

Chapter 19

Leavetakings

Jake felt a slight twinge in his wing as he moved it carefully under Serena's instruction. He unfurled it, bent it, waved it a little in the air, and even knocked over a small post for her as everyone watched.

In the five days since the battle, the camp had become a humming hive of activity. Warriors patrolled the surrounding areas searching for enemy goblins; blacksmiths and weapon-makers worked their craft till they dropped of exhaustion, seeking to replace or repair those lost in battle, the women of the tribe went about their business in the open-air market or out in the wilderness gathering what food they could find. It all seemed so different then when they'd come across it earlier in the week; people sang snatches of happy songs and children laughed and played in the streets between the tents, cheerful voices rang out frequently and music from instruments added their beautiful notes to the joyful medley.

"How is that feeling?" his sister asked. She was human, as she'd been ever since the Brissons had woken from their slumber. Her dress seemed unnaturally clean and her locks were freshly brushed. On her temple rested a delicate crown of woven silver shone clear and bright.

"I'm fine sister." Jake assured her. "The weakness has passed, and I think I am beginning to recover."

"That much is obvious, though I don't think you should push matters too far. After all, what does any of us truly know of the magic you performed? We are lucky that the effort didn't kill you."

"Actually," Jake began, but the chief of the tribe approached them from the tents; he being so large that no tent would possibly hold him, though the tribe had contrived to cover him in whatever blankets they could spare while he slumbered. He hadn't really needed such things, but he'd been unable to refuse.

Serena immediately turned to greet them, remote yet in control.

"Greetings, Chief Barknaluk." She intoned. "I am pleased to see you healing well."

"Well enough." Mausi translated. "The goblin's blade did not bite deep, and our medicine woman was able to wash and bind the wound well." He patted his leg. "This shall bear me many hunts and journeys still." He added proudly.

"And that brings us to another matter, great Chief." Serena said diplomatically, "My brother is healing well, enough that we believe it has come time to make our farewells."

"Already?!" Lana blurted in dismay.

Jake saw Serena turn to survey the young woman who stood

nervously next to her sister. So far as Jake knew, she hadn't let her out of her sight, as if afraid that her recovery would be but a dream.

Jake cleared his throat before Serena could speak.

"We have already been gone overlong from our own lands." He rumbled. "We must return as soon as possible, in case the goblins have found our home and return for revenge while we are still...not there." He changed his words before he said something that might offend them.

"Then we will come with you and fight them." The chief said firmly. Jake had no trouble speaking his language, after all, he was a dragon!

"That would not be wise." He said. "To leave with a large group of warriors now would invite further attack against your people; not one of yours can be spared to help us."

"But none of your people could be spared either," Mausi argued. "Yet you came anyway."

"Yes, we did." Jake nodded. "But then we *knew* the goblins were going to attack, and we had knowledge of the general timing, as you well know. In this, we are going with our fears, not with any concrete evidence of attack."

"That does not make the likelihood any less." Mausi said stubbornly.

"No, but you cannot remain with us." Jake pointed out gently. "If the attack does not come, how long will you wait? Your people must have their warriors to guard them, and we...have methods of our own." He told them. "Any army that comes within our home shall face a fury such this world has not seen for millennia."

"Eventually, they would win through." Serena said with gentle conviction. "That is why secrecy is so important to us right now. Perhaps someday that will change, but not now."

The Brissons looked ready to argue, and Jake suppressed a sigh. His instincts told him they were very proud and would not be easily swayed from helping those who'd helped them. He needed a compromise.

"What if we accepted a representative of your people?" he asked. "One of you could come with us, under oath not to reveal our home, and thus if any fight breaks out, your people will be there to help us?"

Serena smiled while Barknaluk looked thoughtful.

"And who did you have in mind for this great task, brother?" she asked him.

"Mausi and Lana are both excellent choices." He rumbled. "They have been with us in the past and we can trust their word to remain inviolate."

Lana and Mausi both looked at each other, and then at the chief while he studied them behind opaque eyes.

Jake could tell the chief was not happy with either of them, likely for not telling him about the Mountain Folk, as

they were called now, sooner; sorcery or no sorcery!

Jake remained silent; he could do nothing to influence the chief's choices and still remain on friendly terms, and he needed them to be on friendly terms if they were going to become allies in the future.

And it's not like they won't figure out where our home is eventually. He thought. After all, how many mountains in the desert have sprung forests old enough to have been there generations out of the very sand itself? Still, so far as I know, it hasn't been confirmed yet with scouts, and likely they think our home is further west towards that mountain chain we get our water from.

He was shaken from his musings by Serena's gentle touch on his flank. He looked at her questioningly and saw that she was looking at him intently.

'Brother, we have to have the tribes unite against this menace.' She told him in their contact. 'If they do not join, then the goblins will pick them off one by one, seeking to stop any alliance with us.'

Jake agreed, but he wasn't sure they should have any bearing on those negotiations. They were outsiders after all. Still...

"Chief Barknaluk," All eyes swiveled to Serena.

"I know that you have much on your mind, but that does not mean we should spare a thought from the future." She came forward to stand in the center of the circle, her arms spread outward in a pleading manner.

"All of us here know the true scope of the threat; the goblins have begun uniting against us, seeking to bring our destruction. Now that they have been defeated, they will be doubly eager to bring their full force to bear to crush us before we are ready."

"What do you suggest we do?" The chief asked curiously. Mausi translated.

"Seek alliances." She urged. "We are too weak to stand with you." She said warningly before he could speak, "But you do not have to stand alone. You speak of the Fourteen Tribes, some call it the Fourteen Nations. Bring them together, force a meeting and demand they unite as one before you are all killed. Across the sea there are other allies, whose ships and weapons can aid you; make treaties with them and ask for oaths of friendship. They will help you as well."

"How can you be sure?" he demanded.

"They are Gavin and Annabel and Matcha's people." She told him. "And more than that, we have aided them greatly. Should they still live, they will be more than welcoming of friends."

There was a quiet murmuring: the assembled looked impressed.

The chief considered.

"Do not make rash judgments." Jake advised. "There is still

some time before us, but do not cast the matter from your mind."

"We shall return when we can." Serena added. "But for now, we must bid farewell."

She embraced Mause and Lana, whispering in Lana's ear. Not even Jake could hear what she said, but Lana brightened considerably and seemed much improved when she stood up.

The tribe lined up to wave farewell; the women and children cheering while warriors shook spears triumphantly or capered where they stood.

Jake felt quite embarrassed by it all and, taking quickly to the wing, began making his way into the sky, circling the camp once. Halfway in his loop he cut loose with a mighty roar, hearing a second join in. Nacomi soared a mere hundred feet above him, her eyes sparkling in the sunlight.

"This is amazing!" she gushed.

Jake grinned at her enthusiasm, adjusting his trim to quickly meet her.

"I'm glad you like it." He told her more normally, "But we had best be getting back home. Neither of us should be overdoing it today."

"I can't imagine overdoing it!" she said instantly. "It feels like I can fly forever and ever!"

Jake chuckled.

"I know, but we should still get back. Go invisible so we don't attract unfriendly eyes and follow me back."

"Invisible. Right." She hesitated. "Um, how do I do that?"

"Your dragon body knows how!" Jake called back. "Just let it follow my example!"

He faded out, his scales rippling just once in the light.

He watched her closely, hoping against hope she could figure it out. He hadn't been trying to be cryptic; he really didn't know how he turned invisible, it was just something his body did.

Nacomi remained in midair for long moments, her eyes clouded in thought, then slowly she began to fade, her brilliant scales fading into the background around her until at last, she seemed to vanish to all eyes but Jake's. He could only dimly see her, it was true, but he thought he could see a rough outline moving through the air, like an edge where the eye detected movement but couldn't see what was actually there.

"You did it!" he said.

"Thanks! I don't know how!" her voice came from midair, like he was wearing headphones.

"Confusing, isn't it?" Jake smiled. "Don't worry, I never know how I do half the stuff I do! It just comes instinctively."

"I think I can see you, just there to my right." Her voice sounded nervous, he thought.

"Yep, that's me. And you appear to be keeping station about a hundred feet off to my left." Jake said. "That's a good distance too! Just keep that and we'll make it back to the

mountain!"

"All right." She sighed. "I'll follow you."

Jake glanced down and saw Serena racing on foot, into the desert, angling a little north of their destination and he knew she was doing it simply to throw off any attempt of pursuit from their friends; soon she would head straight as an arrow home, the sand swallowing her footprints behind her.

Their dead he had placed inside his statue that Serena had thoughtfully fetched for him the other night. He would bring them out when they made it to the forest, and they would rest in honor with the others who'd fallen since their awakening.

Soaring on a hot, dry wind he left the village with their friends far behind them, and in the distance he fancied he could see home just beginning to appear in the distance.

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