean...is Mausi...ooooh!" she snarled and laughed at the same time. "You didn't really need my help, did you?"

"Your service has been invaluable." Nacomi told her. "I could never have managed so well without you, and your teaching skills are phenomenal."

"You are partially correct." Jake stressed. "We wanted you kept safe and out of the enemy's sight for as long as we could, in an effort to delay his march, perhaps indefinitely. We also were in desperate straits; Nacomi has great knowledge, and so do our martial instructors, but they are too few to handle the students that are being brought out, and you were the perfect fit for our needs."

"But with the cities already complete, and his bases secure

he has only to spy you before marching, and his people may not wait much longer regardless; it would be hard to feed and maintain an army that size and not be seen, and he may not wish to risk the game being found out and launch his assault without spying you. I do not have the answers at this time."

Everyone was silent as they digested this news.

"Then what should we do?" Lana asked fearfully.

"I should say that what we have been able to do, we have already done." Jake told her. "Keeping you out of sight from his spies has fouled up his timetable, for whatever reason. That is to our advantage, and has allowed time to build up what reserves as we are able to in order to bring more of our people out of hibernation."

"But you number only two thousand!" Lana cried. "We have far more warriors than you! And the Dolna are sure to have far more than us!"

"We have somewhat more than a mere two thousand." Jake told her. "But far fewer warriors. Our army would barely muster four hundred if assembled; we cannot spare any further strength from the mountain, and they are simply civilians given time to familiarize themselves with weapons for the last defense."

"Then you can do nothing?" Lana asked.

"I did not say that. You reckon without the power of the Lady and myself. If there are no further surprises for us, then our strength combined should be sufficient to provide some relief. But do not fully trust to this; the enemy might have, or will have I should say, some nasty surprises for us if we come to open war."

"Your warriors will have to be confident of their own strengths." Nacomi told her. "And as long as they are forewarned then they cannot be taken by surprise. That will give the enemy pause."

"In the meantime, Mausi has been doing what she can with what we have left her to convince the elders to call a Great Council amongst the fourteen tribes, and bring your forces to bear all at once. If done, then they would have a strength to match the goblins for a time."

"You do not think they will win." Lana said quietly.

Jake hesitated. "I do not think any of us can win in the end, no matter how mighty we are." He looked ahead at the borders of the Great Wood, now swiftly approaching.

"We have slumbered too long in the mountain, and the enemy has had ages upon ages to gather strength until he has, at last, felt himself invulnerable. It is true that he has allowed the Brissons to survive and flourish as he wills, but I think that is because he is afraid of the emptiness. When I journeyed for seven years, I saw no sign of the demons, and believed them to have been destroyed in a final battle that consumed both their race and mine, but I know I was wrong. Perhaps the loneliness proved too much for them, not having any to torture and amuse

themselves with and so slept much the same way we did, losing strength until your people emerged and spread over the world. At last he had new toys to play with and to mock, and so came to life at last; but now he had a modicum of wisdom, and did not wish to completely win, for he would be lonely again. Instead, he has played a long and dangerous game, bringing your civilization along as far as he feels comfortable with before destroying it utterly and leaving the survivors to begin afresh. But now you are proving dangerous to him; he has no idea of our survival and that we have destroyed his spies and messengers; he believes it is time to end the game and start anew; by destroying the empires of the Brissons and taking most as slaves, he will probably, I guess, drive many into the wilderness as nearly naked savages to start the process all over again."

Lana was silent as they neared the mountain; what she thought of the revelations Jake couldn't say, though he thought he had a pretty good guess.

"Lana, running back to your village tonight would not help them." He told her. "In fact, it would be the worse thing you could do, bar giving yourself up in a foolish and useless attempt to stave off the inevitable."

He heard their gasps and continued. "All you can do is hope and pray; you have strong allies around you, and they grow stronger every day. Your people are mightier still and have caused the enemy pause before. You must trust them again to stand without you, and to keep the secret."

"More than that, Jake." Nacomi interrupted. "We must learn what it is about her that makes her so interesting to the enemy. Why are the fox people pursued so relentlessly? Why is she important enough to hold off on a major attack that would cause great harm and no doubt delight them, to lure her back to her people first?"

"You are right." Jake nodded. "Lana, if you wish to aid your people, we must uncover why you are so important. Go to Serena upon our landing; she has been trying to divine that very reason this whole time, but not openly, for fear of driving you back to your people and putting everyone in jeopardy. Now that the truth is known, she can work stronger magic with you and possibly uncover the truth. If she cannot...well, then we have done nothing that we haven't already tried."

"All right." Lana said, determined. "I will."

"That's good. Now hold on girls! We are coming in for a landing." Jake told them as he angled for the mountainside.

#

Serena looked up as Lana entered the glade. She'd gotten tired of Mulan and the other Maidens trying to take over every little task she tried to accomplish; while the others just smiled as if it was the most perfect thing in the world! She'd finally fled in unicorn form, moving under the trees with the

silence and stealth only a unicorn possessed. Her pursuers had lost her and though they stayed out far longer than she expected, many had finally given it up and returned to the mountain, though the Maidens had taken up posts near the root to await her return. She would have to check on them soon, as they might still be out there in the chill, waiting with the patience of spiders for her to walk into their web.

No, that is unfair of me, she chastised. The maidens meant well, she didn't doubt, but to be waited on horn and hoof was too unnatural and strange for her to feel comfortable with.

Quit it, she scolded. *Lana is here for a reason, and you must learn why.*

Looking her over, she thought that Lana looked windblown and very tired, natural considering that she'd been with Jake on his patrol, but what news could she have brought that made Lana seek her out with such urgency? She hadn't felt any new dangers, nor had her pool showed aught but further darkness surrounding the Brisson people; the power she faced was too strong to break through without alerting it to her thought, and she wasn't ready for that trial yet, nor the consequences of being revealed.

Lana made it over to her and stood a while, catching her breath, while Serena waited politely.

"I have been told the truth." Lana said first.

Serena shook her head sadly, laying her horn on Lana to speak to her mind directly.

'You have always been told the truth here, Lana, just not the whole of it as your friends worried that the invincibility of your youth would make you less wise than was needed.'

"You're saying I would throw everything aside to protect my family." Lana said bluntly. "Well, you're right about that, I guess; I would cast my life aside if it would protect the ones I love."

'As they would do the same for you.' Serena soothed. 'You know that they would agree with me; keeping you safe protected you whom they most love, and served an unexpected boon in protecting the ones you love most. In what way have we done you harm in this? We trusted you with our most precious of secrets, and brought you here to teach. Have we done wrong?'

"I don't know!" Lana said in frustration, twisting abruptly away and stalking along the grass. "I want to go back." She said at last. "I have to help fight; I'm strong and capable, and I've survived being captured before."

Serena, realizing that she might turn away from contact again, returned to her human form.

"Lana." She said, her voice firm and sweet like a mother scolding a wayward child. "You know that your argument is wrong. You were incredibly brave in the cave; Tom and Stacey's praise of your courage and valor tell as much, but you know in your heart that you lost the fight that night, and would have lost your life and Mausi's life if not for Tom and Stacey. Can you

not see that strength of arms alone in this fight is not enough? Were it simply a matter of numbers, then all would be lost in the opening stroke of this war, and we would be washed aside. More than likely, the war would have already started, but for you."

"But why me?" Lana demanded. "What possible reason am I so important? Jake says you have ways to find out, but never used them; but now I beg you, please, tell me what it is that I know that can hurt the demons! What about me is so important! I must have the truth!"

"The truth?" Serena asked. "I would give it to you now if it lay in my power, but right now it does not. We must seek it together. Are you willing to endure such a test?"

Lana hesitated, looking her in the eye, then stiffened her resolve and nodded.

Now that she had her agreement, how should they begin? Serena had no clue, but there could still be a way. Their instincts had helped her in the past, perhaps it would work again?

Taking a deep breath, she relaxed and blanked her mind. Unbidden, thoughts took shape and filled her mind.

Standing tall and erect, proud as any queen, she called softly.

"Mulan, come to me."

Springing noiselessly from the silent woods came a small white-robed shape, followed quickly by a taller, and behind them by only a step or two, came two more.

The four maidens came to a stop only paces away and bowed very low.

"What is your command?" they asked as one.

"Mulan, go and bring to me several leaves of the Thyme plant, there will be some growing on the Western borders. Go with your mother and tell any guard you meet that you are under my direct authority. Go."

The two hurried off.

"Nancy, Sara," she addressed the other two. "I hadn't thought to find you amongst their ranks, but glad am I of your service now."

"Thank you milady." They murmured.

"Take Lana to the far side and brush her fur and clean the dirt off her; I dare not do a reading when she is covered by the memory of others."

The two nodded and went to Lana, tugging her hands while the Fox looked in stunned silence; never before had she seen Serena so regal, so commanding.

The three figures went to the edge. Nancy produced a small wooden brush she'd made while Sara raced to the river, she returned with a bucket of water and wetted Lana's fur to aid the tangles.

When they returned, Mulan and Mei-Yin were coming under the

branches of a tall pine, bearing a small satchel that seemed to have come from one of the guards. Serena sniffed with her sensitive nose and could smell the earthy fragrance of Thyme emanating from the open top.

"Good. Bring them to the side of the Seeing Pool of Ancient Wisdom." She instructed. "Then arrange yourselves in a circle around the edge and wait. You will know what to do when the time comes if you trust yourselves."

Abruptly she turned back to a unicorn; rippling silver as she sped to the pool, she stopped at the north point of the compass. At her feet the still waters lapped at the grass.

Lana came to stand beside her while her maidens arranged themselves at the four points of the compass around the pool; Mulan took post behind her.

At the urging of her thoughts, Serena placed the tip of her horn into the pool; it instantly turned smooth and mirrored as glass. Then placing her horn on Lana, she urged her forward until she stepped into the water. Instantly the water darkened at her touch, yet no ripple formed from the disturbance.

'Kneel in the water.' Serena whispered to her mind, touching her horn to her back.

Lana knelt, her arms spread in supplication as she bowed her head.

Touching her horn to the water, Serena commanded it to her will, calling on the turgid waters to show the mystery plainly.

As the water trembled, the maidens raised their hands to the sky and began to sing; no words could be heard in the tune, but their voices flowed together in perfect harmony. Trees rustled in response and animals gave quiet voice as they came to witness the spectacle at the pool.

Light sprang from the maidens, becoming pure white and painful to look upon. Delicate shafts met above the waters to shine briefly before being met by thin sheets of the water fifteen feet high by eight broad arranged in an octagon.

Serena looked into them, and saw that each showed a different scene playing on their surface.

Directly in front, she saw a young female fox holding a small child while above them a smiling father stood bearing the regalia of a chief.

This must be Lana with her family, Serena thought. The panes began to rotate clockwise, bringing another scene into focus. In this, a young Lana screamed inconsolably over the corpse of her dead mother, a shattered spear buried beside them. A shadow appeared above her, but instead of a goblin, it proved to be grizzled male wolf with many scars on his muzzle and a gentle but sad smile on his face as he picked Lana up and went to the cot where her brother lay.

The next scene showed Lana growing up with Mausi and her brother, before another battle took place, this one in amongst the tents of her adopted people. When it was over, the old wolf

and her brother had fallen, and Mausi clutched a weeping Lana close as her own eyes trickled water down her stoic face.

Further things did she see as the mirrors spun; Lana growing skilled with spear and bow, the preferred weapons of her people; Lana going to search for her missing sister and being taken by goblins who cheered over their prize, seeking to break her will and use her (she remembered Tom's words as he told the story), and the rescue, and Lana at the mountain teaching, but then they came to the last pane.

A great battle appeared underway; Serena could see dragon fire scorching great hosts of the enemy, and flashes of white lightning striking from a cloudless sky as struggling figures resolved into Brisson wolves against goblin and slave, spider and something else, something that remained veiled from her sight.

As a movie tightening on its subject, the armies were lost to show a young fox girl wielding a sword on the battlefield, fighting against a hideous Demon Lord who seemed in command. Serena stared at him hard, memorizing every disgusting detail; from his fetid, pig-like face, to his heavy build and brown, pustule-covered skin, to his great broad battle-axe.

The girl darted back and forth in combat, so light and fast as to be nearly impossible to see while the Demon aimed blow after blow against this lesser creature who dared stand against it, a hundred other warriors already dead at its feet.

She dodged a mean strike and charged in, her sword striking deep. The Demon screamed and dropped his axe, turning to wispy smoke that vanished up into the night sky as he was banished from the plane. His host turned and fled into the night, leaving the Brisson in command of the battlefield.

So that's it; Serena realized. It isn't about power or a secret that Lana possesses, but the fact that she happened to be in the right place at the right time to strike the fatal blow against their leader. Because he fears being driven back to his own dimension, he wouldn't strike so long as a single fox remained alive. But the person isn't clear, is it Lana, or is it someone else?

Serena couldn't know, for the images stopped and the water fell into the pond, which did not splash or ripple, as the water turned clear again and became normal.

No one else noticed that, however, for the breaking of the magic snapped back against all of them, and Serena staggered under the savage blow, shaking her head and whimpering as jackhammers started in on her brain.

Looking around her, she saw the four maidens had been hurled off their feet and lay sprawled unmoving on the grass, while Lana had fallen into the cool water, which floated her to shore and deposited her in front of Serena.

Shaking off the effects, she became human again and brought Lana out of the water and placed her next to Mulan. Then she

walked to the others and saw them only sleeping.

With four musical notes that echoed into the night, she brought forth animals from their hiding places amongst the trees.

"Guard my friends in their sleep." She commanded them. "Let nothing disturb them until they wake."

Deer lay around them to keep them warm while smaller creatures that bore a passing resemblance to squirrels but the size of small dogs, leapt upon them in such numbers that the people all but disappeared under the heavy fur blanket. Around them paced great hulking bear-like creatures Lana had called Bolkat.

Satisfied that their sleep would not be disturbed in the slightest, Serena returned to normal and sped up the slope as fast as her hooves could carry her.

#

Upon arriving at the gated mouth, she passed like a shadow around the guard and sped down the hall.

Jake lounged in front of the door on his great pile of gold, slumbering, yet red light seeped from under one eyelid, indicating he remained only lightly dozing.

'Waken!' Serena called to him as she continued on. 'We must have a Council immediately!'

Jake leapt to his feet scattering gold everywhere and followed her through the doors that were thrown open with magic.

He went to the table, knowing he would not be fast enough, and let Serena continue summoning the rest of them.

Faster than winged messengers, she galloped to each room and passed along the summons until at last she had Tom and Stacey, Rachel and Brian, Shyla and Asbiorn, and Volgelson.

They were dressed for sleep, but all looked wide awake and alert as she told of what she'd seen in the pool.

"But what does that mean?" Stacey asked when she'd finished. "Are we not to aid the Brissons in their fight as we have promised to do?"

"We shall." Jake growled before Serena could remind them of the dragon fire and the white lightning. "I have given my word."

"And you shall not break it." Brian finished for him. "But I do not think that was what the mirror indicated. Indeed, if I read things rightly, then I believe that the mirror has shown what it can, but as our need for secrecy is so great, then it has not shown us everything. Your mirror did not lie," he said before Serena could retort. "But its sight may still be veiled. Perhaps we were fighting in that battle, but somewhere else. Our strength may have been occupied with the lesser demons or sorcerers of the field; it strikes me as this description indicates that it will be a magic-heavy fight, so much so that we are far away when the demon lord takes the field." He paused as if a thought occurred to him.

"Unless we are acting *through* Lana."

"What are you talking about?" Shyla asked in confusion.

"What if Lana is given our power in the fight? Serena might be able to lend her magic to strengthen her blow at the critical moment, especially if given one of our swords with its longer reach."

Everyone looked thoughtful.

"Perhaps, but we will also be engaged, I have no doubt." Serena said with such assurance that no one doubted her word. "But it appears that Lana will strike the first blow, unless there is another fox near us that uses swords?"

They shook their heads. "Not that we are aware of; Mausi told us that the children the tribe took in were few in number and scattered far away, on some of the furthest nations from the goblins. As the tribes are apparently familiar with bow and spear, I do not think any of them would be equipped with swords." Tom said.

"And she is not either." Stacey said horrified. "We have little time in which to instruct her, but we must do all that we can. Do we have the teachers to spare?" she turned to Volgelson.

The general nodded. "We can spare our best, though it would be a trial, as the classes are becoming fuller and our training cadre is not growing proportionately with it."

"What we can do, we must." Jake said. "For now much of what has been dark to us is brought to light; we know now how they have kept their gatherings secret from us, and how difficult it will be to scout for them and find them; we know why the enemy is so determined to find and kill Lana, for simply by fluke of battlefield, she is destined to banish the Demon Lord that commands the hosts. Now we must make some plans to bring all elements together so carefully that the enemy will not know what has gone amiss with his until it is far too late."

"Perhaps we could buy time by destroying that city you found?" Volgelson suggested. "It is uncomfortably close to our borders for my liking, and if we are careful and secret about it, perhaps we can keep the enemy on the defensive. That will buy us more time if he wants to recover what he's lost before engaging the Brissons."

"Actually, I'm not sure striking this city is the best idea." Rachel said. "I agree with you on several points, not the least of which is how close it is to our borders, but I don't think that it's even part of the staging area for the attack; it's too far away, I think; it must be at least five days from the camp, if not more, and any host marching from there would be caught in the sun. I suppose they might have tunneled to their jump-off point, but I suspect that instead they have tunneled to another domed city hidden close to the Brisson camp that has been camouflaged the same way. That is where the main host would already be set to go from, while this one is likely empty of all but essentials, unless the enemy is far stronger than we fear in this region."

"It may also," Jake rumbled. "Convince him to completely exterminate the Fourteen Tribes and allow none of the desert wolves to escape should they win. He has utterly wiped out the fox people as one posed a danger to him; something that could make an entire city vanish and not be seen would be a force he would not want to reckon with."

"Possibly." Volgelson agreed. "But then what should we do with the city?"

"Perhaps..." Jake suggested. "Perhaps it is time to get a better look at our enemy."

"How so?" Brian asked.

"We capture a live messenger." He suggested. "It should definitely be worth it, if the messenger is significantly placed; he may have complete knowledge of many settlements along our respective frontiers, and that information we can give to Lana and let her take it back in secret to her people as more information from the old gypsy cat in town; I believe that is the excuse we gave last time, was it not?"

"Right." Brian nodded. "They have a great respect for any soothsayer or magic user in their culture, and they have appeared to follow the advice that was given. As to whether they would believe a thorough, detailed map from such a source, I don't know."

"Well, we must try something." Stacey flared. "I shudder to think what the poor mothers and children would succumb to, if captured and enslaved by the goblins. The one in the cave wished to use Lana as a pleasure toy, to serve and fetch like a dog. We shall not let that happen." She said forcefully.

"Of course not." Serena soothed. "We will never allow these creatures to win against our friends, even if we must reveal that men walk this earth once more and there are mightier folk yet ready to challenge him. But can we be ready if their hosts move? Can we here go to the aid of anyone if the call comes?"

Volgelson shook her head. "I'm sorry milady, but right now I have a standing army of barely six hundred. There are no more folk left in the mountain now to bring out of hibernation. And my army fluctuates in size as they go about the needed tasks of building a civilization again. That army would not constitute the smallest brigade of my time, let alone an army."

"It will have to suffice." Serena said firmly. "Prepare your men, general. Drill them night and day if you have to, we must be ready to go wherever in the world where we are needed. Keep patrols out to warn of impending attack, but train those soldiers!"

"Yes, Lady." Volgelson actually bowed low.

"What armor have we been able to create, Brian?" Serena asked.

Brian shrugged. "I'm sorry, but we've tried to bring our stores of swords and spears up, so I am not as up on the armors we've been experimenting with. I could give a very simple,

riveted plate armor to begin with. But that would be all."

"Make it," Serena told him. "As much as you can. Make some for Brian as well, and myself."

"What about me?" Rachel demanded.

"And us?" Shyla and Asbiorn cried together.

"I have not forgotten you," Serena said. "Brian must try and make armor for you, Shyla, but we do not have the skill to make armor for Asbiorn, unless he should remain in one shape alone throughout the battle. That would not prove practical in bringing said armor to the battlefield except in train."

"I can go far distances as a lion." Asbiorn rumbled.

"I do not doubt it, but you are massive, twice my size and a quarter of Jake's. We do not have enough time to make armor big enough to fit you and outfit our army, not at once, and I will need armor as well."

"*WHAT!*" everyone cried out in shock.

Serena felt her face darken, as she resolutely held her ground.

"I will be called for in this battle; the white lightning from the vision proves it."

"Milady..." Volgelson started to protest but shut her mouth, looking disheartened. "We cannot afford to lose you." She whispered at last. "The mountain would shatter amongst factions if you fall."

Serena smiled in her direction. "Be comforted, Mary. I will not fall so long as I have good friends and valiant warriors to watch my back; but against the forces we suspect will be arrayed against us, we have no choice. I must fight."

Volgelson bowed, then looked at Brian. "Make sure her armor is the best you can make." She said.

Brian looked at her, then bowed.

"I shall ensure it." He told her.

Serena shook her head. "All our armor had better be good," she said. "Not just me; I shall not go into battle armored if our soldiers have none."

"Don't worry," Brian laughed. "I shall work in the forges making armor for everyone."

"Good." Serena sniffed.

"Then have we further business to discuss tonight?" Jake asked.

One by one they shook their heads, each aware of the immense task that lay ahead of them, except for Rachel.

"Why do I not have armor." She demanded.

Serena looked at her steadily. "You know as well as I do why you will not have armor, and why you shall remain here in command of the Mountain."

Rachel looked confused. "Why should I not?" she asked. "I am not sick, that episode this morning was simply some bad salad."

"That 'bad salad' was due to your human part." Serena told

her steadily. Dawning comprehension was in Stacey, Shyla and Volgelson's eyes, while the men looked (typically, she thought) clueless and Rachel stubborn.

"Rachel, no one here will allow a woman carrying a child into battle." Serena said firmly as the men gasped and Brian looked poleaxed.

"You have a higher duty now, to the children in your womb. Carry them to term and bring them into the world. You must sit this battle out."

Rachel dropped her eyes. "I hadn't thought." She whispered. "I mean, I'd hoped, but at the same time...I didn't want to be parted from you." She said to Brian.

"You never will." Brian took her hand in both of his and looked deeply into her eyes. "Rachel, I will not allow a small matter like this battle to keep us apart. I will return to you, I promise."

To the shock of everyone at the table, Rachel burst into tears and hugged him.

"See that you do!" she howled. "Or I will come after you in whatever afterlife you've found refuge in and drag you back here by your ear!"

Brian took her in gentle embrace, while Serena solemnly put her finger to her lips. The council meeting was now over, and it would be up to Brian and Rachel to settle with each other, and their families.

Ushering the others outside the door, she let them scatter to their she shifted back to unicorn. The headache she'd suffered under since the magic at the pond now seemed somewhat less to her, and she cantered out under the moonlight to return to her glade to stand watch over Lana and the Maidens.

< < < < > > > >