

Chapter 13

Politics and Policies

Jake flew to the top of the mountain where he found a cold, bitter wind throwing hissing snow against his hard, gold scales. Settling on the peak he watched the host depart unblinking, until shadows of the deepening gloom and the far distance veiled them even from his keen sight, leaving him alone amid white-capped stones and clear, hard pools and streams of ice with only his thoughts for company.

Will we ever see them again, I wonder?

The melancholy question filled him with guilt and foreboding. His talons dug deep in the snow with his frustration. *I should go with them*, but the thought withered; his place would have to be here, providing strength to the minimal forces arrayed for the expected struggle.

A lot depended on them in the coming battles, and he couldn't help but remember the last fight when the Great Demon had come so close to destroying him.

For a moment Jake felt ghostly arms around him, crushing him with unbelievable strength while his hide burned like molten lava and he shivered. There would be no Great Demon, he told himself, but the cold terror in his heart persisted.

In annoyance, he ruffled his wings: he was a DRAGON! This indecision was not who he was; he would do what had to be done, without hesitation or question no matter the cost to himself. To do anything less he could not imagine. A strange peace settled over him, his fears remained, but they were now tightly controlled and did not rule him.

Spreading his great wings he wafted down to the entrance like some huge, scaly albatross, landing lightly on the ledge.

Striding past the grim guards, he went to his golden bed to sleep.

As he relaxed, the gold shifting and sliding beneath his bulk, a figure clad in white robes approached and bowed.

"What is it, Nancy?" Jake asked irritably, wondering--again--how such a sensible girl could have joined such silliness.

The figure raised long slender fingers and drew back her hood, exposing her fair face and raven hair. Much of her former beauty had been brought back in her time with her family, but it seemed to him that only now had she come into her own, whether through deep soul searching or by her closer association with Serena, she'd shed her old, drab shell and emerged now as one of the fairest women in the mountain.

"I thought you seemed troubled and wondered if you'd like to talk." She said softly.

Jake was about to send her away, assuring her he'd be fine, when he caught a glint about her throat. He thought of what this

frail-seeming girl--No, he corrected himself, not girl, but woman--had already endured and felt humbled.

"I am troubled." He admitted. "But I don't think you can help me with this matter."

"Oh? And why is that?" Nancy asked. She crossed her legs and sat comfortably nearby.

Jake sighed. *Women*. "I don't think you can help because even if we sat here and spoke until the cows come home, it would not change how I feel." He told her. "I am planning a battle in which some of us, or perhaps all of us, may die. Tell me this, would you ever feel comfortable and easy when doing that?"

"No." Nancy admitted, yet meeting his golden stare with her brown one unflinchingly. "I'm sure I wouldn't, but because I never would feel comfortable doesn't mean I wouldn't share my troubles with someone else. If I kept such troubles to myself, then I think I would go mad."

"'Misery loves company', is that what you are saying to me?" Jake asked, the statement tickling his fancy so that his jaws lolled open in a slight grin.

"That's the old saw." Nancy agreed. "But like all the classics, it holds a grain of truth; sharing some of the burdens eases the weight on your shoulders, calms your mind, and has the bonus of having someone poke holes in your plans and have you see the illogic of them."

"What did you say your chosen field of study was?" Jake asked.

"Psychology." Nancy told him.

"Ah, thought so." Jake nodded.

He stayed quiet for a few minutes then stretched slightly, stirring the gold beneath him. "Well, I guess I'm on the couch, as it were." He said with a straight face. "But you are definitely missing the pen, paper and the soft chair, doctor."

"And the office with the picture of Sigmund Freud hanging on the wall", Nancy laughingly reminded him.

"Yes, and that too." Jake nodded.

He looked suddenly down on her shrewdly. "Let me guess, my sister put you up for this?"

Nancy shook her head quickly. "No...well, she did tell me that you felt, uneasy was her word to me, and thought I might check on you as I walked by on my way to bed."

The unspoken and never enforced curfew was eight o'clock, and it had to be drawing nigh to ten now.

"I see." Jake smiled. "Well, since you are being so loyal to my sister, I guess I can spare a minute or two before sleep overwhelms me."

"Thank you!" Nancy said quickly, listening intently.

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Jake quietly mused as they sat there, ordering the thoughts in his mind. Nancy remained as stone sitting nearby and Jake felt a moment of guilt and pity that she had to sit so

uncomfortably on the floor.

"Why don't you get yourself a stool or something?" He suggested, "and we can talk in more comfort, unless you wish to put this off until the morning?"

"No!" she said hurriedly. "I'll go and get a chair or something. We'll have to make do without the painting of Freud right now, but the chair I can certainly get!"

And she got up and strode to the hall; not running but not slowly either. Opening the great wooden doors she went inside and reappeared moments later with one of the carved chairs from the dining hall.

She placed it at the outer edge of the furthest gold pieces and sat expectantly.

The image of the cool, sympathetic, tiny woman playing psychologist to a great, golden dragon seemed so ludicrous that he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Nancy demanded suspiciously.

Jake was laughing too hard to answer. Under him the gold rattled and the roof quaked. The guards ran in alarmed, thinking a fight was happening and stood amazed, at which Jake laughed harder.

Mastering himself he dismissed the guards back to their posts.

"Thank you for that," Jake said after the guards had gone. "I don't think I've laughed so hard for a very long time."

"Well, that's something I suppose." Nancy said disgruntled. "But what was so funny?"

"Oh, just the thought of what this would look like to a stranger walking in." Jake told her with a cheeky grin. "To them, it would seem as if a field mouse had decided to become the psychologist to a lion."

He saw her roll her eyes and sigh. Then she smiled a little.

"Well, besides mocking me, was there much else on your mind."

Jake shook his head, feeling uncomfortable at sharing his own thoughts, even with a friend. He changed the subject.

"What is your take on the people?" he asked. "Here in the mountain, I mean."

Nancy blinked, caught off-guard.

"Well," she said slowly, thinking about her answer. "The leaving of the Mountain Host is hard, as you already guessed. Most understand helping friends, of course, but that doesn't make it easier, and still harder is knowing we are going to be fighting and not very far away with a second and, some whisper, greater army, with you and Serena both departing to lead that struggle. No one knows who is in charge in your absence, so all these matters are adding fuel to the various factions that..."

"What factions?" Jake interrupted intently.

"There's the Maidens of the White Lady, of course, the

Dragon Soldiers, the Inkers, who are starting to reform their individual gangs again, but they're too busy arguing with each other to be much threat to the rest of us right now..."

"What!" Jake interrupted again, stunned. "The gangs are back? But we told everyone to forget those old allegiances!"

"Some haven't or can't." Nancy said quietly. "Losing all they knew like that...some wanted normalcy again, or the familiar, and they knew gang life than anything else."

Jake felt a rage crawl up him that he'd never felt before crawl into his stomach and sit burning his belly. Smoke issued from his fanged mouth and, had he known it, his eyes glowed red.

Jake noticed Nancy quaking in terror and struggled to cool his temper.

"I'm sorry." He told her. "I hadn't meant to frighten you, but this is bad news." He growled, his eyes blazing again. "Gangs would be the death of us."

"Why?" Nancy said shakily.

Jake felt a moment of irritation that she couldn't see why, but then realized that she was afraid, and probably not thinking too well. He modulated his voice to a calmer version.

"Think for a moment; what did the gangs do back before all this craziness began? They were made up of dangerous people whose taste for violence was insatiable. Most of the "initiate" ceremonies I have heard about usually involve killing someone, whether it be a rival gang member or some innocent walking down the road. Then many were involved in all sorts of racketeering or extortion or anything else where they could use violence to turn a profit. Innocent people could be targeted and their lives ruined if they didn't comply! Murderers! Thieves! Gangers and Dealers! Curse them!" He grew heated again, his voice echoing down the mountain halls sending men and women scuttling behind closed doors, lest they stirred his wrath further, not knowing what had brought him to such a rage.

Nancy threw her hands over her ears to shut out the noise, looking at him with wide, terrified eyes. This time his rage was too great, and he could not calm himself. He wanted to go running through the mountain looking for any gang-member he could see and destroy them. Smoke curled from his nostrils and his mouth flickered with angry red light.

Abruptly a cooling, cleansing feeling doused his fire. He knew who had wrought the change and looked to the cavern entrance where Serena stood in unicorn form, shimmering in the dim light with star-like radiance.

Nancy's relief was palpable, and both of them turned back to her.

"Nancy, I'm sorry about frightening you." Josh said in a chastised tone, "Your news caught me by surprise and awoke in me an actual fear that we might have enemies within as well as without."

"I'm sorry." She said in a tiny voice. "I thought you'd

have known."

Jake shook his head. "Despite all appearances, I am not all-knowing or clairvoyant." He said dryly. "But I have kept you up longer than I should have. Please, go and rest. Serena and I have some matters to discuss now that are better left private."

With remarkable dignity, Nancy got up from the chair. Only the trembling hands as she straightened her robe betrayed her. When she went to grab the chair, Jake said "Leave it. Do not bother taking it with you, I may wish to speak to you again, but of better things, and maybe you can make me laugh again."

"It would be my pleasure." Nancy said hesitantly. She bowed to him and then Serena before scurrying through the door faster than a frightened mouse seeing its hole close by with a hungry cat on its heels.

'What were you thinking? You frightened her so badly with that anger and you had no right to.' Serena spoke furiously to him.

"I know, and I'm sorry." Jake sighed. "Really I am, but her news of the gangs reconstituting themselves...I wasn't expecting that."

'Well, what did you expect?' Serena asked him. 'Men have always found solace in what they know, even if it is wrong and evil.'

"Meaning women haven't?" Jake asked sarcastically.

'Of course they have, but that isn't the point. Look, maybe they are going to be a problem down the road, but for right now we have other business to attend to, and we don't have time to worry about the gangs getting back together. They will be dealt with in time.'

"That's the thing about such problems." Jake countered. "All too often they are put on the back burner because there's always something more important and immediate that needs to be done, and when we finally think we have time for it, we discover that the problem has entrenched itself and becomes impossible to root out."

'So what are you saying?' Serena asked. 'We can't go out and break down people's doors?; we are not the Gestapo.'

"Of course not." Jake said agreed. "But we can't let this become a larger problem, or it will cause trouble for the mountain down the road."

'Then we will have to make a choice.' Serena told him warningly. 'On what kind of rulers we want to become; are we to be dictators, demanding everyone bow to our whim alone, or are we to be someone who listens to the people and shows them the value of themselves and let them make their own choices for good or ill? It is not on our part, or ever should be, for us to rule them absolutely and become tyrants.'

"I know what you are saying, sister," Jake said quietly. "I really do, but we are all alone out here, this is all of humanity that remains. The mistakes of our past cannot be

repeated now or we will lose everything. I do not wish to become a tyrant, but we must think of the greater good in this. If we do not, then people will get hurt and maybe killed."

'What is it that you fear, brother?'

"Open rebellion." Jake told her softly. "Open rebellion and war. If the gangs come back, then their leaders will want power, the power over others and their own people that they craved back in the twenty-first century. This time, they may feel that they have the strength to realize those dreams, especially if you or I are hurt in the upcoming fight."

'They will think that regardless.' Serena told him, shaking her head and sending her mane flying in one bright motion.

"Sister—" Jake began.

'Silence, brother. Let me finish.' Serena said, her words gentle and soft-spoken. Jake stifled his reply and listened.

'We knew that such events might occur the day we accepted that we would be in charge of every survivor of mankind. Everyone agreed to pitch in and help, but they are still full of the time of which they are most familiar; the twentieth century and the freedoms they had there.'

"They have those freedoms even now." Jake said, frowning.

'Do they? They don't have the luxury of doing nothing and being paid for it.' Serena pointed out. 'We won't let them, and they know it.'

"The need..." Jake began.

'I know, and they know, but that isn't the point is it?' Serena asked. 'After all, they are still remembering the time when they walked as lords over the earth, when there was nothing that couldn't be done, couldn't be accomplished, and they could do whatever they wish with as much leisure time as they could want. Now that they don't, they want them back again.'

"Even if they were free of any leader, they couldn't have that, not and survive." Jake said in rebuttal.

'The smarter of them know this. It is those that think they are cleverer than they are who do not see past their wants and desires.'

"Then what do you suggest we do with such folk?" Jake said irritably. "Sister, I know you speak truthfully, and from the heart, but I still do not see your point in this rambling."

She sniffed. 'Then you are as blind as they are.' She said reproachfully. 'But very well, I shall speak plainer then so you can understand me; we cannot do anything now, but keep an eye on the situation and discourage it if it seems to be a problem. We cannot tell anyone who to befriend or who not to, not and still hold true to who we are. If some have different ideas about how things should happen or be run, then we must be wise enough to listen to their counsel and reason with them if we do not like the choice, or compromise if we are able.'

"It is the times we will not be able to do either that worry me." Jake muttered. "The gangs back in our time weren't

noted for their talking skills, just their gun arms."

'No weapon can hurt you.' Serena pointed out. 'You have less to worry about than any of us.'

"It isn't myself that I'm concerned about." Jake said.

'I know, but that is all that I can say at this time.' Serena turned back to the door.

'Good night brother, sleep well.'

"And you as well, Sis." Jake said fondly as he watched her shimmering tail disappear outside.

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Jake woke early the next day and found that the chair had been returned to the hall. He walked inside to where the tables sat laden with food, the remaining people gathered into silent groups. Though Jake tried to pay closer attention to who was sitting with whom, it proved fruitless; everyone was despondent over the leaving of their army, and actually seemed to pull together.

Maybe I am making more of a deal of this than I should, Jake mused as he settled at the high table. There he found his parents talking with Serena who'd turned human and sat queen like in the middle. To the right of her sat Shyla's mother, looking unsure of how she'd wound up there, and beyond her were Tom and Stacey and their families, and on the left past their own parents sat the families of Brian and Rachel while the couple stood nearby. Rachel seemed tired, and Jake pitied her, her pregnancy had become very obvious by now and she moved with extreme caution to keep from bumping into anything. She'd become so gravid that everyone wondered if she'd have twins. Without a touch from Serena they wouldn't know until the day came, but Rachel had stubbornly insisted on not knowing the child beforehand for reasons Jake didn't understand. He was content however in letting her do as she wanted, however, and said nothing.

Three maidens came and laid out a salad for the centaurs and Serena, as well as honey from wild hives that had come from the forest, dozens of fruits and vegetables, and pitchers of clear water from the springs. In front of Jake they placed a platter with a roasted deer, glazed with honey and spices from the forest.

They ate well and when the Maidens had whisked away the dishes the assembled began to get up and leave for the farms and forest while others went to the armories to gird themselves for the patrols to the borders and to send back those who'd watched them during the night.

Nacomi came in with the late watchers, her body tired but her eyes bright with interest as she came to the table and sat down. No sooner had she taken her place then a Maiden silently brought her a morsel of meat and a bowl of salad with a carved goblet of water.

Once she'd eaten and drunk, the maiden took the plate and

left, the Dining Hall becoming empty except for them.

"Well, I suppose we should ask first if there was anything to report on the night watches, though I daresay you would have said something if there had been."

Nacomi shook her head. "Yeah, there's been no word." She told Jake. "As you thought, if they're preparing for the assault, they are doing it underground where we can't see them."

"What of Mausi's people?" Jake asked. "Are they ready for the attack?"

"Well, unless you have more news of them than I do, then no." Nacomi said. "We haven't sent anyone out that way at all."

"Not even scouting missions?" Brian asked, frowning.

"No. We know the area is going to be positively stiff with goblins and demons around Mausi and Lana's camp, and since we are still maintaining the fiction that we do not exist, there is too much chance of our people being seen and reported back up their chain of command." Nacomi replied.

"Oh." Brian nodded. "That makes sense."

"I thought you were aware of that?" Jake frowned. "After all, it was your idea."

"Oh, was it?" Brian blinked. "I guess I forgot."

That didn't seem quite right to him, and Jake took a closer look at the centaur. For the first time he noted the sag of Brian's shoulders and the rings around his eyes, not to mention the dirt and dried foam in his handsome coat that Jake knew the normally fastidious centaur would never allow.

"Brain, have you been resting appropriately?" Jake asked accusingly.

The flash of guilt on his face was more than enough to answer that, but he stared steadily back.

"Of course I have, but there are many demands on my time and not enough hours in the day, it seems."

"There are enough hours to sleep." Jake told him firmly. "Do not become so far exhausted that you become useless to us, and to your wife."

Brian's mouth opened in hot retort, but his eyes turned at the last words and he closed his mouth without speaking. Rachel looked embarrassed and downtrodden, leaving Jake to suspect on some of Brian's demands.

'Never mind my brother's roughness.' Serena soothed. 'He is nearly as cranky as you, though I suspect he sleeps more. Now, tell us what you've accomplished.'

"Not as much as I would have liked." Brian grimaced. "We've managed to increase the length of every sword in the army when we sent them out, as well as fashion spears and shields along with their armor, and how we've managed to accomplish so much in so little time is literally astounding to me, but it's left no reserve to equip our forces. I can make some, but it will take time."

"Time that we do not have," Jake said. "We shall have to

make do. What about the older weapons that came with the mountain? Your templates, are they still usable?"

"Of course, I haven't destroyed them." Brian said in a wounded tone. "But it's a wrench, letting the patterns go, let me tell you. I wish we could have an appropriate testing lab here so I knew exactly what went into forging them; our stuff's pretty much pale imitations of their strength."

'It will improve with time.' Serena said. 'But for now, we have no choice. With the weapons on hand, what size force will we be able to muster?'

"About fifty." Brian told her in a grim voice. "And that is the absolute maximum. They won't be heavily armored either, but the textile industry that we've been working on for the side is starting to show some promise with that weird cotton-like bush in your forest? It's proving surprisingly resilient and easily dyed, I think we might be able to fashion some cloaks and things like the old Ghillie Suits snipers would wear, and that could help give our soldiers an edge, at least in ambush situations."

"That would be useful, especially with our hope of ambushing the ambushers." Jake rumbled. "The Brissons are going to have to face the initial assault on their own, but with the warnings we gave to Mausi and Lana, they should be able to resist the initial onslaught."

"Then we roll up the flanks of the enemy and drive right to their damn heart and tear it to shreds." Brian said quietly, in tones of grimmest satisfaction.

"Er, yes." Jake nodded. "Serena will be on hand to help us face off against the demons that come, and I will be providing areal support."

"I will be with the main force." Brian volunteered. Rachel stifled something that might have been a protest or denial. He frowned at her.

"It is only logical." He said. "With my mass, I and Roger can break a hole in the line that the others can use to push through."

"Fifty is poor numbers to cut your way to the heart." Jake rumbled. "And suicidal. I want as many of our people and you alive as possible at the end of the battle. You can go ahead with the charge, but aim it at where the engagement is hottest and cut through to where the Brissons look to be the worst stuck in. That is where they'll need the help, and I'll concentrate on the center."

"One is even worse odds than fifty." Brian pointed out.

"True, but you forget I'll be in the air; I'll not set down in the middle of an army of goblins and orcs." Jake said dryly. "Rather, I will use my fire breath to burn holes in the center and, hopefully, demoralize them."

"That will be good." Brian nodded. "And you will not need the added distraction of having to control your flames. Very well, I'll aim more for the front lines where our friends will

need the most help."

"Now, that leaves the matter of Lana." Jake said. "I understand now that she will have to be in this battle, but she cannot be there until the proper time to appear comes; when the Demon Lord takes to the field. According to Serena, it is not our part to slay him, but hers. We must ensure that she is alive to do so. Thoughts?"

"Well, I'd say summon her back to the mountain and have her lead the forces to their positions and help disguise them from her people."

"That...will be asking a lot of her." Jake rumbled. "We are asking her to hide an army from the eyes of her people close to their camp. She may not want to do that."

"She will definitely want to do that, but may not be able to." Brian said. "She is determined to be there for the fighting, and we do not know how long it will be before the goblins arrive. We do not have ways of tracking them."

"I could go into the tunnels that we find." Tom offered. "And wait for some distance down them until I catch sight of the forces coming for us, then fly back and let you know they are coming."

"That is a possibility, as you are small enough that, so long as you did not glow, you might escape being seen." Jake mused.

"That would be useful. Still, have we done any major searches in the area of the Camp?" Brian asked.

"We've done a couple of scouts, though most of our effort was in equipping our army for the London campaign." Jake explained. "Now we have a breathing space in which to affect better searches and arm our forces. Will we be able to march before the final week in October though, as that's when the date Grolbark told us we would have to beat."

"I think so." Brian said thoughtfully. "That's still several weeks off, and though we will be busy as beavers, I think we should be able to do the job in that amount of time. But I have another question, again going back to Lana. What of her training with the sword? She had some instruction before she had to return to her people, three days ago, and I'd heard she'd been doing well, but not as well as the others."

"I fear her skill lies more with the spear than the sword." Nacomi said heavily. "But the vision said she'd have to deal the final blow to the demon with a sword, so we've done what we can to prepare her. What about the sword though? What do we have on that?"

Brian cleared his throat. "I've been working on a design that I think will work for her, a one-and-a-half sword, but it will most likely be a two-handed for her. Still, the blade is of the lightest stuff I can make it out of and still have the hardness of tempered steel."

"Are you using some of the old tank armor?" Rachel asked.

"No, that's still in dragon ice, and most of the armor on tanks is only light steel over high explosives over heavy steel anyway." Brian explained. "And I don't even want to try and learn how to handle that type of explosives from any of the tank crews that made it to the mountain, assuming any are going to live after the upcoming battles. All of the soldiers that could be spared went with Volgelson, after all."

"I see." Jake mused. "That might not have been the wisest course; we might have need of the tanks someday, and we will need experienced crews to teach and train."

"Well, I don't see us having the fuel or the ability to use them for centuries, at least." Brian said dryly. "We're still having trouble catching up with medieval times. In the meantime, we are going to have to send a teacher to Lana somehow, someone who knows swordcraft and can train her so she's ready."

"Why don't I go?" Tom suggested. "I am small enough to evade suspicion at the camp, I have some ability with my magic sword (he spread his hands and a blue sword appeared briefly in midair), and can search for the tunnels in between the training and mark their locations for the follow-on forces."

Jake saw no dispute amongst the assembled except for Stacey, who looked concerned. Jake knew why, of course, and thought fast.

"Still, it would be better if you did not go alone." Jake mused. "You might run into problems, delays, something of that sort. Perhaps it would be wiser if we asked Stacey to go along with you if she would. That way, we are better assured of success in this."

Stacey nearly leaped out of her chair with the force of her approval. "I'll go!" she said eagerly. The others laughed, and then the talk began to turn to more of the mundane matters of stocks, farming requirements, and harvesting, patrol schedules and needed ore for the smithies.

"We have sufficient stockpiles left from the dwarves." Brian remarked. "But we will run out, all the sooner for as much as we are making. I've walked into one of the mines, and I think I've found iron ore in it, as well as some silver."

"How much, do you think?" Jake asked interestedly.

"Not much." He replied, "At least, not as far as I searched, but I'm no mineralogist or geologist that could tell you for certain what's in there."

"Hmm, and I don't think I've heard of one in the survivors." Jake said in disappointment.

"Well, perhaps Lana's people might have one." Stacey suggested. "After all, they must get iron and other metals for their arrowheads and spear points, not to mention their knives; they aren't stonework, but metal, so they might have some sort of metal-working capacity."

"That's puzzling." Nacomi admitted. "My people never used metal until you European folk arrived and brought them with you,

and still we didn't work it much even after we'd seen how useful it is. What we got we either bartered from or looted after battles or skirmishes."

"True, but think of it as more of a barbarian style," Jake suggested. "After all, the northern folk of Rome's day still wore hides and warm furs they'd taken from animals, and traded in jewelry and trinkets, but they had their own metalsmiths as well and made good blades, and often could hold their own against the feared Roman legions. What gave Rome the edge was their discipline and tactics, plus the idea of shield walls and a professional, standing army."

"Well, those were fine." Brian interrupted. "But we shouldn't forget that much of Rome's empire was built on intrigue, even in those areas they wanted to conquer. There were the people in what is now Spain, but was then called Ibile, and the Iberians, after an initial defeat and revolt, were able to overthrow the Romans and keep their lands free of Roman soldiers for quite a few years thanks to one of their best leaders, but when force of arms failed, the Romans bribed his friends to kill him, then killed the friends when they collected the payment, and marched in anyway, seizing Ibile in the end. Often whenever the Romans met with defeat, which was fairly frequent, they resorted to assassinations, bribery, and deceit to accomplish their ends."

"That's true, insofar as it goes." Jake commented, "But I really think..."

"It doesn't matter now." Serena interrupted. "We have much work to accomplish and debating ancient history, even by the standards of our time, will not help us. We must return to work as quickly as possible. Was there anything else that must be considered by this council?"

"Actually, yes." Jake said, ignoring his sister's warning glance. "I've recently become aware that the gangs of our time are starting to reform themselves in the mountain. I cannot say that I am pleased--"

"Yes, I'd wondered what had made you bellow like that last night." Brian commented.

"--And I'm sure you can all see my concern in this. We do not have time for politics and factions to form right now, not when we are embroiled in starting up what amounts to a colony and fighting a global war at the same time. We do not have the resources or the manpower for either task, and having gangs back only increases the aggravation and workload of our people."

"What can we do about it though?" Tom asked practically. "After all, they are going to be there, whether they have to hold meetings in the back of some cave or out in the open where we can keep an eye on them."

"Do you suggest bringing them to our very meetings?" Jake cried, aghast at the notion.

"Better the enemy you know than the ones you don't." Tom

pointed out.

Jake was silent, pondering the words, and when he spoke he was surprised to hear his tone mellow, despite the harshness in them.

"Tom, your words might be considered wise, by those that call themselves politicians and think they are wise enough to govern and rule; I do not think that is wise. A deed is a deed, and thought is thought, and to each of these, we must pay the price of them whether we do them or no. To form a gang again, with whom to make your neighbors tremble and give up their wealth to you, is--"

"The stupidest thing they can do." Rachel broke in. "For we will be on them far harder than any prison or justice system in the Old World, and they know it, or should by now. We made no bones about the fate of prisoners in our care with Grolbark, and your first encounter with those sad remnants was enough to convince anyone what their fate would be if they tried something. No, I don't think your fears are justified in this. At least for now; perhaps in the future, that might be the case."

'You see brother, you are being overprotective.' Serena urged. 'Yes, I think too that we will have to deal with this; but now is not the time to be setting policies and becoming, as you said, politicians. We must be generals and leaders first, and then we can worry about the other things assuming we survive the upcoming days.'

Jake could see in their eyes that they weren't interested in facing this problem now, and realized that he must give way.

"Very well, I will bow to this council," he grumbled. "But I think we have done wrong here in doing so."

'Only the future will tell.' Serena said sadly, 'But we must not become tyrants in our desire to do good. It is their choice, and they must live it.'

"Yes, it is the choice of each person." Jake agreed. "But their own choices must not affect others, or they will answer to me personally."

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