

Chapter 18

Aftermath

Serena caught Lana as she fell, balancing the Brisson with hardly more effort than if she'd picked up a sparrow.

"Ah, Lana," she crooned to the sleeping face, finally relaxed in sweet slumber. "You've done so much for all of us. Ah, you lived up to the prophecy so well. Sleep in peace."

Carrying the young girl back to the tents, she found one that wasn't damaged and placed the young girl on a cot inside. Once assured that no one would disturb her slumber, she went in search of Mausi.

The field of battle wasn't completely abandoned yet; here and there a handful of goblins found themselves trapped in the sunlight and unable to get back to the tunnels. In the shade of small tents or behind raised shields they fought on, dying to the last as the brissons exacted their vengeance.

Serena saw none of that, in fact, she didn't raise her spear but once, to put a mortally wounded goblin out of its misery. Her concern lay in finding her friend.

She found her crumpled and broken where she'd been tossed by the Demon. Serena turned into a unicorn and rushed to her side.

She is still alive! She thought in amazed relief.

She could barely feel her friend's life force it seemed so weak, but she would be able to save her.

Quickly she placed her horn on the worst of the wounds, her magic infusing new flesh and blood to replace the damaged and lost. The char fell off the fur, which grew straight and healthy once more, her breathing steadied and her heartbeat grew strong.

Serena lifted her head, shocked at how weary she was now, and surveyed the battlefield. She could feel *hundreds* that needed her help. She knew she could not save them all, and that thought woke a deep dread, yet she had to try.

"Over here!" she cried out, turning human. A pair of human searchers, wounded, came running up to her once they heard her cry.

"Quickly, take her to the twelfth tent in the third unburned circle, nearest the center." She instructed. "That's where her sister lies. Let them sleep together until morning."

"Yes, milady." The men said respectfully.

As they left with their burden, Serena became a unicorn once more. Running to and fro on the battlefield, she healed as many of the wounded as she could. Occasionally she would come across a Brisson shaman, murmuring entreaties to their gods or rubbing a poultice on some wound, and she would linger just long enough to see that her help wasn't needed before flitting to the next body as quick as lighting or quicker.

Jake landed nearby, she saw, but there wasn't anything to

say to each other yet, there remained so much work left to do. Jake realized that he would be no help and settled for aiding those collecting the goblin dead for burning. Knowing him he would no doubt also help with that chore as well.

Serena paused over what seemed her thousandth case, though she knew intellectually there couldn't have been that many people in the fighting here; at least, not if you discounted the goblins.

Then her heart stopped: it wasn't an adult warrior that huddled on the blanket with her knees drawn to her chest with her eyes closed, her mom looking up from the unconscious form at the stranger that stood above them both.

Serena did not turn human or lay her horn on the brisson to tell her what she was going to do. Looking at the child she knew she had no time: the young girl had been slashed from her shoulder to her thigh from what appeared to be a casual stroke of a sword as if the child had been batted aside in the rush of battle.

These creatures didn't even try to avoid the children, she thought with a surge of anger, not even when they weren't interested in them! They cut through them or worse, saw them as an obstacle to cast aside like a chair or bundle of sticks!

Snorting in indignation, she placed her horn on the cut and watched it heal, but slowly: her horn was fighting a stubborn poison as well as the cut. Serena knew that some of the goblin blades had been slathered in a vicious poison that carried some magical property to it, making it difficult to treat. Already her reserves were nearly exhausted, but she wouldn't give up! Not now.

Slowly the wound closed on the child, her color returning.

Serena left off with a sigh: the girl would survive.

"Nevya!" the mother cradled her daughter unbelievably. Two violet eyes filled with tears looked up in appreciation at Serena who tiredly dipped her horn in mute acknowledgment.

A sharp wail to her left interrupted whatever the mother had been about to say. Another healer was getting wearily to his feet, his face a mask of grim misery as the mother in front of him clutched the infant body of her son.

Serena rushed over, but already she could tell it was too late: the babe's face hung slack with jaws agape, a tiny mouth that would never again give voice and cry out with joy or hunger.

Serena felt something slide down her cheeks, and soft tinkles sounded on the earth. The healer gasped in astonishment as he beheld perfect crystals falling from the unicorn's eyes.

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They reconvened that evening, tired and footsore from their efforts. None of them had slept for the past twenty-four hours, fought a major battle, and spent the entire day healing the wounded. Serena, in particular, felt the exhaustion sharply;

her head hung nearly down to her feet and her knees trembled.

"Well, we've made it." Brian commented.

"What are our losses?" Jake asked. He sounded subdued, and Serena could imagine why.

"We're down to six effectives and five wounded, most seriously." Brian said quietly.

Jake flinched.

"There's nothing you could have done, Jake." Brian told him earnestly. "That arrow might have struck her any time, even had she been at the mountain. They are aware of us now, and you can bet they will be looking high and low for our home. It will only be a matter of time before they find us."

"No. Had I made her stay at the mountain, she'd be completely safe right now." Jake said miserably.

'Make her stay?' Serena snorted in anger at her brother.

'She never would have gone for that and you know it! She would have followed in the fighters. Besides, she is her own woman and doesn't have to follow your orders!'

Jake looked forlorn.

"I would have begged her to stay." He said sadly.

'She still would have come.' Serena told him earnestly.

'She may have worn a disguise, but she would have been here.'

"Is there nothing you can do?" He asked.

Serena vividly remembered her last attempt to save Nacomi's life: the curious black-fletched arrow with red tips had vanished when she touched it with her horn, but the angry red and green wound refused to answer her healing power, no matter how hard she tried. Again and again she expended precious energy into her body but to no avail. What was worse, she lost two soldiers she could easily have saved.

'There is nothing.' Serena admitted.

"I see." Jake said quietly. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

'Be with her now.' Serena told him. 'That is all any of us can do now.'

"What of the Brissons?" Brian asked.

'Everyone is too exhausted to deny our help now.' Serena told him.

'That will change later, but right now all of them are in a healing sleep, recovering from the battle and the month-long assault on their fears.'

"A month!" Brian's eyebrows shot up to his shaggy hairline. "They've been under siege a lot longer than I realized."

'Yes, it is amazing they have any sanity left. Those monsters have much to answer for.' Serena said bitterly.

"Yes, well. They have survived, and that is what is important here." Brian said uncomfortably after her venomous words. "Now we must decide what to do next."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"I mean that right now our friends are comfortably asleep

and our enemies have been routed so completely I doubt they will come back. We could easily leave a small, stealthy guard and take our dead and wounded back to the mountain. If we stay, we will have to make a treaty or agreement that may not be to our liking."

Everyone pondered his words carefully.

He has a point. She conceded. We can't afford to be placed in any sort of cooperative agreement: We simply do not have the manpower to help if the Brissons decide to go on the offensive. Not to mention what else they might demand of us!

She wondered what Jake thought, but before she could ask, Brian continued.

"There is another factor as well: There are only three of us; and while two are the de facto rulers of the Mountain and the Council, we should really have everyone present when we make such political decisions."

That brought her up short.

'But... but... I'm not... I mean we're not...' She spluttered.

"You and Jake rule us." Brian Said firmly. "Everyone knows it, and so do you. Pretending otherwise is stupid." A trace of irritation showed in his voice.

Serena scudded a hoof, overwhelmed with shame.

'I'm sorry, Brian.' She apologized. 'I know I should have accepted it by now, but it's hard, you know? It wasn't that long ago we were college kids struggling through our classes.'

"Yeah, three or four million years ago." Brian jabbed.

'Point.' Serena said fondly. She couldn't grin, horse lips just weren't made for that, but it didn't matter. Brian got her intent anyway.

"You raise good points." Jake said unsmilingly-he had a distracted melancholy air about him. "We cannot bind ourselves to agreements, especially now with so many lost here and no way of knowing how Volgelson and Shyla have done. So, where does that leave us?"

"With bowing out as gracefully as possible from people who see us as saviors from the demons and their pets, or making an escape now while they are asleep." Brian surmised.

'What about Lana and Maui?' Serena asked. 'The tribe knows that we've had contact with them in the past, they may try and force them to tell how they know us and where we can be found. That will leave them in an uncomfortable bind, between their oath and the love of their people. We should not force them into that predicament.'

The others fell silent.

'Let me stay.' Serena suggested 'I can explain why we can not join them right now, what are think their best course of action will be, and outrun any pursuit if necessary.' She pointed out. 'In the meantime-'

She found herself interrupted by the sight of the soldier

she'd stationed to watch Nacomi erupting from the tents. He was running flat out, a tiny part of her mind noted with dread.

She did not wait for him to get there or to speak: she lunged into light (a mistake, a tiny portion of her mind noted, as the magic drained further from her but she needed the speed!) and sped to Nacomi's tent, turning back into a Unicorn when she got there.

Nacomi lay on a mattress of furs with several blankets on top of her to ward off the chill. Her eyes twitched feverishly under their lids while her skin had a gray pallor. Her long dark hair lay tangled and knotted on her pillow, no doubt from the tossing of her head.

Serena lowered the point of her horn to Nacomi's brow, hoping to at least cool the fever. Her power flowed into the unconscious woman and did nothing.

Serena nearly uttered a curse against the archer who used red-tipped arrows: She'd come across only twelve such arrows, all of them but one fatal despite all she could do, and it looked like it would soon be a complete dozen to the archer's credit. The only thing keeping her from doing so was her unicorn nature, telling her that disaster would befall if she did so and truly meant it.

The sound of wings and the tremble in the ground told her Jake had elected the fastest way as well.

The flaps pushed in, then slid along his cheekbones his huge head taking up the entire door.

'Jake, I'm so sorry.' Serena whispered to his mind. 'The poison, it resists me even now. I can't ... there's nothing...'

She fell silent, crystal tears of frustration and helplessness landing at her feet.

Jake's head bowed until his snout nearly touched the dirt. He blinked his eyes rapidly as he gazed at the woman he loved drawing her last breaths.

"My love." his voice harsh and crow-like.

"My love, my heart." he repeated softly over and over Serena wondered if he even knew he was speaking.

She turned to the tent wall, wondering how to leave and give him privacy when he said, "I will not let you die, not while I live!"

She turned to him in horror, seeing the determined look in his eye. His golden hide began to glow, a sign that he was using Magic.

"Our hearts beat together; Our love is intertwined; Let the love within me; Save this heart that is mine!"

A golden thread snapped out from his chest and struck Nacomi in the heart, the blankets flying into the corner of the tipi.

The tipi itself tore free of its mountings and flew away, landing on the hill in a crumpled heap. The wind which had hurled it not even disturbing the surrounding tipis.

Serena grew goggle-eyed as Nacomi rose angel-like, arms akimbo and her hair cascading down her back.

She opened her eyes and looked calmly at him like they were sitting at the dinner table for breakfast.

"Why are you doing this?" She asked

"Because I love you." Jake answered. "I will not live without you. Say that you love me too!"

"I always have." She smiled.

With those words, her skin darkened to a violet shade and became scaly. Jake groaned and Nacomi gasped; the thread connecting them pulsed, a bulge appeared on Jake's side and passed along the thread until it reached Nacomi's chest where it vanished.

I think... I think Jake's given part of his heart to her!

Serena felt like the untutored rube at a magic show than a powerful practitioner in the Art.

She watched in stunned disbelief as Nacomi's limbs lengthened and two more sprang from her back, her eyes changed shape and hue, and along her spine small plates appeared. Horns appeared and grew around her eyes and along her rapidly lengthening jaw.

The others gathered now to watch, the humans and the centaur, as Nacomi became a young dragon, about a fourth of Jake's size, standing on prancing limbs. There was an elegance and grace about her, Serena noted, like a thoroughbred compared to a draft. Serena wondered if that was a normal difference between the male and female dragons.

She's about the right size for Jake when he came about the first time. She mused in some distant corner of her mind.

Everyone else simply stood in awe as Nacomi spread her fresh wings and began to launch into the sky.

Jake followed, though slower than he normally would have done, and Serena noted with alarm that his eyes had gone listless and dull.

He's used up too much magic, or part of his organs have been given to Nacomi! He's got to take it easy, or he could kill himself! Serena realized

'Jake! Take it easy!' she commanded silently to him, thankful their close connection gave them the ability to communicate further than the others. She told him what she'd surmised.

"Then what should we do?" Nacomi called down, hovering concernedly over Jake who'd returned to earth and stood panting heavily, drool falling from his jaws.

'He needs to rest.' Serena commanded. 'He's expended far too much...'

"No." Jake managed, looking up at them. "Brian is right. The sleep you've laid on the Brissons will not last, and we do not have the ability to strike a bargain that is favorable to us. The best thing we can do now is withdraw and leave you

behind sis to protect Lana and Mausi. Say we had urgent business to attend to and that we returned home, then come after us. We will bring our dead with us." He added firmly.

The remaining soldiers nodded and raced away to gather the blanket-wrapped bodies of their comrades. They would be placed on a cart and rolled behind Ja--the dragons now.

'I guess if that is our only solution.' Serena grumbled.

"For now, it is. Until we can gather the full council again, if we can, we shouldn't make agreements that will decide the course of our dealings with these people." Jake said panting. "Besides, none of us, even the Brissons, are in any shape to conduct any sort of negotiation. We should try and arrange any future meetings through Mausi and Lana."

Serena thought a moment, then realized that it would be perfect, their friends would be fine ambassadors to the Mountain, as people already trusted them, and they would be welcomed there at any time.

'Alright, we'll play it that way.' Serena said, much more eagerly this time.

"Good. We should get going." Jake grimaced. "Or we will get caught before we could make it back home. We need to make sure that the mountain is safe."

'I will meet you there.' Serena promised.

"Very good." Jake nodded.

He turned to leave, taking one step, wobbled, then took another before he fell to the ground with a heavy *whud*.

"Jake!" Everyone cried.

Serena was at his side in an instant, touching her horn to his hide and scolding him roundly.

'You shouldn't have pushed it, it was too much for you! The magic you used, it gave up so much! It was dangerous...'

She continued in vein for some time, as her magic soon assured her that she didn't have to worry about him dying, except that he was terribly weak and exhausted.

'Your plan will have to change.' Serena said grimly to Brian who looked unhappy. 'Jake isn't going to be going anywhere for a while AND THAT IS MY ORDER, BROTHER!' she said sharply before Jake could open his mouth to protest.

He looked sulky, or as sulky as a dragon could at any rate. But he didn't argue, and Serena sighed, she'd have hated to have pushed things; he could be so stubborn!

Turning away from her brother, she looked at Nacomi.

'You'll have to stay as well.' She told her. 'You're newborn, as it were, and it's likely you will be as weak as he is.'

"All right." Nacomi said worriedly, looking again at Jake.

He simply stared at her with one great eye, then shrugged and put his head down to sleep.

Brian looked about to open his mouth until Serena shushed him.

Laying her horn on his shoulder she spoke quickly to him, soothing his troubled mind.

'Jake and Nacomi will follow as quickly as they can. Lead the soldiers home yourself; do not burden yourselves with the dead. We shall bear them ourselves.

When Jake and Nacomi are strong, we will follow, and I will bring Mausi and Lana with us. In the meantime, set up a watch on our borders as far as you dare and keep watch for Volgelson and Shyla. It is hopeful that they were victorious in their fight as well, but we don't know how long ago they fought or if they've seen battle yet.'

"We can only hope that they've made it." Brian agreed.

He seemed to focus on something in the unseen distance. Serena wondered if it was Shyla and Volgelson he sought or Rachel.

After all, it isn't surprising that his thoughts would be with her; They are having a baby together after all.

Serena would have smiled if she could have.

'Go,' She urged. 'Keep the Mountain safe. We will not be far behind you.'

"I don't see any reason for you to linger." Brian grunted. "Beside the reasons that I stated before, there is little danger of the goblins returning to attack anytime soon. They will have to reorganize, resupply, rearm, if at all possible."

'Do you see them as disorganized right now?' Serena asked curiously.

"Yes. The number of dead alone would seriously hamper their army organization, but losing their leader as well? There is likely to be some infighting amongst the more powerful remaining goblins at the very least as to who is going to rule in his stead." Brian said, a grim satisfaction on his face.

Serena believed he might be right.

'We will be home as soon as we can.' She promised. 'We'll bring Mausi and Lana with us, and I suppose we must set some sort of date for the eventual meetings that will take place between us, but I don't know, what do you suppose is appropriate for such things?'

Brian shrugged. "How should I know? I was more concerned with making weapons and armor for a long time than looking at diplomacy books." He said bluntly. "But I will see about doing some research when I get back about it."

'Use Mulan.' Serena urged, thinking. 'She is the daughter of a former politician, and might have some insight.'

"Ah yes, the Maiden." Brian nodded. "Her father went with the army, didn't he?"

'Yes, if he's even still alive.' Serena nodded. 'I really wish I could go to my pool now and see what is happening, but I'm afraid we'll have to remain in the dark for some time yet.'

"It's strange, isn't it?" Brian commented.

'What?' Serena asked, not really listening anymore as she

ran through a mental checklist of patients that she could look in on now that the crisis was over and she didn't look like fading off into the night.

"How we used to take instant news for granted. It seemed that whenever somebody sneezed in Pasadena or Rome we would know it in seconds thanks to all those messaging systems and the like. Now we still have the ability to gather news from far away, but only in one place in the entire world, and it is limited to only one user. There must be a better way of getting news." Brian frowned.

Serena shrugged uneasily. 'I guess you have a point. If it concerns you, I suggest talking with Stacey, she might be able to get news from the trees about what is happening. I can speak with the animals and gather reports that way, and of course Jake can do the same with many of the beasts as well...I wonder if Nacomí can too?' she mused. 'Well, that is a question for another time. There is still much to do here, and we've stood idle long enough. Go! Gather your retinue and depart. Leave me to my work!'

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