

Chapter 20

Unexpected Meetings

Shyla felt the heat of the desert sunrise and stirred from sleep. She got out of her blankets and struggled towards the small bag that held the last remaining toiletries she owned in the world. Her small hairbrush, threadbare from hard use, passed quickly through her long hair. She fingered the ends with each pass, amazed anew at the healing powers of the spell; not even a split end remained of her fight with the demon...what, a month, two months ago? She tried to think, but the answer just didn't come to her. Whatever it was had been lost in the long, hard marches and all-too-short nights of rest, camping in cramped, out-of-the-way places where unfriendly eyes might not be able to spy them.

She put down her brush and carefully wiped her face with her threadbare rag; she wasn't sure she accomplished much past rearranging the dirt on her face, but it made her feel more human at least.

Somewhat refreshed, she peered out the crack in her tent, seeing the sun rise in the sky. It wouldn't be long, she knew, before the army stirred itself for the next march.

Stepping out of her tent her gaze automatically went to the small dune that overshadowed their camp; behind its crest were five spears planted in the ground; a marker that showed five goblin scouts had been intercepted and killed. She breathed a sigh of relief at no flags. She knew that Volgelson had arranged two colors, red and black. Red would have meant a guard killed in the night while black told of a scout escaping into the desert, which would give their course, composition, and the fact that most were human to the enemy. Volgelson and Shyla both knew that word of the human army that had defeated the attack on London would quickly spread, but both of them hoped that they could slip back into the forest before word made it back this far.

Shyla automatically checked to make sure the cloth around her eyes was secure before she started breaking down her tent. She knew her eyes made people nervous, (and she couldn't blame them!) but they respected her too much to come out and say so.

Stowing her tent, she checked the position and contents of her pack, wishing briefly they had more food, but their raids and forays in the goblin resupply caverns were necessarily limited by their desire to remain unnoticed and not point the way back to their home.

Asbiorn came up to her before she'd finished and she nodded to him, noting again how beautiful his aura looked; brown and placid with undercurrents of fiery gold. She couldn't help but wonder what Serena's would look like, or Jake's.

"How are you doing today, Shyla?" Asbiorn asked in concern.

"I'm fine, As." She laughed. "Seriously, whatever I ate yesterday passed before we made camp."

"Dehydration isn't something to laugh at, especially on long marches." He told her seriously.

"I know, I know." She comforted, patting his arm. "I've drunk all that water you made me take, though you shouldn't have taken so much from yourself!"

"I can easily make up the difference later." He said unconcernedly. "You are the one who is sick."

"Not anymore." She told him firmly. "So don't think of forcing more water on me today, I won't take it. You'll have to drink it or give it to someone else."

"We shouldn't have to ration in a couple of days." He reminded her. "The mountain will soon be in sight and we should see the eaves of the forest not long after that."

"Thank God." She said sincerely. "What do you think we'll find?" she asked the question pressing on everyone's mind.

"So far we have no idea." He said gently. "Our own scouts are necessarily kept close in so that we can pass unseen, so they can't see much more than we can, but we haven't run into any of our own scouts." He shrugged fatalistically.

He knew as well as the rest of them that they should have run into some sort of sentry by now or patrol keeping watch on the desert for attack, if there'd been anyone left.

Shyla didn't think any whispers had started yet, but it wouldn't be long before that happened. She could see the colors of the souls around her turning the darker blue shade of grim despair undershot with the purple she associated with determined courage.

"Well, whatever we find, we'll face as one people." Shyla announced determinedly. "Though I hope we'll find them alive and happy." She whispered.

"As do we all." Asbiorn laid one hand on her shoulder. She patted it with a wan smile.

Abruptly a stirring showed Volgelson moving towards the front.

"Come on, we have to start." She said wearily.

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Shyla wondered when they'd be stopping for lunch; her tongue felt thick and swollen in her mouth despite the pebble she'd obediently stuck on her tongue at Asbiorn's prompting. To her surprise, it did help trick her body into thinking she'd had more water than she really had. She felt sorry for the Brissons who struggled in the heat. Their human companions marched beside them now, matching their steps and raising cloaks or whatever cloth lay at hand to shade their miserable companions. Gavin, Annabel, and Matcha were covered in foam while their mouths hung wide open and panting; a bad sign, for panting like that was considered rude in their strange society and to have no care at all for it meant they were suffering cruelly under the

unyielding rays of the torturous sun.

"Volgelson, we must stop soon. We...I'm feeling thirsty and I'm not sure how far I can go on." Shyla told the bronzed warrior, not wanting to hurt her friend's feelings.

Volgelson glanced at her in surprise. Shyla discreetly flicked a finger towards Gavin and Volgelson nodded in understanding.

"Twenty-minute rest." She shouted, her voice echoing up and down the line. The Brissons fell off their feet.

"Well, forty minutes." She amended.

Shyla grimaced: she too hated the delay this was causing, but she wouldn't dare blame her friends for it! It's not like they could help having fur coats any more than she could help having black skin! Why should other people judge them based on their biology?

Water canteens were passed around and Shyla was glad to see that this time more of the humans were sharing; the example she made of the two who'd drunk all their water in front of the thirsty Brissons on half rations had evidently stuck.

She generously gave most of her ration to Matcha and Annabel, while Asbiorn gave his to Gavin. The Brissons thirstily drank what was offered to them: the forced marches had taken their toll.

"We should get there soon." Shyla told Annabel encouragingly.

"I'm amazed that we haven't found it yet." The dog girl panted. "With as far as we've come, it doesn't seem possible that we could have come nearly this far before."

"Ah, but you rode the train then." Shyla reminded her. "And you stopped often in towns and had access to ponies. Since we don't want to be seen, we avoid those areas (easy, as we'd have to march far north to get to the nearest of those settlements) and stick to the wilds. We might have had less overall distance to travel, but we've gone a lot further on foot than you did before."

"Succinctly put." Gavin nodded. "We'll have the longer job of it, but I don't doubt we'll see that bloody mountain soon enough."

"Right." Shyla grinned, amused at her friend's shift to an almost cockney accent with the heat and stress. She assumed he'd been hanging out with his soldiers too long, who almost universally spoke the same way.

"I think it will be tomorrow we'll see the mountain." Volgelson said, looking up from where she'd unrolled a map. "Then another day and a half march until we get to the edges of the forest."

"That soon?" Gavin asked in surprise. "I'd have thought it a little longer than that." He said over his sister's groan.

"Yes, if we keep at this pace we should be there."

"What do you think we'll find there?" Shyla asked

worriedly. In this semi-private meeting, she gave voice to the fear that infected them all to some extent or other.

"Could the mountain have fallen, and that's why we haven't seen any sign of our patrols?"

"Possibly," Volgelson said very grimly. "But remember too that nearly every fighting soldier and guard unit went with either us or with Jake and the others. We left no reserve units behind to safeguard our people, so we might have abandoned the outermost patrol routes and maybe even the inner routes. We might not see anyone until we're almost to the forest..."

A roar cut her off.

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Everyone looked up to see a winged shape descending rapidly towards them.

"Jake!" Shyla laughed in sudden relief. "At last! That must mean we've won here too!"

"Indeed." Volgelson grinned as well, "that's good! We'll have..."

"That's not Jake." Asbiorn announced tersely. "It's too small for one thing, and it's purple."

Everyone looked up startled, only having noticed the general dragon shape before. It was still too far away to make out much, but Shyla could immediately see that he was right.

"Battle formations!" Volgelson roared, her shout wiping the amused grins off the human faces that had been watching the fear and awe spreading through the Brisson ranks.

"It's not Jake!" she warned. "It's not Jake!"

Cries of shock and dismay filled the air, but the soldiers raggedly got into a fighting line, grabbing their bows and fitting shaft to nock.

Shyla hurried into the front ranks closest to the hurtling shape, raising her battle-damaged staff high and casting a shield that would protect them from flames as far as she dared, hoping that the magic would attract the dragon first and leave the unprotected people alone. Asbiorn changed into his cat shape and stood growling, his fur on end as he crouched tensely, waiting to pounce. Volgelson had come to stand next to Shyla, drawing her sword and shouting orders to runners who raced to one ragged formation to the next, relaying her instructions to lieutenants.

All eyes were on the dragon as it spread its wings, braking suddenly in midair before settling on the ground in front of them.

Now that it had come to a stop, Shyla could tell immediately that Asbiorn was right. Its legs seemed thinner than Jake, and its face...the word *delicate* wasn't right, not for a dragon, but certainly *softer* might be the right term, though that too wouldn't be close, so long as she had those scales. But her light was white and pure, and soothing browns and reds told her that this dragon was gentle and not angry.

"Shyla!" The dragon said joyfully. I'm so glad to see you guys! You've no idea how long we've been waiting to meet you again!"

Shyla felt her jaw drop almost down to her toes. The shield sputtered and died as the magic sustaining it disappeared.

"Nacomi?" she asked in a strangled voice. Her throat felt a little tight as she grappled with the impossibility that Nacomi could be a dragon.

"Yep." Nacomi nodded, her mouth open in a dragon grin. "It's me all right. I wanted to surprise you guys, and it looks like I did. Ha!" she stuck her tongue out to the right. "Told you they'd notice."

"Yes, you did." Jake rumbled, fading into existence. Standing next to Nacomi, Shyla was struck--again--at his huge size.

"However, I do want to point out that it took considerably longer than either of us guessed they would notice."

"Nitpicker!" Nacomi jabbed. "I still won the bet!"

"If that is the way you see it." Jake said in a long-suffering tone.

"Before Nacomi interrupts to say something about how her way is the *only* way to see it," Jake continued, "I would like to say that it is a pleasure seeing you again, Lord Gavin, Ladies." He bobbed his head to each of them. "You are always welcome to the mountain. As for your army, we...had not originally planned to host any gathering so large..."

"They wanted to help!" Shyla broke in. "You should hear some of the restrictions they've placed themselves under! Allowing Serena to wipe all memory of our home from their minds and to come with us when we couldn't be sure that we could offer them a place to rest and the sand fleas and waves and the strange fish and I think we saw a mermaid...but that doesn't matter!" she ended in a rush while everyone stared at the sudden vocal witch. "What does matter is that every one of them is pure! Every one! I've seen the truth! I can personally vouch for them." Shyla continued, unaware that Jake was trying to say something and having no luck.

"And furthermore, if either of you wants to complain about it, then you can say that directly to me! No one else had a hand in that decision! I did, so don't go holding the others to blame! And--"

"Shyla!" Asbiorn said, grabbing her arm gently. "Jake is trying to speak!"

Shyla fell into an embarrassed silence.

"I am glad to hear of such a high endorsement for their character." Jake said mellowly as his eyes swept the assembled. The Brissons drew themselves up aware of the inspection, forgetting their earlier awe. "It speaks well of them, and we will be glad to welcome them now to our home. Mausi and her people are already waiting for us. Let us go to them now."

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The army got to its feet, weary but buoyed by the presence of the dragons. The Brissons, in particular, were awed and amazed by the presence of them, and walked behind the pair with awestruck eyes, hardly seeming to notice the heat anymore.

Gavin, Annabel, and Matcha strode evenly beside Jake, talking about the Battle of London, of which Jake and Nacomi were both intensely interested. Shyla, for her part, was glad to let her friends talk about that day; for her, the pain seemed just as intense as it had been then.

When they got to the demon, Matcha took over and described the fight then. Shyla listened despite herself; she couldn't remember being so brave facing the thing down, instead, she'd been nearly frozen stiff with fear but strengthened by her indignation and desperation.

"...And then she cast her spell and the Moldra gave a howl of rage before it vanished! By then I could see her again and saw the flames that enveloped her. I thought she would die! When I got to her after the battle, her body lay so still I feared the worst, but then she grasped my hand when I touched her and I knew then she lived! She'd beaten the monster! She gave her eyes for us," she said solemnly, and the listeners glanced at her in mingled pity and horror. Shyla ignored it; She'd done what she'd had too, and if she'd been forced to do it again she would.

"I can see." She said, noticing the colors in Nacomi change as her gaze turned to her. "Just differently than before now."

"How so?" Jake asked curiously. "We knew about the loss of sight before, for we've espied you in the Seeing Pool and saw the bandages across your eyes. Serena hoped that she might be able to restore them, though she isn't positive she can do so with such an old wound." He cautioned immediately.

"Don't worry about it." Shyla told him firmly. "If she can great, but if not, then I can be satisfied with what I have now. Don't pity me!" she said sharply, seeing his colors shift. Immediately they changed to those she'd learned to associate with surprise and confusion.

She sighed. "Look, I don't want to have to explain more than once, okay? But suffice to say, I can see you, but more than I normally could before, okay? Let's just wait until we get there and I can tell you about what I've gone and been through, okay?"

"Okay." Jake nodded. "It won't be long, and you'll have some fresh supplies tonight regardless; as soon as we verified what was happening we sent Mausi back to her people with tidings of victory and an unexpected opportunity."

"You mean for treaties?" Gavin asked sharply. "I don't have that authority." He warned.

"We suspected as much." Jake assured him. "So what we are looking for is more along the lines of friendly reports. We are going to hold a feast in celebration of the dual victories and

honor those who've fallen. That will allow people to meet and mingle and hopefully create a basis for understanding when we do hammer out a deal."

"Does that mean we are coming out of the shadows?" Shyla asked in surprise.

"Not yet." Jake told her heavily. "We've sustained heavy losses, and I am weakened. We will not have any strength to be much help to our friends. I'm afraid the war," he continued, directing his words to Gavin and the others, "will likely be carried out by you for a very long time. It will be years before we can replace our losses, and that is something we cannot count on our enemies giving us. While there are signs that they are disorganized and divided now, it is possible that they will unite under a single banner again to destroy us all, now that they know humans have survived and come back to the world."

"So what does that mean for now?" Shyla asked, seeing the sudden uncertainty in Jake's soul. "We cannot be hidden now that they know we exist."

"I do not think that this is the time or the place for that conversation," Jake said slowly. "That is a discussion for the full Council."

Shyla nodded. "Very well. Until then."

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