

(Chapter ONE)

Words and Councils #

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Brian walked through the desert sand like an Arabian stallion, with steady, strong strokes through the shifting dunes. After so long carrying Corporal Wilkes, he barely noticed the weight anymore. He felt lucky to have him along on this patrol; they worked very well together, almost in tandem at times, and both of them were capable fighters.

Brian knew that Rachel desperately wanted to come along and guard his back, but like Serena had said, no one would allow a pregnant woman outside the safety of the mountain; they were simply too precious to risk. She wasn't the only woman carrying a child, of course, but they still seemed too far, too few in between for comfort.

Of course, everyone is afraid of the looming war; those that can fight don't want to be the warrior left behind, and those that don't fear losing their husbands to war.

It was a pretty problem, one that Brian did not know how to solve, and he filed it away to work on at a later date.

He returned his focus to the task at hand; locating a small goblin party with a high-ranking officer in it that they could question, or discovery further intelligence on the body if that proved impossible.

Brian didn't often get a chance to be outside the forge anymore, but he could not stay there all the time or he risked madness. Sandra, Shyla's mother, proved to be a very capable administrator and forge worker, she'd been left in charge and he thought she would prove better at it than he ever could. She had a real knack for being able to read when the metal was at the perfect heat for working, and with experience she'd gotten much faster at her craft.

"Brian, look ahead." Roger's voice interrupted his chain of thought and he looked where Roger indicated. In the distance he could see five shapes hurrying through the sand under the light of the full moon.

"I think they are goblins." Roger's voice betrayed the eagerness in which he drew his sword.

"I believe you are right," Brian said with matching excitement. "And look! See how that fellow in the middle is dressed differently than those around him? He has a huge hat on his head that is no doubt decorated with the skulls of office for these foul folk. With luck, he'll have the information we need."

He eyed the situation a little longer.

"Put up your sword for now." He told Roger. "And use the bows. We will pick off his guards at range, then close the

distance before he can run."

Roger slid his sword back in its sheath and swung from his back a horsebow; a small bow with a strong recurve, it had nearly three-quarters the same reach as the longbows, but could be operated from horseback, or rather centaur back. Brian drew his own bow, a great longbow from the dwarf hoards, and drew the fletching to his cheek. Sighting on the lead warrior, he waited with baited breath to hear Roger's shot, then loosed his own.

Two of the warriors pitched forward immediately, Brian's with an arrow in the neck, Roger's with one in its head.

The goblins drew their swords and surrounded the chief and looked wildly for their assailants. The shine of their weapons in the moonlight provided perfect markers.

Thunk! Thunk! The last two warriors were down, but the chief had his own blade out and seemed to be bellowing an enchantment! Brian drew, brought the arrow to his cheek, and loosed!

His aim proved true, and the arrow pierced the cheek of the goblin as it spoke, broke its teeth as it passed through the lips, and emerged, bloody and chipped, out the other cheek, making him look like one of the ancient aborigines and their bone piercings.

Brian secured his bow on his back and raced to the goblin that had at last caught sight of him.

The goblin tried to speak a spell to curse him, but the arrow wedged his jaw open too far to be able to fully form the words needed, and when he pitched the spell nothing came from his palm. The goblin then proceeded to hop up and down in wordless rage, throwing down his helm and stamping on it.

The sight was so bizarre that Brian actually stopped more than an arm's length away, wondering if the creature had gone stark mad.

The goblin, not satisfied with its insults, drew forth a scroll from its belt and proceeded to charge them, waving the scroll like a sword.

Brian stared, nonplussed, until the paper and wood scroll struck him on the greaves. *Clunk!*

Brian reached out and snatched the scroll from the goblin, who tugged on his end as if trying to hit Brian again all the while attempting to kick at him. Fearing damage from the armored boots, Brian danced around, trying to keep from being struck.

Roger slid down to the ground and tackled the beast but his will, or drunkenness or whatever the maddened creature was on, kept him on his feet. He ignored Roger's attempts to subdue him and kept trying to kick at Brian's legs.

"Come on Roger!" Brian shouted at last, tired of the game. "Bring him down."

"I'm trying." Roger puffed. "But he's a strong devil...gotcha!"

With that, Roger slid down from the waist and clutched at

the goblin's legs. Thrown off balance, the foul thing fell into the sand face first. The dune muffled his scream of pain and rage while Brian and Roger worked quickly to bind his hands.

Yanking their prisoner off the ground, they saw the massive wound the arrow had worked on his face and knew there would be no saving the arrow; the creature's teeth had all but chewed through the shaft.

"Roger, get some strong cloth, will you? This fellow isn't going to have that fine gag of his much longer." Brian grinned; the battle was over and he had a victory on his hands, it was a very good feeling.

"Sure thing." Brian could hear the grin on Roger's face. "Just be sure not to pull his braces until I've got his replacement ready."

"A shame, his last dentist did such shoddy work." Brian remarked delicately. "Well, perhaps his new one here will be more to his liking."

Breaking the tip of the arrow off, he waited for Roger to signal he was ready before swiftly drawing the arrow out. Before the goblin could speak, he was securely gagged.

"Excellent. Now bind his eyes, tightly now." Brian commanded, grabbing the prisoner's wrists before he could struggle free.

They bound his eyes with another strip of cloth from Roger's shirt, which now looked rather strange without sleeves, and made sure the rope was well and truly tight on the wrists. Roger then swung up on Brian's back and, not without a shudder of disgust, Brian placed their prisoner between them.

With a whisk broom and shovel, they spent a short time erasing all evidence of their battle, as well as their tracks that led eastward.

On their way back, Brian picked up the bristled broom that wiped their trail away behind them, with the aid of wind. They vanished into thin air by the time goblin scouts arrived to learn what had happened, the confused creatures passing by the scene of battle without noticing and continued far to the East.

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Brian and Roger returned to the forest as the sun started to rise in the sky. Messages had sped ahead of them of their prisoner, and they found the forest astir when they marched underneath the dark boughs.

A platoon of soldiers in full attire met them and surrounded them, escorting them further into the forest. Brian wondered why they weren't heading for the mountain, but then realized that there would be no safer place than the forest to keep their prisoner; with every tree and bush an ever-watchful guard, the goblin would never be able to escape the trees on his own.

They followed the guard for some ways until they came into a place blacker than any Brian could ever remember seeing. He

actually stopped and drew back, his eyes looking up into the trees for the cause. It was then that he saw how the trees had twisted themselves very close at the top, weaving and interlocking their branches until no light shone through to the ground.

Brian realized that it had to be Serena's effort to make their prisoner more comfortable, and perhaps more in a mood to talk. Brian thought it a fair idea...if they had been dealing with a Brisson or human that liked it dark. The goblin deserved no mercy, in his opinion, nor did would it recognize kindness as anything but a weakness to exploit.

He brought the prisoner into the dark glade, barely able to see, until red light swept to him and he froze in terror until he could convince himself that it was Jake. The darkness had enhanced his vision, blotting out all distraction until one could only focus on those terrible eyes.

Brian shivered as he hurried forward to deposit the Goblin at the base of a large tree; he understood things better now and could not wait to retreat out of that horrible cell.

Once on the ground, vines and bushes seized the limbs and secured the writhing chest of the goblin to the trunk, all but paralyzed against the tree. Brian removed the cloth gag and blindfold, passing them back to Roger who took them gingerly (later Brian saw him burning them).

Then they marched out of the gloom back into the light, where they saw the others. Brian barely noticed them; for now, he saw Rachel, her concern for him touching, and he noticed how she'd brushed her long hair until it shone, weaving flowers into it. His heart beat faster and his tiredness fell away as he took her hand in his (at some point in his hurry to get to her, Roger had quietly slipped away as any good friend would).

Rachel smiled up at him, her grip strong as she stroked her free hand along her horse belly, where a small bump was beginning to show through the muscles.

"Come on." She whispered to Brian. "Mom and Dad are waiting for us at the apartment. We're having family dinner."

"That would be heavenly." Brian told her quietly, and arm in arm they walked back towards the white mountain.

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Jake watched as Brian and his rider hurried out of the interrogation...room? Perhaps glade would be a more fitting term, he mused as he speared the goblin with his fiery stare.

The goblin looked frozen with fright, which Jake played upon by letting the silence stretch to the point where he felt he could cut the tension with a knife.

"Well, Goblin." He said very softly, but his natural voice making it sound a hundredfold more menacing than jackals circling a wounded wildebeest. "You appear to be in quite the predicament, are you not?"

"Who are you?" the goblin croaked, licking dry lips in his

terror.

"An ancient enemy, one that has defeated Great Demon Chieftains," Jake told him. "Let alone small goblins like yourself."

The goblin shivered at his tone and pressed himself tighter against the tree, if that were possible.

"What do you want?" he croaked.

"Information." Jake told him. He saw the calculating look swiftly cross the goblin's face before disappearing behind a mask of terror, one that Jake felt sure the goblin *thought* just a mask.

"What...what kind of information?" the goblin whined, probing.

Jake let the silence draw forth a bit longer before replying. "Everything...all that you know, all that you are."

"And...what will I get out of it?" the goblin asked.

Jake came forward, thrusting his head so close to the goblin that it easily could see his formidable jaws with its powerful nocturnal vision.

"I will not eat you." Jake told it. "Piece by piece. You may choose either a quick death or permanent imprisonment. After all...I don't think your master would care to learn where you have been and what you have said to us already...he may decide that you are a traitor even with no word having passed your lips. Your death will no doubt please him, as he listens to your every agonized scream, drawing it out for every nuance of pain that he can inflict upon you."

The goblin licked his lips and muttered words he no doubt thought too soft to overhear, but Jake had learned a little of his foul speech when he'd arrived, listening to his muffled curses, and when they conversed they spoke in the language of the Brissons, so Jake heard every word.

"The Pain Wringers are very good. Jolna lasted six days in agony before he died, and Lord Dilkna's are supposed to be even better."

Jake gave no hint that he'd understood anything; after all, it might give him an edge in later negotiations; indeed it had already given him some insight, this goblin was evidently from a different host of goblins, serving a different Lord! That indicated there were political factions amongst the Demons, tensions that might be pushed to incite civil war, if they were handled very, very carefully.

"What was your business here, goblin?" Jake growled.

The intimidated goblin spoke in a rush before he could get his mouth under control.

"I was sent by Lord Tiknol to ask for aid from Lord Dilnak. We wish to destroy a great Brisson city, and there would be slaves and loot for everyone."

Jake stilled.

"What is the name of that city?" He demanded.

"London."

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Jake spent the next six hours interrogating Grolbark on his master's plan, the timing of the attack, and the forces that would be arrayed against the city.

When he left the goblin, the exhausted creature demanded they cut off his head instead of setting him free, or let him kill himself. Jake told him they would talk amongst themselves and choose the right course.

Out in the lighter shade, he found the others waiting for him. A table had been brought out of the mountain and around it stood chairs for the humans and blank spaces where the others could stand. Ringing the table were several Maidens in white, and outside them, standing guard were the shapes of soldiers; the small flashes of red on their shoulder telling him all he needed of who they were.

He suppressed a momentary flash of irritation at them, and instead focused on who stood at the table.

Volgelson had spread several maps in front of her, and two members of her staff had several more maps carefully sorted and ready should she call for them.

Serena stood at the head of the table in human form, to make it easier to converse with everyone there, he had no doubt.

Lana sat nearby, looking pained as she rubbed her temples, but scowled fiercely at anyone that suggested she leave for medicine. Jake wondered why she didn't seek Serena's aid, but perhaps she still suffered from last night's magic.

Rachel and Brian stood comfortably together on one side of the table, holding hands. She wore a crown of lilies in her hair; he wore a metal bracelet that seemed to have come from the Old Days.

Tom and Stacey sat in small doll furniture that someone had carved for them; Stacey's carved with snapdragons, moonflowers, and laburnums. Tom's bore whales and fishes and crowned with three seabirds in flight.

"Well," Jake said, beginning the council, "We must change much of our plans, I fear, to counter this new threat. And we, at last, have a timetable for our operations. Sooner than we hoped but later than we feared."

"What did that creature say?" Volgelson asked.

"His name is Grolbark, and he is from a separate nation of Goblins and Demon Lords." Jake said. "Theirs lies across the far sea where our friends Annabel, Gavin, and Matcha reside."

"In England?" Tom asked in surprise.

"Not quite." Jake said. "It seems that the UK has come crashing into the coast of France; it now is a peninsula of land coming out of France's side. Although here, there is no France, or Germany, or Russia, those lands are held in the sway of the Demons. Fortunately, however, it is not a harmonious union, as we have believed; wars constantly wrack them as demon enclave

struggles to gain status over demon enclave, and the lands lie fallow between them."

"So that is why Grolbark came here, to try and bring about a temporary alliance with our Demon Lord." Stacey suggested.

"No." Jake said. "The alliance is already signed, Grolbark was sent here as a hostage and overseer of preparations. The fact that he has gone missing does not damage the treaty in the slightest; there is too much possibility of loot to distract them."

"Then what is their plan?" Volgelson asked, frowning. "They are preparing for a strike against the Fourteen Tribes, after all. Is this attack to take place at a later date?"

"No." Jake said, shaking his head. "If you can believe it, the goblins are planning to hit the two targets at the same time."

The table fell silent as they looked disbelievingly at him.

"That must be a lie." Volgelson announced. "Surely they would see the stupidity of attacking two directions at once, and over such distances! Neither army could support the other, or come to their aid if they fall."

"Ah, but they believe they have a cunning plan." Jake said. "The army facing London will be composed primarily of their foot soldiers, slaves, and the greatest champions and captains they possess. The forces arrayed against the Fourteen Tribes, while significantly reduced in number, will contain the largest amount of sorcerers, beasts, spellcasters, and Demon Lords, meaning the battle will be far more of magic against magic. With the relatively few shamans and magic users of the Tribes, they believe that it will carry the day for them."

Volgelson bit her lip as she looked at the maps.

"Perhaps we could hit the army while it marches." She suggested.

"As much as I would like to do so, I cannot think that we will succeed." Jake told her. "Much of the force has already departed; that is why we've had such a long delay already, between the diplomacy, planning and the ordering of their forces."

"How much is left to be done?" Volgelson asked.

"Another force of two thousand is being dispatched tonight." Jake said. "After that, there will be another force of two, and another of three, in the next few weeks. When they arrive, there will be a short delay as the armies fall into order, then they will march."

"And that will be?"

"At the end of October."

"And it's the end of July now." Volgelson mused.

"If the host departs, that might leave them vulnerable. Enough to wipe out the enclave here?"

Jake shook his massive head. "We cannot abandon our allies across the sea, General. They are one of the last enclaves left

on the far continent. We must ensure their survival against this foe."

"But you cannot abandon us to face such a force on our own!" Lana cried. "We would be defeated!"

"No." Jake assured her, "We will not leave you alone. Aside from the duty of friendship, I have promised no less."

He looked around. "Therefore, I'm afraid we must do as our enemies; we will divide into two forces. One force, under Shyla, Volgelson, and Asbiorn, shall march to London, taking with them all the soldiers that we can spare. The rest of us, along with the Dragon Rangers and the Centaur Rider, shall march to the aid of the Fourteen Nations. Rachel shall remain here to administrate while we are gone."

The expected resistance began almost at once. Volgelson did not want to risk dividing their forces, saying in no uncertain terms that it would be the same as when the Germans fought England and Russia at the same time.

"Ah, but this time we shall have allies to help us." Jake said. "The Brissons. They are short in stature, perhaps, but they will prove more able than we fear. I should think, as well, that London will contain the greatest armories of firearms that may be found on this planet."

"What of the smaller colonies that may be found on this continent?" Serena asked.

Lana spoke then. "They are not part of any nation, really," she said. "Like those of my people, they hold allegiance to no one and are all tribes unto themselves. We could not bring all of them together, even if we wanted to."

"I suspect Lana is right." Jake said. "We must concentrate on the greater nations, and hope that the little ones will evade notice for now."

"All right." Volgelson nodded in relief, "But I still think we should concentrate on destroying the enclave after the last force has left, then follow on its heels and attack the other, take them out piecemeal while they are weak and divided."

"That is a good plan." Jake nodded. "If we could be certain that we got the enclaves. While Grolbark was useful, he did not know where all the cities were. He just knew that he had met his guides at one of their secret landings, and then marched over the desert for twenty days here."

"Secret landings?" Volgelson asked sharply.

Jake looked over the maps that Lana had purchased in one of the aforementioned colonies. He pointed delicately with his snout.

"Here," he said, indicating point of land on the coast. "There is a secret port carved into the rock like the Nazis did with some of their secret submarine bases in World War Two."

"What are Nazis?" Lana asked.

Everyone froze, looking at her. She'd been with them so long, they'd forgotten how little she knew of the histories they

took for granted.

"Lana," Jake told her at long last. "The thing you must understand about our people is that we have had a very long, very complicated history. I cannot impart all of it to you now, but suffice to say that long ago, in my grandfather's time, there came upon this earth a madman, evil incarnate some say. He convinced a nation to follow him, and under his leadership they forged a militant, brutal society. Their misfortunes he blamed on outcasts, and they were gathered together in great camps to be efficiently exterminated. A huge war was fought to destroy him and his allies, growing greater until the whole world seemed to be in flames. Millions died on both sides, civilian and military, until that nation was wrecked and that leader, fearing the justice we would wreak upon him, took his own life."

"What was this man's name?" Lana asked with a shiver.

"Adolf Hitler."

The voice wasn't Jake's that answered though, but Nancy's. Everyone turned to the White Maiden who looked horrified that she'd spoken.

"Your family has personal history?" Serena asked her gently.

"Yes, milady." Nancy said directly to her, as if to mitigate her impetuous act. "My step-mother's family? They came from East Berlin, but they were Jewish, and my step mother's mother and aunt had been part of Doctor Joseph Mendel's experiments; they were twins. Her aunt was about to be placed into an atmospheric chamber with her sister outside the window to see what they would experience when the Russians stormed the camp. They freed everyone for a short while, gave them good food, then put up the wall and forced everyone to work or be deported to the Gulag. When my stepmother's mother was teenager, she'd caught the eye of the local official, but she didn't want a thing to do with him, so the family escaped before he could have them arrested on a trumped-up charge, and made it to America."

She fell silent. Most looked grim and sympathetic, while Lana looked horrified.

"Lana," Jake said again. "Please remember, that we are a people. There are good and bad amongst us, as there are good and bad amongst your people. You must make your mind up about us on an individual level, and judge each of us by our actions."

Lana nodded, but still looked upset. There was nothing that Jake could do about that however, they had to turn their minds to more important things.

"General, could we perhaps, take that port?" Jake asked. "It would be a great way to launch the ships to cross the sea without tipping our hand early."

"That depends on its size and how many they have guarding it." Volgelson said at last, after studying the location. "We could march our army here, where these tall hills would hide us from unfriendly eyes. On that, we could use an overflight by you

Jake, to see that they have no sentries there, Then in the daylight, we cover this last ground in three hours and then seize the port through the entry tunnels, if they've been marked by the scouts."

"I will not be going with the army, remember?" Jake told her. "You shall have to rely on Asbiorn for clearing the sentries."

"Then it will still be okay." Volgelson said, with a glance at the were-lion.

"I can clear the sentries before word is sent." He told her confidently.

"Okay, once in, we have to make sure that no one gets too far up the tunnels. I think we can hack that, if what you said about them having to march long distances on the surface is accurate. We can take the city, use any of the craft left behind, and sail to this point here."

She marked a point on the continent near London.

"Then we march in the daylight until we reach London, about a one-day journey. We should arrive an hour before sunset, maybe longer. We bring all our forces inside their fortress, and we bleed the enemy white, with luck they will suffer such losses as to be disheartened and an attack the next morning from the castle will break them and send them howling back to their cities in defeat."

"It is a good plan." Jake said at last. "And may reap unexpected rewards; if the defeat is sound enough, then these goblins will have to worry about their neighbors seeking to take their territory and riches. They may withdraw early to conserve their losses."

"We shall see." Volgelson said. "We can only hope."

"Very good." Jake nodded. "And as for us, we know that the attack on the tribe will take place now towards the end of October, a week after the Brissons march back from the summer grounds and take their places in the winter grounds. I believe that they will have completed their tunnels before that happens, and will wait for the brissons to get drawn into complacency."

"That will not happen." Lana growled.

"That will happen, whether we will it or no." Brian told her. "No force has ever been able to maintain extreme diligence in the face of monotony, for week over week."

"But," Jake interrupted before Lana could retort. "We should not give them the opportunity. If we are able, if we are careful, I think we should try to destroy the end of the tunnels far enough that it will bring their forces to the surface some distance from the camp. That will give the Brissons time to gather their strength, and send the women and children outside the net."

"Won't such a move warn the enemy that we are there, and aware of their scheme?" Serena asked.

"Not if I bring up water in the tunnel." Tom suggested.

"They might think that they'd hit a spring in their digging."

"That could work on one or two, but what if the enemy has dug, say, seven?" Volgelson asked.

"It would stretch credibility." Jake agreed. "But if Tom, say, softened the dirt around the rest with water, it could be weakened to the point where it collapsed when they marched up; then we could count it a success, and may kill some goblins as an extra."

"That is an idea." Tom said eagerly.

"But how can we be sure that we've found all the tunnels?" Volgelson asked. "If even one escapes our attention, then everything will fail as the Brissons try to deal with the threat that's close to home!"

"In war there is always some risk." Jake said heavily. "I fear that holds true now, as it did in our earliest ancestor's time. We can only do as we must with what we know."

"I know." Volgelson sighed. "I've done a lot of battles in the Middle East with faulty intelligence, but those were small tactical affairs with the bastards coming at us from house and apartment, with six or a dozen people at most. This...this is something I haven't come across before."

"True, but our ancestors did." Brian said thoughtfully. "Some of the texts Jake has managed to save include accounts from Socrates, Homer, Tacitus and other great generals and historians in days that are not all that dissimilar from this. Perhaps we can borrow some of their tactics to aid us?"

Volgelson looked interested.

"By all means." Jake said with a smile. "Study them well, but not overlong. We have too much to do and this war is only just starting to kick off. Even if we win these battles, this will only be the opening moves in what might be a long and costly war."

Silence fell over the room as the torches, having been burned earlier and not yet replaced, began to dim and sputter, casting them into darkness.

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