

Chapter 21

Forging Alliances

Jake stepped over the rise and strode steadily towards the forest. He smiled at the sight of all his people gathered in front of the dark eaves of the trees, his sister in front of them arrayed in her fine white dress and crown.

The army behind marched proudly, their flags high in the air, the armor and weapons polished with care, the clothes mended as best they could, and faces and bodies washed clean of grime. The Brissons had made a herculean effort to clean up; every button was shined, every rifle or weapon cleaned with care, yet there could be no denying how far they'd come and the hard roads they'd taken.

He couldn't tell by the intensity of the cheers that greeted the brissons as they walked proudly up to the edge of the forest. Interspersed with the humans were members of Mausi's tribe who beat their chests, danced and howled their delight.

Jake found the scene reminiscent of the old storybooks or movies of the silver screen, and he chuckled at the strange thought.

Serena stepped forward. A hush fell over the gathering as Volgelson, Shyla, Gavin, and the other captains stopped together before her.

"Welcome." Serena said, her voice heard clearly in the silence. "You have come so far and sacrificed so much. For our soldiers who marched, welcome home. For our most honored friends, both across the sea and across the sands, welcome to our home. Your bravery and friendship will never be forgotten by our people. Let this moment stand enshrined in the annals of History, now and forever."

Cheers rang out once more, from hundreds of throats. Tree limbs shook in a manner suggestive of clapping, while under dark, leafy boughs howls and roars and calls of every description added their voice to the din. The Mountain People had come home.

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Night fell, cloaking the mountain under the light of millions of gems. Under the trees, light blazed forth from dozens of fires, fueled with dead sticks and branches sacrificed by the trees for the celebration.

In three large clearings several dwarven tables had been carried out and placed on stone blocks. Every table stood bedecked in the simple tablecloths made from the first crops and made by hand. Some carried native symbology to represent Mausi's Tribe. Others carried the Sun banner of the Londoners. Only a handful were worked in the golden mountain and white tree, at Serena's insistence.

Jake surveyed the heavily laden tables, wincing at the huge

amounts of food that had been prepared for the feast; plates of the strange fish caught in the river, bowls of fresh salad, nuts and berries, roots and tubers, four roast deer carcasses, some strange fowl that looked like ducks but with the necks and heads of geese that they'd taken to calling "Deuce's" (though Jake hadn't learned why), and great casks of water and some early attempts at wine that sat mostly untouched.

The assembled were irrespective of tribe or race, sitting mixed together chatting freely (aided by Jake and Serena's insistence that no table be segregated).

At his table, he loomed over his poised, serene sister, Shyla and her worried mother, Gavin and his sister, Matcha, Volgelson, Brian, Stacey, Tom and Rachel with her two newborns, Bethany and Roger. Their godfather sat at one of the nearby tables, occasionally glancing over to ensure everything was still all right.

Everyone felt protective of these two new lives; they were the first children of the Changed, and they were treated with reverence. Jake wondered how they would be treated as they grew up, but for now they were well loved and taken care of.

Serena looked around, and almost before she could speak there was a Maiden in White at her elbow.

"Yes, Mi'lady?" the voice sounded like Mulan.

"Mulan, please go and bring that young woman to our table." Serena nodded towards a nearby table. Jake craned his head, wondering what about her had attracted his sister's attention.

There certainly seemed something familiar in the girl's fur pattern, but for the life of him he couldn't recall where he'd seen it before, though Annabel came close. Indeed, all eyes were turned towards the table where Mulan hurried towards, their gaze frowning in curiosity as the white-robed figure bent down to speak with the diner.

Immediately the two were back up and hurrying back. Annabel gasped in shock.

"Alise!" she gaped. "Where did you come from?!"

The Brissons leaped to their feet, bowing or curtsying low as the young princess came up.

"I was with the volunteers." She said, taking the seat the maiden set out for her. Instantly Mulan went back for her plate.

"What! But your mother--!" Gavin said faintly.

"Didn't know what I was doing." Alise said firmly. "I had to help the people who risked so much for us when we had no claim of any sort on them. I knew mother wouldn't approve, so I didn't tell her, or anyone, that I was coming." A wry grin came to her face. "A little dirt in my fur and a woolen dress from a shopkeeper and I became just another merchant's daughter ready to fight."

She turned to Serena. "But how did you know who I was?" she asked, leveling her green-eyed stare right at her.

Serena gazed back with her ice-blue ones. "I felt it." She

said simply. "No one I know of has ever been able to hide their identities from me long, even when they are aware of who I am and my power. You knew neither."

"I see." Alise said quietly. "But what now?" she asked.

"What is it you desire most?" Serena asked her directly.

Surprise and confusion flowered across her face, before the cool mask of the seasoned diplomat closed over them.

"What else? Peace and prosperity for my people, the securing of our place in the histories, and the end of the Dolna and their foul masters." She stated matter of factly.

Chief Barknaluk nodded his agreement. Mausii hastily put down her half-finished leg of venison to translate his words.

"We too wish the end of the Dolna threat and the growth of our people."

"It seems as if we have similar goals." Serena said with a small smile. Abruptly she stood, her piercing eyes sweeping the chamber who, aware that something of importance was happening, stared back.

"We have won a victory, but not the war." Her words were forceful, strong. She did not allow any the chance to feel fear before continuing. "Each of us must find the strength to repel the darkness, or we will all be lost. Each of our people brings a strength to the table; we have our size and strength, Barknaluk's people bring their superior tracking skills, while Alise's people have stores of arms and knowledge of fortifications our people have long forgotten. And both of you have greater numbers than we can bring." She reminded. "Together, you can become a mighty host capable of wresting peace from chaos, safety from danger, and peace from war. With strength, perseverance, and dedication, we will win."

Mighty cheers rang out as she sat back down and people returned to their feasting.

Around the table the leaders looked thoughtful as they considered the import of her words. Jake could see all of them at once, and their faces were a study of contrasts.

Barknaluk looked eager, to his mind. His warrior's soul called for blood and battle. He would have to be watched, Jake thought, not to lead his people into a terrible folly just to prove his worth in battle.

Alise had the face of the experienced diplomat, but to Jake's mind there seemed a hint of uncertainty, even fear. She knew the losses they had taken, on all their sides, and most likely wondered if they would indeed have the strength to carry on. Also, from what Shyla had told him of her adventures, they were without effective generalship. That could put a severe handicap on their future operations.

Serena met his gaze with her knowing one; she'd felt more from them than he had, but what her thoughts were on their allies he couldn't guess.

Annabel, Gavin, and Matcha shared an anxious look; Jake

knew they had a lot of things to think about, and not all of them were directly related to this meeting. What the future held for them, he couldn't say. They'd gone so far already together; perhaps they would go further still.

Jake decided it was time for him to speak.

"Lady Serena is right. We've accomplished the impossible, and it is time for our people to celebrate that victory. But we here, I think, can not. Our minds will have to be busy with our next moves in this chess game, this Game of War, to counter our enemy's stroke."

He looked at Barknaluk. "If you would listen to our advice, I would continue to advise you as before; urge the other Tribes to fight together. I know that you have always lived nomadic lifestyles and many of your people have become strange to you, yet you all share the commonality of our enemy, and that should be enough to cement at least a working friendship."

His gaze shifted to Alise. "Your Highness," he noted her bearing stiffen in a pale imitation of Serena's regal pose. "You shall have to return to your side of the ocean, but not, I think, alone."

The others looked at him, puzzled.

"I think one of us can be spared for a short while." He smiled at Serena. "If you don't mind me tagging along with your army, that is."

Princess Alise smiled. "I think that would be just fine."

"One more thing," Serena said seriously. "Do not travel back the same way you came. There will be goblin scouts in those areas, though that is a secondary concern. I should think heavily about speaking with the independent towns and cities that mark the confederation of government here in this country. Having your army appear out of the blue should accomplish two things: show them the vulnerabilities of their early warning, if they have any, and show that you have answered the call of friends, Barknaluk's people."

"But we..." Alise began.

"I know." Serena interrupted. "But as soon as you mention us, their people will want to cast us out of what they rightfully believe is their country. We cannot countenance any division right now, and simply stating that Barknaluk sent a messenger (Mausi perhaps because of her friendship with Annabel and Matcha) beseeching aid against the goblin hordes, will seem believable to them. Saying that you marched with fireside myths in the bright light of day to the aid of the unknown would be...less than convincing."

"I see your point sister." Jake rumbled thoughtfully. He hadn't thought of that angle, and she was probably right in it. "By remaining hidden, we promote time to foster an alliance between such disparate groups, with the hope that they might find other peoples to ally with, such as Matcha's in South America, to join in the cause."

Brian and Rachel nodded. "It sounds logical on the face of it." Brian agreed. "But there are still many unknown variables that we can't take into account. Even this course of action, sound as it is, may have hidden dangers that we know nothing about. We should proceed with great caution."

"Which is why we must still remain in the shadow for now, waging a silent war against our foe until we are able to muster the strength to stand once more on the field." Serena said.

She looked sadly at Shyla. "We have paid a high price to stand here today. We can ill afford such in the next bout for a long time."

"Yet you do not stand alone now!" Alise told her earnestly. "I stand here ready to sign a treaty of eternal friendship between our people; all our people!"

"As do I." Barknaluk grunted.

"Thank you." Serena nodded to both of them. "That is an alliance we should all gladly share, yet what can we have to offer in terms of men and material? All we have is our knowledge of the enemy, and that is old, old knowledge indeed. We cannot again come to open war unless the fight comes to the mountain."

"Then we shall be ready." Volgelson said, unexpectedly joining them.

"Milady, we have the very last of our ancient weapons..."

"Useless now, with almost no sulfur and no oil." Rachel interrupted. "At present capacities, there is only one tank of fuel in each of the war vehicles, even with draining the civilian equipment and putting in their tanks, which as you know is not recommended for our Abrams. Their power output would drop enormously if we mixed fuels."

Everyone around the table familiar with her words nodded unhappily. The others merely looked blank. Serena elaborated for them.

"Ancient weapons from our Age." She explained. "They were great chariots that ran on internal fires and used cannon to damage the enemy. We brought some with us, but alas! Too few to make any difference, and their requirements to keep them in readiness is too great a strain for us."

Gavin opened his mouth instantly but Alise shot him a warning look.

Serena guessed what was on their mind and nixed their plan immediately. "Your unspoken offer is very kind, but were we to hand you working models, what then? You have limited metalwork, and the technology of that sort is so different that it would be like handing an unlettered person a book with no instructions on how to read. They may solve some words eventually if the language is that of their spoken word, but an alien language? One they had never heard of before in their own life? Could you master such an undertaking as that in a day, Annabel?"

Annabel started at being addressed. She looked guiltily at the assembled and shook her head. "I could not." She admitted.

"Not without years of study."

"Yes." Serena smiled at her. "That is certainly true. And it would be worse, as you do not yet have the tools to make the tools. We will help you in that regard, but I fear it will take years, and we are hampered by a lack of basic supplies that our industry ran on before. Namely, sulfur and oil."

Faces became grim as they realized how ingenious the goblins and demons were to hoard such supplies. Without those two most precious resources, one of which was so common in their old world as to be abundant, modern technology as humans remembered it was simply impossible.

"We will adapt," Serena reassured them. "We have magic, which wasn't possible in our age, and we have the ingenuity and resourcefulness of our friends. We will survive."

"Well then," Brian raised his glass. "In the name of friends and survival, I offer this toast to the Alliance! May we find victory! To the Alliance."

Everyone in the hall raised their glass and shouted the toast. "To the Alliance!"

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