

(Chapter ONE)

Preparations #

(PROOF COPY -- Not for distribution.)

Brian sighed as he put down the book in front of him. A concerned glance showed Rachel still absorbed in the scroll she'd been translating for the past hour.

To his mind, she'd become a glass doll, outwardly collected, but many times he'd caught her with red eyes or gazing sorrowfully into the night at the tunnel entrance. Losing someone under your command was far more difficult than Brian imagined, he'd have hated to know what it was like to lose a close friend in such circumstances.

Since they'd come back to the mountain two weeks ago, he'd hardly been in the forge, except to come up with new ideas for shields and swords that he gave to his craftsmen. They'd gone to work with a will, and he hoped that the longer designs would give their soldiers a much-needed edge in combat against the goblins. While the creatures were far smaller in stature than men, being just a hair taller than the Brissons, but the length of their swords gave them nearly the same reach as the Roman gladius they'd been making for their ability to be easily carried along with the rest of the gear modern soldiers carried.

However, Rachel and Brian had set themselves a new task, to learn as much as they could about the dark things in the days of the dwarves, hoping to find some similarities that could give them much-needed information and an edge over their rivals. Yet Brian began to think that it was a hopeless task; there were descriptions of all manner of dark creatures, some Brian thought he'd heard of before, and others entirely new to him, but nowhere had he come across references to goblins, except as mention of creatures near in size to men, with human features and near parity in strength.

My best guess is that they have either shrunk in the intervening years, or the demon folk bred them from the Brissons that appeared, thus they were fine-tuned specifically against them as men faded from memory and knowledge.

He looked around more of the scrolls in the library, nodding hello to Tim and Dorothy Ann, the librarians. They'd only been recently unfrozen, and in addition to spending two days a week on the work parties, Jake insisted that they take posts in his library, aiding him with the preservation and use of all the computers, scrolls, books and paraphernalia that he'd accumulated in his seven lonely years.

The pair smiled back at him, and turned back to their work; Tim would take a frozen book and dip it in a bucket of the gray mist with a pair of tongs. The book would be brought back up and carefully studied, noted, and then refrozen in Dragon Ice to

ensure its survival in the long years ahead.

Brian wished them luck, they had an enormous chore ahead of them, regardless of the fact that he'd never met more passionate people about their work. So far, he knew they'd only covered the stuff brought with them at the Fall, and that only the surface; this task would be ones of decades, if not longer.

Selecting an ancient scroll, he went to the bucket and carefully dipped it to free it from its prison. Then he took it to the table he'd been working at.

"Have you found anything?" Rachel asked him, her voice weary. She'd stopped her study and had been stretching near the tables.

"Nothing yet." Brian told her, tearing his eyes away from the play of light on her face, and the tight shirt over her bosom.

"Is there nothing here on the demons?" she flared.

"We've been through the library before, searching for such things." Brian reminded her. "There were few scrolls of them then, and they had been written in different hands each time, and nearly different languages, which gets me thinking."

"About what?" she prompted.

"Well, suppose that in the times of the dwarves and elves and other magic folk, the demons would appear, but usually only the lesser demons. Though obviously strong in dark magics, they would often create twisted imitations of the living races they could find. Obviously, whenever such creatures were detected, they proved a threat to the entire world. Armies would quickly assemble to stamp them out. Now suppose demons had a fatal flaw; they could only be summoned to this plane of existence in the first place, they couldn't come through on their own. If that were the case, then only the most foolish or ignorant would undergo the rites to bring them here for whatever reason; wealth, power, desire for conquest, what have you."

He felt the excitement of his theory grab hold of him, and he became more animated, gesturing with his arms to add emphasis to his words.

"Thus they would come, and set about a very similar pattern of events, as evidenced by the scrolls we have found. With the scrolls giving warning, alliances would quickly form to destroy the demons before they gained much of a power base."

"Now, however, we are dealing with something different. Men did not start with the lesser demons at all and forsook them to go after the Demon Chief, of which only one scroll we found ever spoke of, and it was written in a very shaky hand, as if whoever wrote it could barely write of what he'd seen. So, the Demon Chiefs stand everything on their head, and come out with their full measure of strength and came out swinging. We defeated it but it brought out a host of lesser demons and foul creatures to distract us. We killed it and most of the lesser beings, but the nuclear missile attack nearly obliterated our army and

civilization, but did almost no damage to the lesser demons."

"That we are aware of." Rachel interrupted, looking very thoughtful. "I suspect that they were badly reduced, but still enough escaped that they could start again in secret. If only we hadn't had that nuke! Then we might have been able, with Serena's forest, prevented the demons from escaping at all and the world would never have fallen!"

"But then the Brissons wouldn't have risen." Brian reminded her. "We should not bemoan our losses and wish otherwise when good friends were the result."

"You're right, of course." Rachel smiled at him. "I wouldn't trade knowing Lana and Mausi, and the others, for anything."

Brian smiled and took her hand. "And knowing you as well."

She blushed prettily and cast her eyes down with a broad grin on her face.

He held her hand for a long moment before coming back to himself and letting his arms fall to his side, heat blooming in his cheeks.

"Well," he said quickly to cover his embarrassment. "It's good that demons, once defeated, aren't able to come back until re-summoned, but then we have the problem in that it's been three million years since they were last summoned, and no matter how reduced in the wars that followed, they have had literally ages to recover and grow. Why they haven't simply marched over the face of the globe everywhere and wiped our friends from existence long before, I don't know."

"Perhaps they didn't want to." Rachel suggested. "It could be that they need victims to give their depraved lives meaning, and they need the Brissons to keep the other creatures they use happy."

"The spiders, you mean?"

"And possibly others." Rachel nodded. "Who knows how long Roland and Melinda's shops were operating after we left? There could be other, fouler things besides demons, goblins, and spiders out there that we haven't met yet."

"Not a happy thought," Brian admitted.

"No, but having a catalog of what came before is very useful." Rachel smiled at him. "It could give us clues as to what will come next."

Brian sighed, looking around; they were in one of the deepest chambers of the library, that literally tunneled *under* the main shaft in a partial spiral. Here the dwarves had placed their entire history, feeling safe in the knowledge that they would be well protected. The walls were lined with shelves taller than him, and *filled* with scrolls and tomes, depending on their age.

"Well, it will be a long search." He admitted, then looked at Rachel with a smile. "But at least I can't think of anyone I'd rather be researching with."

"I can tell." Rachel said throatily.

Brian frowned, and then remembered he wore no clothes on his horse end, and so his interest would be plain for everyone to see. He grimaced.

"Don't be so put out." Rachel whispered to him, rubbing along his right side and down along the left. "I'm not." She said and, seizing his head, pulled him down for a kiss.

Brian felt his mind blank in surprise for a moment, but a wave of desire crashed over him and he seized Rachel in a strong embrace. He felt as if he would never let her go as he mashed his lips on hers, their arms twinging about each other to pull them as one.

When he loosed his lips to breath, he saw that her face was flushed and her eyes glowed with intense desire. As for Brian, he could feel himself so becoming so hard as to be steel.

Rachel spun herself away from him, looking over her shoulder with intense desire. Brian quickly came upon her back, his legs grasping either side of her barrel as he slid forward. A moment passed, and then he felt his tip enveloped in searing heat.

At last! He groaned. Never in his wildest imaginings did he think this would feel so good as he slid further into his mare.

And Rachel? She seemed every bit as pleased as him! Her head was cast back against his chest, her eyes closed in lust as she felt him stretch her inner folds wide, his unaccustomed weight holding her in place as they mated.

Snaking his hands forward, he placed his left on her head to tip her head further while his lips sought to plunder hers again; his right dropped lower and loosened the top button of her blouse. Plunging inside, he cupped her large, soft breast with tender fingers, probing the flesh as it threatened to spill from his grip. His thumb flicked her nipple, feeling the button grow harder from his attention.

Rachel gasped and groaned into his mouth, her inner fires growing hotter in a blaze that threatened to sear his flesh completely off, yet Brian wished he could remain in that inferno for the rest of his life, feeding off his own that surged in heart and limb as he thrust powerfully into his lover over and over, pushing her forward and throwing her breasts into his palm as he gripped her torso harder, now with both hands in her open shirt while hers had seized his face to constantly pull him back down to her lips whenever he sought to breath.

Her muscles squeezed him, milking his shaft over and over as she clenched around him.

He felt a tightening sensation in his balls, and then with a startled oath into her mouth, he gushed his seed into her amidst her high-pitched cry of release.

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Brian, after some minutes spent catching his breath, slid out of and off of Rachel, who groaned appreciatively. Brian

thought she'd never looked more beautiful to him then right at that moment; her hair cast askew, her afterglow strong in her eyes, a satisfied smile lighting her face.

"That was...amazing." She managed at last.

"Yeah." Brian agreed, wondering what expression was on his face. Probably the same as hers, he thought.

"Well, that was beyond wonderful," he said at last, and she giggled in agreement. "But we should continue our census of possible creatures to face, and their weaknesses."

"It could take a *long* while." She stressed.

"It might indeed, but the end result should be *satisfactory*." Brian grinned.

Rachel pulled down another scroll with a saucy smile, leaving the buttons on her shirt undone and her breasts pushing open the fabric; the chances of them being bothered down there were remote, and Brian smiled as he looked forward to spending the rest of the day with Rachel; and looking through the scrolls, of course.

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Shyla sighed as she closed the white tome in front of her face; a gift from Rachel, it had been a book of dwarven magic. There were dozens of earth-based spells in there, and she tried to memorize all of them, but she'd never had a strong affinity with stone, air being her preferred medium, but if there were books dealing with air spells in the library they hadn't been found yet.

I wonder how Brian and Rachel are doing, and if they've found any more magic books? She wondered, picturing the two pouring over scrolls by candlelight, looking worn-out and exhausted in her mind, and very miserable.

A stab of guilt propelled her from her chair. *I should go check on them and take my turn. I'm sure they could use a break right now, and Rachel's still feeling guilty about Bethany...even though none of us really knew her at all.*

Asbiorn glanced up from where he'd been carving a new bow stave.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"Down to the library." Shyla told him. "Brian and Rachel have got to be feeling like taking a break now, and maybe there's a chance there's a spell book down there that is more to my liking."

"Shyla." Asbiorn said sternly. "They are not looking for spell books right now, but are searching for information on what we might be facing in the upcoming battles. Pestering them to leave, and then not continue on with their work is a hindrance, not a help.

"I suppose you're right." She sighed. "But it's not like I'm all that skilled with ancient dwarvish. I can only read the spell books because of the interactions of the book's magic and mine, so I wouldn't be able to read any of the texts they are

either."

"Then you should leave them to their work and concentrate on your own." Asbiorn advised. "After all, we will have need of your spell casting when we go to war, and the General would like us to participate in more patrols, so we do not end up like the Lost Patrol."

Shyla winced; so far the Lost Patrol, as it had come to be called, had not suffered any more casualties, but they had fallen very grim for the near loss of Brian and Rachel, and the loss of her rider. Brian's rider had joined the lost patrol on its marches and now wore a centaur patch on his right sleeve.

No one else had encountered any goblin scouts, even Jake. Shyla wondered about that, but thought that perhaps the loss of so many scouting parties and sorcerers had warned the enemy not to poke into the region. Mausi had brought some of her friends out to where some of the battles had taken place and tramped all over the signs (to her friends bewilderment) but hopefully any scout that they hadn't seen would see the tracks of the Four Tribes and assume that a mighty force was loose in the desert looking for them.

Shyla hoped so, as it seemed to her that if the enemy thought there was a strong force of Brissons about, and no signs of lessening numbers at their camps, then he would delay his march until he had ascertained the location and strength of this rogue force.

So why hasn't he sent scouts? She wondered.

A soft nicker behind her made her heart suddenly sing, and she turned to behold Serena in her unicorn form standing in the doorway. Shyla grinned and waved, though she suspected it hadn't been noticed; Serena's eyes seemed drawn to Asbiorn while he smiled back at her.

"Okay, I guess I could leave," Shyla smiled, thinking she could escape down to the library and search for more spell books.

Serena still blocked the way, however, and she shook her head. Instantly she turned into a beautiful maiden, clothed in silver, and whiter than the unstained moon.

Oddly, despite knowing Serena looked so much better, she felt no jealousy towards her.

"Stay," she said. "For I've not come for Asbiorn, but you."

"Me?" Shyla asked, surprised.

"I've come to see what spells you've mastered, and perhaps learn a little of white magic with you." She said.

Shyla looked at her nonplussed. "But you are a powerful magic-user! You've done things that aren't in the book!" she said. "What could you learn from primer books, as they were."

Serena laughed like tinkling bells. "Shyla, my magic works by following my desires, but that does not mean I know what I am doing. Having knowledge, even that of unfamiliar magic, would bring up new possibilities, and perhaps I can cast spells better

in human form as well? I do not know, and will not know until I try."

"I'm sure Shyla could teach you much of what she's learned." Asbiorn rumbled with gentle malice. "After all, she simply loves learning about earth magic."

Shyla stuck her tongue out at him, before laughing at herself.

"Sure, Serena, we can work together; who knows perhaps I will finally make sense of these spells!"

"We can but try." Serena smiled.

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They worked on them for several hours, but had almost no success, at least Shyla felt that way. Serena could generally manage to perform the spells in rapid order, though she did manage to foul up a spell that turned the axe handle Asbiorn had been working on into pulled taffy. They spent the next half-hour or so enjoying pieces and laughing amongst themselves at the delicious turn of events.

At last, Shyla gave it up when the stone she had been trying to transform into crystal just stood there.

"Come on," she said. "I'm getting hungry, let's go to the kitchen and beg some food!"

"Shyla," Serena warned, shaking her head. "We cannot keep begging food that needs to be saved. Look at how much longer that will set us back."

"I guess you're right." Shyla said. "But really, how much longer are we going to keep at this? I don't know the time (it's impossible to keep track without watches or clocks underground) but it has to be getting late, right?"

"Actually, I think it's half-past three." Asbiorn said.

Shyla looked askance at him. "I didn't know you could tell time too, Asbiorn." She said.

"Not really, but we came down here after morning meal, and took only a light repast when lunch was served. That lunch seems to me more than three hours ago, but less than four hours." He replied.

Shyla shook her head, marveling at Asbiorn's skills; just as she thought she knew them all, he always managed to surprise her.

It had been like that the moment she'd summoned him, how many years ago now, she wondered? Many millions, if she counted actual time, but to her, it seemed just two years before.

After purchasing the bag from Melinda, she wandered the city streets for a while before returning to her tiny apartment she share-rented. It had been all she could afford on her meager salary from the store; her textbooks for college consumed the rest. Even with her grant money, she hadn't been able to do any better for herself, and she lived in silent terror of getting a bad grade and being told she wouldn't be eligible to remain on the scholarship.

That day had been particularly bad for her, she'd had to work late shift that day, nearly to closing, and there hadn't been many customers at all; that meant her boss could hunt for opportunities to 'accidentally' brush up against her and 'bump' into her butt and things while pretending nothing was happening. She put up with it because if she got fired from her position for reporting him, then she wouldn't be able to afford the apartment or her books, and couldn't afford the money for so much as a bus ticket home. She'd be stranded and on the streets. So she bore under it and did her best to evade him through the aisles.

Finally, she made it to her apartment; her flatmate had apparently found someone else's bed to share that night, she could only hope that he paid her better than her last client and she could help with the broken sink. The good thing about Claire, she knew, was that she did her best to help out, and always managed to scrape enough money together to pay the rent. The vivacious redhead was also polite and very nice to her despite being a broke kid from the wrong side of the tracks in Detroit. Not at all what she expected from a hooker, though Shyla was grateful for the encouragement Claire gave her and had vowed that someday when she pulled herself up from that shithole of her life and got some real cash, she'd bring Claire with her and get her out of the business she was in.

All right, enough daydreaming. Let's see what that batty old saleslady pawned off on me today, she sighed.

She liked the bag at least, tough, sturdy, and roomy, it promised to be able to hold all of her personal items, plus a textbook or two, which would be a huge plus.

After admiring the bag, she looked at all the other stuff that it had come with. There were candles of various sizes, which when sniffed had a pleasant aroma, and she smiled at the imagined look of delight on Claire's face when she came in and smelled the fresh fragrance in the apartment. Putting these aside, she picked up a large bowl with a heavy, short stick and handle, almost like a wooden spoon that had the spoon part chopped off. Later she would learn that it was called a pestle, and would be used to grind herbs and spell ingredients into powder. There were also several dried herbs, a jar of black powder that had the label *Ground Scarabs* on it, and a large black book.

Wondering how much she could get at the used bookstore for it, she picked it up and opened the first page. On the inside she found a name written in red ink at the top left, just inside the cover. Shadouix.

"Huh, must be French." She mused.

Flipping through, she realized the book had been handwritten, and by a good hand; all of the spells and instructions were perfectly legible and some even had drawings done around the letters, something she hadn't seen before.

"Huh, this thing's pretty fancy. Could definitely be worth something."

She felt a momentary flash of hope that it could be worth enough for the math book assigned next quarter; the used ones alone cost nearly two hundred dollars, and she had been worried that she wouldn't be able to afford it.

Suddenly, she came across a spell that said "Familiar Summon."

"Huh," she said, pausing at the spell. "Well, aren't witches supposed to have black cats or something that spy for them and help them and things? That would be pretty cool." Shyla had always loved cats and took care of the strays around the buildings as best she could with whatever she had left.

She laughed, "Well, why not? Could be fun to try it."

She started to read the instructions. Then she took four of the candles and placed them on the floor in front of her, spaced evenly. Using white string, she laid out a neat circle, with the candles forming four anchors to the circle. Lighting them, she noted uneasily that they burned with a green flame, not red like she'd been expecting; however, she kept on with the spell.

Pricking her finger with a needle, she put a drop of blood in the exact center, then sat back.

"Moldrinika, summmmonses, dormadledor." She chanted. "Slave of my will, I summon thee from near and far, obey and come to me, Asbiorn come to me!"

The candles roared upward ten feet into the air, filling the room with green light. Shyla threw her hands up to shield her eyes as she fell onto her back, screaming in terror.

The green light vanished and she lay there long moments, trying to get her vision to come back. When she was at last certain that she could see again, she propped herself up and froze.

Standing in the middle of the circle stood the tallest man she'd ever seen in her life. He was nearly as broad as he was tall, and heavily muscled; bodybuilders and pro-wrestlers would kill to have a body like his. His face was broad and scraggy, and it seemed carved from the mountain he had to be made of, though his dark eyes burned with curiosity.

"You are not Mistress Shadouix." He rumbled. "But you used her spell. Who are you?"

"Sh-sh-Shyla." She stammered, her mind completely blank.

"Shyla." He rumbled. "Well, what would you have of me?"

"Are-are you real?" she asked, the only thing that came to her then.

He smiled, seemingly amused. "I am very real." He told her.

Stretching out his hand, he touched her arm, and she was forced to admit that he did exist.

Another thought fell out of the jumble that her mind had become. "But I thought familiars were animals or spirits!" she blurted out.

Asbiorn took a step back, and then another. His form shifted, hair sprouting over his body, his features becoming less human and more cat. In the space of a breath, a great mountain lion stood in their tiny apartment, its ears scraping the ceiling as it looked down at her with the same gray eyes as the man. She could read his amusement at her gape-mouthed stare, and she barely managed to close her mouth with a click.

The big head came down and rubbed her arm. She giggled at the tickle and rubbed the big head affectionately. Then the full import of what she'd done hit her.

"I'm a witch!" she said in awe. Then the thoughts of what she could accomplish filled her mind and her smile grew into a grin that threatened to split her face.

Boy, won't Claire be surprised when she sees me next!

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Claire had been surprised, and a little afraid, but Shyla had done everything she could to ease her mind. With a little planning, she managed to discredit her boss and have him jailed for feeling up a checker girl, and get better employment elsewhere that allowed her to pay for school. Her new boss had liked her so much, that she'd gone and hired Claire as well, so she gave up her life and even started seeing men for dates, rather than business arrangements.

It had been pretty good, until I tried to capture Serena and got Stacy instead.

Shyla felt her cheeks burn with shame as she remembered simply walking up on the drowsing fairy and sweeping her into the bug jar, thinking that the day hadn't been a total waste at least. Then Serena had come to help her friend, and Shyla had tried to...

She pulled herself from dark memories, and quietly blessed the friendship that she'd gained with the people who, by rights, should have hated her and killed her out of hand.

She wondered if Claire had ever made it out of the apartment; it had been on the far side of town, closest to the blasts. If not, she hoped that her friend hadn't suffered.

The walls disappeared as they entered the cavernous space of the Main Hall. Looking down one of the eight western tunnels, she idly thought of her comfortable rooms in one of the larger homes she shared with six families.

They did not turn down any of these and instead chose the forward-most eastern tunnel, walking up its gentle slope to the Feasting Hall. On the far side from them Shyla could see the two great doors that marked the exit to the mountain, and Jake's bedroom.

"Hey Serena, how come Jake doesn't move his bed downstairs somewhere?" she asked. "I mean, it is outside the doors, and there has to be a bit chilly out there, not to mention that anyone fighting to gain access to here would see his gold first..."

Serena shook her head, as she and Asbiorn glided arm in arm; it made her feel downright dumpy by comparison, a clumsy servant next to a regal king and queen.

"No, he will not move his bedchamber." She said. "You are right in that it will be the first thing that enemies would see coming into the mountain, assuming they won past the forest and the sentinels by force or trickery, but they would come upon him before the people, and he would have it no other way. He's a strong protector, and he will sell his life long before he fails in his charge."

"Ah. Just wondered." Shyla looked at the hall, noting how empty it seemed.

"I wonder what time it is." She repeated her earlier question.

"Let's go outside then, and see where the sun sits in the sky." Asbiorn suggested.

The three friends left the hall behind and climbed the tunnel to the outside world. Below them stretched Serena's forest, and she leaned towards it slightly unconsciously as she looked over it. Above them, the very first dusting of snow had appeared on the mountain, while above them, driven by winds, clouds whipped about the dark gray head.

Shyla smiled, driven by the hope of the first real rain in far too long, and looked out over the darkening sky at the disk of red sinking below its thin, wispy veil as the shadows grew long.

"Well, it looks like it's nearly supper time." Shyla remarked, as long lines of people appeared under the darkening eaves and made their way up the slope to the cave. The night watchers, having rested and eaten, passed the returning workers to fade away into the forest on their way to the borders.

They returned ahead of the crowd and went to take their seats. Shyla plunked down in her chair, feeling inordinately tired, and cracked a yawn.

A few minutes later her mother appeared through the crowd and sat beside her.

"Hi, mom." Shyla hugged her.

"Hi, sweety." The exhausted woman returned the gesture.

"How goes the forge work?" Shyla asked curiously.

"It's very busy down thar." The blackened woman told her, the only clean place on her skin around her eyes, where the dark brown shone around the dusky skin.

"Brian, er...Mister Brian, I mean, has us making longwords and tryin' to improve the mixture of iron to carbon to bring better steel about. I think we got the formula down in terms of mixin', but our timin's off; we're not getting the bes' blades yet...but we're hopin', Mister Brian is countin' on us." She sounded determined not to let him down.

Shyla shook her head at the loyalty shown by those that worked under any of the original companions. The people that

worked under them showed utter devotion and loyalty to such an extent that she'd never seen before. She wondered if it had something to do with their magic, or just because of who they were.

They had the courage to take matters into their own hands, the drive to keep everyone focused and on task, and the will to see it done. Few people of Shyla's experience had ever shown any of those traits, let alone listened to what their people wanted and made scrupulously fair choices that didn't leave bad blood behind.

I wonder what they would be like now if they hadn't stumbled into the shop, she mused. Perhaps they would be very much like they were now; perhaps they would never have been given the chance and disappeared into the faceless masses.

It's interesting how things work out, she thought as she continued talking with her mother about their efforts through the day.

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