

Chapter 15
The Sound of War

Jake looked at the men and women assembling in the cavern. No smile could be seen, nor laughter heard, but fair and stern they took up their weapons and checked their armor; Brian's forges had worked until the blacksmiths had all but fallen off their feet with weariness, the forges' fires fed ceaselessly, the hammers never quiet in all the intervening days and nights since their meeting. Today would be October the twentieth in the old calendar; funny, how something he'd known all his life as the sole meterstick of his life was already ancient news and defunct in this new age of the world. Gavin had tried to teach him of the modern way of thinking, but Jake had politely refused. Oh, he'd listened; he did not doubt that he would meet the Brissons soon enough and would need to communicate with them on their terms, but to him, he would always use the Roman Calendar to tell time.

Perhaps, Serena has a point about staying with the familiar; Jake caught himself musing in a moment of introspection. If I am guilty of it as the others, perhaps I shouldn't judge them less harshly than myself.

Ah, a new voice whispered, But your 'old' ways are universal in the mountain, and would not cause the harm that they would.

He sighed, he knew deep down that it would make the difference in the end, but it didn't help him now.

Letting go of his muddled, half-vague fears and dull arguments, he focused on the soldiers.

Each of his men had a corslet of rings girded by a belt that held their swords and two daggers per man. On their back, underneath their cloaks, they bore an oversized quiver filled with as many arrows as could be given room. The heads were heavy chisel points designed to penetrate any armor that the goblins might wear, yet they would not be able to match the flesh damage as, say, a broadhead arrow. Covering their armor were cloaks woven by the maidens and what seamstresses could be found. Each had been covered in scraps of cloth fashioned into webbing and wrapped with branch and bush until each soldier looked like a tree sprite than a human girded for war.

At the far corner stood Brian clad as the men in a shirt of steel rings with a steel cap over his head. On one flank he had the broad dwarf shield now adorned with the curious devices Jake had seen on the soldiers marching with Volgelson--a white tree in front of a golden mountain. He'd meant to ask about that, but hadn't had time. There would be no time now.

Along with his shield, he had three long lances tied to his back and four smaller spears. On his right was his great sword Lightfang in its sheath, and on his back the longbow. On his

horse half he wore strong steel barding made for him by his worried blacksmiths. Towards his croup he wore a solid peytral adorned with rearing horses, covering the vulnerable chest and front legs. He now had a proper steel saddle for Roger, his rider, to sit in and fight with a low cantle to allow freedom of movement, from which hung plates of steel for the Flanchard which smoothly melded to the heavily adorned crupper. Jake had seen how touched Brian had been when the smiths had presented the set to him.

Rachel stood beside him, helping him adjust the last fits for his greaves which had the mountain and tree symbol on them. Her worried face peered anxiously up at him under her raven hair, seeking comfort. Brian cupped her chin and stole a kiss, before resuming his efforts to armor himself and aid his rider in getting into his lighter armor of chain mail and leather jerkin under a cloak of green.

Flashes of white near the edge of the hall turned his gaze to where Serena stood allowing herself to be dressed in her own armor. Their parents were doing most of the work, despite the Maiden's attempts to help. All too often they simply handed a piece of the plate armor to his mother who gently tied it in place, ensuring it was tight.

Serena's armor seemed plain and unadorned to Jake, and he suspected that she'd visited the smithies often to ensure that would be the case. It was, however, the brightest in the room, with silver flourishes added despite her protests. In style, it seemed similar to Brian's armor, though lighter for her stature, and given the crinet to protect her neck and a chanfron with a hole for her horn.

Feeling a tickling at his chest, he looked down at Nacomi finishing tying the saddle onto his back. It had bulging bags on either side filled with stones, arrows, spare bowstrings and two bows. She would be his only rider, but she didn't want to risk anything happening to her weapons that would preclude her from the fight. Jake hadn't wanted to take her along, fearing that his battles may go against a demon or two, or even one of their Demon Lords and anyone who rode his back would be in great danger; but Nacomi had insisted.

"I do not fear the danger." She'd declared to him in the hall after telling him her plan and he just as firmly rejecting it. "Besides, while your fire will be great, I can shoot targets with better precision."

"My flames..." he began hotly.

"Are fine for doing damage to lots of targets at once," Nacomi returned, "But what about if we have to support the front lines? You'll have to slow down or even land in order to control your flames, and you'll be vulnerable then. My arrows can hit targets on the pass and you'll never even have to slow down."

"And what if I have to face off against one of the Demons?" Jake countered. "I would be encumbered by the weight of the

saddle and fear for my rider, it would be better if I face him clean with no one else!"

"We will all face him regardless." Nacomi returned. "And if you don't want me on your back, then I will assuredly march with the army and face him on the ground, alone if I must!"

"Never!" Jake seethed.

"Then we will go together." Nacomi replied smugly, "And you can guard me if I am so important to you!"

Jake found himself caught flatfooted, and though he opened and closed his mouth twice no noise came out. His mind raced with trying to come up with arguments against her coming with the army at all, but he couldn't justify any of them; other women were marching with the army, she was single and unattached, and was one of their best marksmen with a bow and arrow plus had the experience of already shooting from his back.

"Fine." He'd told her sourly. "But on my back you will stay and you won't do anything stupid like actually shooting arrows at Demons; leave them to me, and me alone. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly." She'd assured him.

Jake hadn't really believed her then, and he still didn't know two weeks later. But what was done was done; he couldn't deny her coming with him despite his worry.

"How long do you think it will be?" Nacomi asked quietly as she worked to fill his saddlebags, two other Dragon Rangers helping.

"To march this army unseen fifty leagues to where the Brissons have set up their camp, to hide it so well that neither friend or foe will see it until it is time to strike, and to have it in fighting shape at the end of that time? I do not know." Jake said heavily. "At best guess? It will be a four-day journey before we come to Mausi and Lana's camp, which would be about October the Twenty-Fourth. After that? I don't know. That depends on the goblins and their schedule, but we know the attack is scheduled to take place at the end of October sometime, and we know that Tom and Stacey have been training Lana and managed to find seven tunnels."

"Has he booby trapped them?" Nacomi asked.

"Some." Jake told her. "We want to bottle them up if we can. So he has set traps in four of them, leaving just three exits to watch close to each other so we can support one another as possible. Mausi knows their locations and has let the elders know that she has found them. So far as we know, they are still holding scouts in them waiting for signs that the enemy is approaching."

"Will they be trapped in them?" Nacomi asked in alarm.

"There is always that possibility," Jake told her, "But we hope not. Tom is in control of the traps, and once the Brissons come running out they will be activated, the tunnels will collapse, and the enemy won't have the ability to use them anymore."

"Well, that's a relief at least." Nacomi checked the saddle one last time. Satisfied, she hopped back and smiled up at him.

"Well, now it's time for me to get ready to go." She said.

"Why is it always the woman who takes the longest to get dressed?" Jake asked mock aggrieved.

"Because we always have to get our men dressed before ourselves; they never get it right." Nacomi riposted.

Those in hearing burst out laughing, spreading as the tale was retold in the hall.

Feeling pleased with himself at lightening the general mood, Jake began to go over the logistical problems facing them in the march.

Thus occupied he came to with Nacomi's butterfly touch on his shoulder.

Looking at her, he could see that she'd been given a mail and leather jacket, on the shoulders were embossed gold dragons with silver eyes. On her back was a soft buckskin quiver filled with swan-fletched arrows while at her hip she carried three short spears, a small buckler with the symbol of a rearing dragon rampant and at her hip were two long knives with long handles. She'd painted her face with the warpaint of her people, and eagle feathers adorned her hair.

"Ready?" Jake asked when he'd looked his fill.

"Of course." Nacomi said saucily.

She climbed his proffered leg onto the saddle and strapped her legs to the saddle so she wouldn't fall off during high-speed maneuvers.

Seeing that all was ready in the hall, Jake stood up; instantly drawing every eye to him.

"It is time."

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Serena felt a pang as she left the comfortable eaves of the forest she so loved, stepping out into the gripping sands with their broad, featureless dunes carved by the wind. The morning dew still glistened on the golden sands, making them sparkle like mountains of diamonds, but Serena knew it wouldn't last. By the time the sun reached its zenith the dew would have long been gone and they would shimmer with the blistering heat.

Above her she could feel her brother pass overhead, invisible and slow, his keen eyes searching the desert for any sign of scouts that might espy their approach to the battlefield. Beside her walked Brian, his pack bulging with supplies, but he showed no weariness, even though Roger rode on his back with his own pack, harness, and weapons.

'Are you sure about having your armor on now?' Serena asked him concernedly. 'I mean, it will be some time before we reach the battlefield, and the sun will cook you in all that metal.'

"We do not know when battle will come." Brian responded. "After all, our forest may be watched by eyes that we cannot see

or do not yet understand. If that is the case, then we will be faced with ambushes, battles, or possibly magic and we will not have any idea of when or where that will be. Certainly I will not have time to don my armor then; so, for now, I shall wear it day and night until I return home." He shot her a glance under his heavy eyebrows. "You should do likewise." He remonstrated. "After all, you will be the primary target."

'Possibly.' Serena agreed. 'But I can do something you cannot.' And with that her horn shimmered, and she walked another step feeling the unaccustomed weight of the armor bear down on her.

Brian goggled, and she turned her head to look; the armor the blacksmiths had made for her had been strong, yet plain, as she'd desired it. She'd never really had time to wear it properly besides the fittings and had never summoned it. Magic had infused the steel now, and where once there'd been plain metal bright silver lines appeared. Runes were written in a strange, flowing script that Serena didn't recognize. She felt their power and assumed them to be spells of some sort. Even as she thought this, images came to her mind of the smiths at the mountains, muttering prayers of protection and hope even as they wrought the armor, and the Maidens too had unknowingly taken their thought in polishing the pieces. Yet it was the magic of her summoning that brought the prayers and thoughts forth into a tangible, finished piece.

Serena felt deeply touched at the effort that went into making this superb armor for herself and only wished everyone could have been equipped thusly.

"You're magic is greater than I thought." Brian said, staring at her.

'I think it is your smiths.' Serena replied. 'They are far more skilled than we dreamed of, in such a short time.' She continued sadly. 'I can't help but fear we are going to be using them up, burning them out with our demands for this war.'

"It would be thus whether we wish it or no." Brian reminded her. "The enemy would not listen to reason or treaties, even if we had tried. No, it is the only way we can be safe."

'Can we, can we be safe?' Serena asked. 'They've held this world in their terror for so long, can we ever overcome it by ourselves?'

"Not alone." Brian reminded her. "There's Mausi and Lana and Gavin and all their people as well. No, we don't stand alone, and they have just as much stake in this ancient war as we do. We might have slept on the job, as it were, but they haven't. They know better than anyone what it's like under the cruel yoke of the goblins."

No doubt he is right, and I know it in my heart, Serena mused, But I fear for everyone if the Demons decide to unite against us. They are many, and strong, and hold such advantages over us, that it will be a miracle if we just survive in this

war.

Ah, Another voice whispered, But you have seen miracles before, haven't you? You were changed into a Unicorn, and Jake into a dragon, and Tom and Stacy and Brian and Rachel, you've seen magic for good, as well as evil. There must be a balance, and we have to provide that balance.

Serena kept walking, thinking heavily as the army marched steadily behind her.

They camped for the night in the lee of a deserted stream, and Serena felt an inkling of sadness for the once babbling brook; even though she knew, somehow, that it hadn't flowed in hundreds of years.

They passed the night peacefully and resumed marching early the next morning. There wasn't much to see but more sand, and Jake, flying constant recon, told her he hadn't found any scouts. Her own magic told her that much, but a dread grew in her heart with every mile.

When they were but a day from the camp she felt a cold shiver. She lifted her head and scented the wind, trying to determine why her heart had gone so dark. There seemed to be nothing that could account for the sudden, almost tangible, increase of dread.

'We will camp here, one last time.' Serena announced to Brian, who dutifully passed her order along.

The army quickly set about pitching a cold, cheerless camp. No fires were lit, nor were the tents simply pitched on the ground, but instead placed in every depression or hole in the sand that could be found and partially buried in order to hide them from friendly and unfriendly eyes. Lots were cast for the first watch and the sentries slipped silently into the moonless, starless night.

Serena did not rest (though her Maidens had insisted on packing along a tent with the rest of the army's luggage, she had no intention of sleeping inside) but walked the perimeter of the camp in circles, anxious in her mind as she tried to sort out her feelings and concerns, conscious of the uneasy sleep of the soldiers in their tents.

I don't know what it is that makes me so uneasy. I can feel there is something here, something obvious, but I am missing it. She fretted.

She tried to cast her mind back, to remember when the last time she'd felt like this. For a moment, nothing came to her and she continued her eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth circuit before it came to her: the frantic Ride to the Lost Patrol.

I'd felt the evil in the sands then, setting its will against us to slow our response to our men, she realized. Could something like that be happening here?

She opened herself to feel the open air. There was a small thrum of magic in her veins, and she felt her guess to be correct, though it seemed to her different than last time.

It's less like trying to keep us out, but more keeping us in, she mused. I feel dread and despair, and I can't help but wonder what this is doing to the morale of our people, but it must be doubly worse for Mausí and those poor brissons, who have not an inkling of what is happening around them. By now they must be terrified to leave the safety of their tents, which is no doubt the enemy's plan.

Knowing the enemy's plan now, she began to move from tent to tent with all the noise of ghosts, passing unseen and unheard as she brushed each sleeping soldier with her horn. Each seemed to relax and slumber more peacefully when she finished.

Jake found her as she came out of the last tent and she looked up at the hulking golden brute of her brother.

"I felt bits of what you were working on." Jake remarked quietly, in a voice no louder than sliding pebbles. "What is going on?"

Serena told him what she'd deduced and the work she'd done to thwart it. When she'd finished Jake was nodding to himself.

"It makes perfect sense," He pointed out, "And would help them a lot in the coming fight. We must be ready to counter it. Can we do so without attracting notice?"

Serena hesitated, pondering. She'd done her best to disguise her work that evening (hopefully it had gone unnoticed) but she couldn't see a way of doing it for the tribes folk. True, she could instantly see the advantages if she could manage to pull it off; a collected, disciplined force versus a frightened, disorganized mob afraid to come out of their tents. The goblins would have a horrible battle with the likelihood of heavy casualties rather than an easy ambush. But the enemy would be likely watching the effect of the spells on the Brissons closely, and not on those on the periphery. Which she pointed out to Jake, as the dragon sat musing.

"How fast do you think you can move?" he asked. Her quietly. "You once turned into light back in the Forest of Cassandra when you escaped from the police; could you do the same in the camp? Become light that moves from point to point and work your magic on them undetected?"

'You ask so little.' Serena said dryly.

"You mean, you can't do it?" Jake asked.

'I didn't say that.' Serena snapped at him. 'What I meant was, I don't honestly know. How much magic is required to become light and teleport from one place to another? How about a place I've never seen or been? Is it invisible or easily detectable to those searching for us? I don't know, and I daren't find out, or all our efforts will be for nothing.'

Jake nodded his head slowly, his eyes unfocused as he thought hard.

Serena tried to see the problem from various angles, but she couldn't see how they could test without trying it first, and by then the ruse would be broken. *If only I had thought of*

this before Shyla left!

She felt a pang of loss at the thought of the witch; though they'd met as enemies, they'd become friends and practitioners of magic together, though very different in means as they'd discovered.

"What shall we do?" Jake asked. "Do you believe the will of the Brisson's is strong enough to withstand this creeping dread, and face the goblin's first push long enough for us to choose when and where to engage? Or will they crumble the moment the attackers are upon them?"

'I don't know, not without being there to look.' Serena replied. 'And I'm toying with the notion of doing so tonight, so I have a better idea of what dangers lie ahead and if we must change our plans. This is not something you can do.' She added, seeing him immediately eye the sky. 'You are adept at scouting, but I will need to get in close and feel the mood in the air, as it were, while you cannot from your height.'

Jake nodded. "Of course." He said, sounding slightly hurt that she hadn't trusted him to think of that at first. Serena snorted at his fake wounded routine; it reminded her of when they were both growing up and how they'd teased one another. Being the only children in the house and mostly outcasts at school, they'd been pretty much inseparable friends and mischief makers all throughout their lives.

"Well, I guess we have no choice." Jake sighed. "You'll have to go. Will you leave immediately?"

'Yes. I shouldn't be gone long.' Serena said. 'Just long enough to verify my guess and see if I can get in contact with Tom and Stacey.'

"Don't be seen." Jake cautioned. "If you do, then it's a thousand to one we'll be able to lay any sort of trap for our foes."

'Right.' Serena nodded.

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Her hooves thudded into the night, striking the sand aggressively and hurling herself forward; yet no sand particles dislodged or dust rose high into the sky to give her away. Her magic ensured that none would see her as she drew near the camp. To any that chanced to be looking her direction, it would seem a pale blur passed over the featureless dunes like a wisp in a strong wind.

In less than an hour she'd covered the thirty miles between their camp and the Brissons. She slowed to a canter, and then a walk as she crested the rise of a small hill and looked down upon the camp for the first time.

The Brissons had come to this new stretch after the discovery of tunnels in their old camp before they headed away to farm and fish. When they returned to their winter hunting grounds, they'd chosen a new location nestled in the center of three rounded hills that formed a gentle slope around the camp

except for the direction from which they'd come. There, across the entrance, stood a wall of hides and skins in panels six feet high by four across, double stacked and stretching from hill to hill with only one opening that could be opened and shut by means of a gate. Serena guessed that the wall wasn't there to keep enemies out, any more than the gentle hills were; most likely they served as windbreaks, sheltering the village from high winds and rough storms. To direct runoff, a long ditch circled the camp and went away past the wall for a little way; how far she couldn't say exactly, the wall blocked her sight.

On each hill she spotted three sentries (two on guard while the third slept a while before being changed out with one of the others), none of whom had apparently heard her silent approach.

I guess this should be convenient, she mused. The sentries were an excellent guide as to whether the dread that her forces had been feeling had infected the Brissons or not.

Silently, so the brissons staring out at the darkness would not see her, she slipped past them towards the camp, then approached the post from that angle, as it seemed to her that it would be the direction least guarded.

Luck was on her side, she realized, as she noiselessly stole to within a foot of the sleeping man without his companions noticing.

Bending her neck she touched the point of her horn to his head and felt the contact at once.

His thoughts were strange, nearly as strange as Lana's, and she struggled to make sense of the images that were flooding her mind, seeking those that were the most recent. Her practice had made it easier to sort through the memories, but it still remained maddeningly difficult, and it seemed forever before she found what she was searching for and withdrew.

Glancing at the sentries to see if they'd seen anything, she found them staring hard out into the night, and not paying attention to their companion. She quietly blessed her luck and slipped into the night, just in time to hear one say,

"Wake him up. It's time for him to take his turn."

"Who shall sleep now?" the other asked, his voice higher pitched and younger than the other.

"You get some sleep, Mingan, and I will continue the watch with Enkoodabao. I can't sleep lately anyway, with the Dolna scout on my mind."

"Me either." The other said before Serena passed from hearing.

So, they caught another scout and it has them worried. Serena pondered what it would mean as she hurried back to Jake.

'You were right.' She said when she came in sight of the camp. He looked up at her approach without surprise, curse his sharp dragon hearing.

"They are already suffering under this spell of terror." His tone was thoughtful as he pondered the ramifications.

'Yes, or at least the one I found asleep had been.' Serena told him. 'But their shamans have managed to keep the terror under control so they do not panic and the warriors can continue to function, but what happens when they are caught by surprise and the enemy comes out in such numbers, I do not know.'

"We shall have to prevent them from breaking right away." Jake ruminated, "Or panicking when we arrive and start shooting at us. They may be under such strain that our arrival may break them."

'Never fear on that account.' Serena assured him with a confidence she certainly didn't feel. 'I will cast the counter spell when all is ready, and our horns will blow, and the enemy will feel his own dread and terror bite him while the Mausi will help the Brisson's feel emboldened.'

"I fear we depend on them too much in this." He mused. "Not that they aren't willing, but I wonder if they have the clout they *think* they do."

'They are the daughters of the old chief, if not the new one.' Serena pointed out.

"That's right, the *old* chief. The new one might not appreciate their warnings, thinking it might be an attempt to supplant him."

Serena felt fresh surprise; she hadn't considered that the same politics that plagued man would be commonplace in Brisson society, but she should have known better. After all, she'd had such interesting conversations with Annabel and the others. The similarities to the world they'd lost were as striking as the differences, and once more she felt a time traveler out of place, wishing she could simply wave her horn and return to her own comfortable time before the demons, and Roland's shop and Melinda's.

Hearing the sound of approaching hooves, she saw Brian striding through the sand to them, his form bulked with armor; as he'd promised he hadn't taken it off at all during the march, yet he still looked fresh and ready to fight. Serena suspected Miles had been cleaning the armor for him so that it wouldn't look worn and disheveled.

Roger rode now on his back, dressed in his own armor and Serena wondered if it had been taken off at all either; it had the same polish as Brian's but it had been done with far better precision that she suspected Roger could master, judging from Brian's armor, and she knew it had to be Brian returning the favor.

"What is it?" He asked as he came up to them. "I felt something in my sleep, and I came out to find you two up here having private councils of war without me." He seemed angry and put out, very unlike Brian and she realized the dread had been working just as hard on him as the rest of them, except she hadn't touched her horn to him yet!.

'One moment!' she cried, springing forward to his surprise

and touching him on the heart with her horn. A moment only, but when she stepped back he looked better rested and refreshed. He looked strangely at them.

"Thank you, but what did you do?" he asked.

"The demons have cast a spell on this entire area to fill the heart with dread and set the will of the land against us," Jake explained as Serena felt the spells take their toll on her and she felt content to let him handle the talking.

"The men were feeling it tonight and Serena figured it out before we did and hurried to each and touched them and removed the spell so they could sleep better. Apparently, she forgot you--"

'Sorry about that.' Serena said apologetically, scudding a hoof in the sand. 'I had thought we would be immune to such magic.'

"Yes and no." Brian said thoughtfully. "When we were charging out to rescue the lost patrol, I had been feeling the dread then until you mentioned it, and then I simply didn't. It was almost as if being made aware of the magic allowed me to counteract it. It could be the same here as well."

'Well, we won't know for sure.' Serena said heavily. 'As for the Brissons, they have been suffering the effects longer than us, but their shamans have been able to keep everyone on their feet.'

Brian looked alarmed.

"Are the Shaman's going to be able to stand when the fight comes?" he asked. "This is supposed to be a magic-heavy fight, after all."

"Of course it is." Jake said in sudden realization. "They are not expecting much out of this attack--it's a diversion, a way for them to bleed the shamans of their strength in the upcoming fight and leaves the tribe defenseless."

Serena looked in dawning horror at the horizon where she knew the Brisson camp lay.

The cunning of the plan was immediately obvious to her, with chilling certainty she knew it was too late, the plan would already be at fruition.

'They are going to attack, tonight or tomorrow night.' She spoke with utter certainty, as her companions glanced at her in surprise.

"Well, then it's a good thing we are so close." Brian said at last. "We'll be there within a few hours today and can be in place by tonight. Then we shall have to see what the night brings."

'We shall see.' Serena said grimly. 'Tonight will be long, and the dawn far away.'

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