

(Chapter ONE)

Armies March #

(PROOF COPY -- Not for distribution.)

Volgelson looked up from her desk as Shyla and Asbiorn walked in. The young woman stepped in, her long black hair shimmering in the light of the torches. For a moment, Vogelsson remembered when she'd first met the pair, and the brown hair she'd sported then. Seeing it back to its natural color seemed more appropriate on her, she thought approvingly.

"Well, shall we get down to it?" Vogelsson asked.

"I think so." Asbiorn nodded. "We've been to the training field today to see the soldiers; they look very comfortable and natural in formation; all those drills have really paid off it seems."

Vogelsson grunted. "We won't know that for certain until we meet the enemy, but I'm cautiously hopeful, yes. Now however, I've got to get ready to march across searing desert sun without being seen, stage a battle at the end of that march to ferret out all the possible goblins hiding in the tunnels of their ports, repair or build a fleet big enough to get across the Atlantic, which is a lot bigger than I remember it being, march a solid day after that to get to a fortified city that may or may not let us in, and then fight one of the most one-sided battles I've ever *heard* of, let alone fought. Assuming I survive that day with any sort of force left, I need to march it back here in secret without letting our allies or enemies know of our location."

She sighed.

"It is a heavy task." Asbiorn rumbled thoughtfully. "But it might be manageable."

"How?" Vogelsson asked in frustration. "I don't have any sort of wagon train available to haul all the supplies I will need to keep my army fed, rested and supplied! And each wagon or cart is going to leave very deep ruts...how on earth am I going to get rid of those?" she bit back a curse at the seemingly insurmountable obstacles facing them.

"Our first task," Asbiorn suggested, "is to see how big of a train we are going to need. We will need to be light and swift, too swift for carts or any sort of conveyance to keep up, and we don't have any animals to use anyway. Nor do we have the limitless numbers of men to set up...what did you call that trail the Vietnamese used?"

"Ho Chi Min Trail." Vogelsson supplied.

"Right, one of those." Asbiorn said airily, waving the option away. "No, we must find a different solution; we must find a way to allow every soldier to carry his supplies with him without overtaxing him."

"And how would we do that, Asbiorn?" Shyla asked curiously.

"Have we come across the recipes for dwarf food?" Asbiorn asked her.

Shyla bit her lip, thinking. "I believe so. At least, Brian mentioned in passing having seen a scroll like that, but as it didn't deal with weapons, he put it back."

"We need to see about getting it here now." Asbiorn remarked. "If my hunch is right, dwarves, with their constant movement underground like goblins, would have had to keep foodstuffs on them when they marched or traveled, and a great amount of it, or else some secret of theirs will mete a food so dense and nutritious that it could keep us on our toes a lot longer with less."

"I think the chefs are trying to sunbake some goods as well." Shyla said. "Dried fruits and some vegetables, I think, and some venison meat as well. If we make some jerky or pemmican from it, then that could keep good a very long time, and we won't have to worry about hunting for a while."

"That's very good." Volgelson said, feeling her mind ease. "We have to see about that dwarf food though; will it be good for men to eat? Will it do all that we hope? And finally, can we make it, and make enough of it in time for the march?"

Shyla nodded. "We'll go and check on that scroll right after this meeting." She said. "What else should we be aware of?"

They spent the next hour going over equipment lists, possible strategies, and even ways of meeting the Brissons when they got there.

"You know, instead of simply walking up to the gate and shouting at them," Shyla suggested, "Why don't we see if we can borrow Brian's horn? I know that Gavin and Annabel have heard it at least and Matcha too! With luck they will recognize it and let us in or at least put in a good word for us."

"That's an idea." Volgelson nodded approvingly; she'd been impressed with the questions the girl had asked, and Asbiorn, and how quickly she had grasped information when presented to her. "I'll talk to Brian tomorrow and see if we can borrow it for our mission."

"There may be more he can take." Shyla pointed out, "And besides, Mausi and the others don't know the horn call; so one horn will be as good as another with them."

"True." Asbiorn nodded.

"All right. Let's meet back here in three days." Volgelson nodded. "We are due to set out five days from now, as that will be the soonest we could possibly be ready. I'd sure like another week or two to prepare, but there it is." She said.

"All right." Shyla nodded. "We will meet in three days."

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Three days seemed to pass in a whirl of packing, organizing, meetings and speaking with endless people. Yet

despite the whirlwind that descended on the mountain, Volgelson felt almost cheerful.

Shyla dragged in, blinking tiredly as she plopped into the chair held for her by Asbiorn. She seemed utterly exhausted and grasped Asbiorn's hand in mute acknowledgment of his help.

"What all have you managed?" Volgelson asked sympathetically, pouring a clear pitcher of water and passing a full glass to her. She also poured one for Asbiorn, but in a great mug that she kept just for him these days; it stood larger than a German beer stein, but in his hands it seemed no bigger than a teacup. He took it and smiled at her, seeming to understand the amusement seeing him with that huge mug caused.

"Well," Shyla said with a strained sigh. "We've actually managed to do quite a lot."

She began ticking points off her fingers. "We discovered the dwarf-loaf recipe in those scrolls; Asbiorn was right about it being what they carried all over the place, it's extremely dense and would apparently serve as their primary staple when on the move, but unfortunately we can't seem to get the baking just right-as one might expect, it's a super complicated recipe and apparently has to be followed precisely. We can have enough made, I think, to see the army through for about a week, tops, and then we're going to be in trouble."

"We'll be in trouble long before then," Volgelson assured her. "We can't carry enough water to see us through for about four days, perhaps five if we stretch it. I've no idea how we are going to be able to bring along enough drink and food to see the army through, not in two days."

"We can't follow the river?" Shyla asked.

"Doesn't go the right way, at least not without wandering through a lot of towns." Volgelson said.

"How do the goblins do it?" Asbiorn said after they'd sat for a long while and pondered the problems.

"What do you mean?" Volgelson asked. "I'd assumed they used slaves for carrying the needed baggage."

"Not likely." He shook his head. "And remember, Brian caught that goblin of his with a group of soldiers, and they didn't have much in the way of their gear for food and drink, not for as long as he said he'd been walking."

"What are you thinking?" Volgelson asked, interested.

"I'm thinking that perhaps our friends have stored what they needed already along the way. If they've been careful and secret about it, then they might not bother to bring guards for their caches, and they may have left us a few morsels to use on our march."

Shyla and Volgelson glanced at one another.

"That's brilliant!" Volgelson said at last. "But how can we be sure, and where would we find the stuff?"

"By asking our resident expert." Asbiorn replied. "Who else?"

Shyla stood up with a small smile. "If you're going to ask that little cretin anything, I'll bow out this time; I want some more time to study all the books I can get my hands on and Shadouix's little grimoire. With luck, I can have a leg up on the competition in case they haven't gotten rid of all their spellcasters just yet."

Volgelson studied her a moment, then nodded; after all, they had a long way to go and she'd seen the girl work in the city; she knew Shyla didn't lack for courage.

"All right, I'll let you get to it then." Vogelsson said.

#

The goblin looked up as they entered, giving them a horrifying grin that pulled his huge scabs and made dark black blood ooze from the edges (he'd refused all treatment, especially from Serena).

"Well, well, my pretties." He cooed softly. "What are you here for? Are you here to finally live up to your promise?"

Volgelson growled, "We've come for more information stored in that ugly head of yours, and if you don't give it to me, I'll get Jake in here to ask."

She blinked irritably in the deep darkness surrounding her; the only light to be seen was what shone in the doorway behind her.

"Can't we get some light in here?" She asked Asbiorn without thinking.

Just as she was about to answer her own question, the trees seemed to just...lean away. Light poured in from the roof in a broad circle around the prisoner who pulled away with a pained hiss and left the grotto illuminated.

"Well, that's better." She remarked slowly, staring in wonder. When had the trees started listening to humans?

Returning to business, she addressed the goblin. "I want to know about your campaigns through the desert to the east. In particular, I want to know how you march with so little gear on your back."

The goblin growled something in its foul tongue, but at last managed;

"What's in it for me?"

"A return to the darkness." Asbiorn suggested.

"Not good enough this time." The goblin snarled.

Volgelson stared at him, then in one swift motion snatched her K-bar from her sheath and drove it into the small table next to him where he'd had his morning meal. The knife drove easily through the thin wood almost to the halfway point.

The goblin stared at it, then her, this time with a shadow of fear in its eyes.

"Tell me what I want to know." Vogelsson growled, sticking her face closer.

Whether it was her tone, or the hard look in her eyes, the goblin spoke rapidly.

"We needs to hide during the day, so we digs ourselves holes in the ground along our routes. We keeps a steady supply of meat and grog there, as well as some weapons, in case some clumsy fool breaks theirs or drops it."

Volgelson unrolled a map and lay it in front of him.

"Show me these locations."

"Never." The goblin cried, for once the grip of some greater terror seemed to be upon the creature, for it shrunk back against the bole and shivered.

Volgelson stared at it and then tossed the knife onto the ground at its feet.

"I may just forget I did that if you show me what I want." She coaxed.

The goblin looked at the knife, then at her. At last it nodded, and the vines gripping its wrists relaxed enough for him to move his arms freely again.

For the next twenty minutes he showed them about ten large supply depots and fifteen smaller supply caves that the goblins used. Volgelson questioned him further on the caves and learned that they were very similar to the cave that Tom and Stacey had found Lana in, in fact they were all nearly identical as geology allowed, being part of the same plan that the Digger Group used, throughout the world.

"Digger Group?" Asbiorn asked, interested enough to walk over from where he'd been lounging near the door.

"Yes." Grolbark snapped. "Digger Group."

"And what are they?" he asked softly.

Perhaps intimidated by his size, Grolbark lost some of his insolence.

"They are the diggers of caves and fortress." He said. "All clans have them, they are one of the few dols that can move back and forth freely between clans as the work is needed."

"So a sort of engineer class then." Asbiorn suggested.

"Engineer?" Grolbark looked up, keenly interested.

"Thinking of sticking around a little longer now?"

Volgelson asked nastily. "I guess I'll be taking this back then, shall I?" and she reached for her knife.

Grolbark seized it and jerked back, clutching the knife like it was the most precious thing in the world to him.

Volgelson stopped moving and stepped back out of range.

"Mine!" he whined, cowering. "Mine! My essscape from this place!"

"Fine." Volgelson said quietly. "But before you...escape...tell me more of this port city. What is it like there? What layout do you remember?"

The goblin looked surprised, and spoke before he had a chance to check himself again.

"The port? It's typical goblin fortress...big enough for twenty fire-powered ships and fifty smaller sail ships."

He continued in some vein for a while, proud of his

people's accomplishments and eager to showcase obvious goblin superiority. By the time he'd finished, Volgelson felt confident she could draw the plans from memory, although the crude scrawl provided by Grolbark showed more than enough.

The port was large, Volgelson thought, but very efficient in its design, with much of the space being the harbor for ships and mechanisms to move the doors to the side for the ships to pass through. The vessels described were all enclosed submarines that ran on the surface; even the sailing ships were covered over to block out the light of the sun. In fact, they reminded her of the CSS Virginia, the first Confederate ironclad that had been made famous for its duel with the USS Monitor.

She looked up from studying the map and cursed; while she'd been distracted Grolbark had cut his own throat, leaving a gaping smile underneath his horrible face.

She sighed and shook her head, not feeling an iota of pity for the horrid creature. Grabbing her knife from the dead body's hand, she wiped it clean on its trousers and slid it back to its sheath.

"Well, that will be that." She said.

"I have a feeling Jake will not be pleased." Asbiorn rumbled. "There would probably have been more for Grolbark to tell us, even though we'd promised to let him die."

"That's the thing," Volgelson said, turning away from the body which already started to sink below the trunk of the tree he'd been leaning against, roots coming up and wrapping around the dead body and tugging at it, sealing it inside its eventual sarcophagi beneath the surface. "We'd promised he could die. He would have dried up before too much longer, until he got what he wanted in the end."

"I thought you couldn't kill prisoners before, even if they wanted to die." Asbiorn rumbled.

"That was different." Volgelson defended. "After all, those were men! These are goblins, a different matter entirely. And besides, if the courts granted the inmate's request to die (which nearly never happened, true) then we had to abide by the court's decision." Volgelson explained. "But here we have none but the Lord and Lady and they've promised him he could die. I've just ensured that promise is kept so they don't have to do it themselves; we both know how much that would cost them in the end."

"True." Asbiorn rumbled. "Neither would care to murder a defenseless creature, and Serena would never have done it, no matter what had been promised in her name."

"Exactly." Volgelson said, striding out of the dell that grew brighter with each passing moment as the trees pulled apart and stood straight and tall again, seeming to groan in relief, she fancied.

Or was it? She could have sworn she saw the tree wave its branches at her in gratitude. The forest was getting more alive

all the time, and when she actually stopped and thought about it, she had to admit how creepy it actually was. But usually, she found it all perfectly normal.

Just another way being in the presence of a dragon and unicorn; and centaurs and fairies and were-lions too I guess, can change people. This stuff...we would have had orders to H-bomb the place if the suits in Washington had ever gotten wind of this. Her heart thumped painfully at the thought of the harm the forest would have suffered if she'd been ordered to attack it; the thought so abhorrent to her that for a moment she felt physically ill.

They hurried back into the mountain, carrying the precious maps, and calling the rest of her staff to her, she ordered copies made to distribute to all of her sergeants and above, and two copies to be placed in the Great Library for future missions.

Jake came to see them before the day had finished, he looked inscrutable to her as he always did.

They were down in one of the armories, preparing the last minute details when he strode in.

For a long while he said nothing, but at last he spoke.

"So, Grolbark is dead then. Have you found anything useful from him?" he kept his tone light, but Volgelson gulped, feeling guilty.

"Yes." She said, the skills learned in many White House briefings rescuing her. "Quite a bit, actually; it looks like we might actually be able to pull this mission off, though the timing will be very close."

"We knew that already." Jake told her, "About the timing at least. But as of yesterday, we had no clear idea how to march so many men so far with so little gear. What changed?"

"This." Asbiorn told him, holding up one of the copies of Grolbark's map.

Jake leaned in to take a closer look at it.

"This map shows the locations of caches the goblins use on their journeys. All are usually well stocked for two or three patrols, and the greater depots are used to supply all the smaller caves. That's how they can march vast hosts across desert distances very rapidly on the surface. Tom and Stacey had stumbled across one of their smaller supply and resting caves when they rescued Lana. It was part of a vast network that extends throughout the world apparently, though each is subdivided amongst the factions that have sprung up amongst the demon lords and their servants, and even a few wild tribes of goblins. Every one of them has their own system but jealously guard their secret locations, even from others of their own kind. So he only knew the twenty or so that he'd been too that led here. We will have to see about acquiring a scout or two from the enemy and gain more maps to know exactly where all of them are." Asbiorn explained.

"You know, I think that's the most words you've strung together in all the time I've known you." Jake said, his mouth opening in a dragon smile.

Asbiorn snorted his amusement. "I shall have to stay quieter next time and let you guess what crosses my mind."

"Please don't." Jake chuckled. "I think we know how well my mind-reading technique works when I wanted to freeze you all in Dragon Ice."

"You were more than a little obvious." Asbiorn nodded loftily.

Jake didn't dignify him with a response, which served to heighten Asbiorn's amusement, and Volgelson's.

Boys.

Turning her attention to her staff, she examined the information posted on the board. While paper was still a problem, they'd managed to find a crude form of slate and chalk, making her think she'd gone back to grade school, with the heavy smell of chalk dust in the air. The hands of her staffers were white from the chalk dust, which lay on everything.

"When will you depart?" Jake asked, guessing her thoughts.

"With the second dawn." She said. "We still need to make sure we have enough canteens from our supplies to cross the distances between, but having supply caches will make things easier."

"Will our people even be able to eat goblin food?" Jake asked, wrinkling his snout in disgust.

"They are totally carnivorous." Asbiorn said. "So the food is likely to be smoked meats, but it will get us to the sea. There we will have to have the sun-dried fruits and vegetables to get us across the sea without suffering from scurvy and other diseases, which we can hopefully make up when we get to London."

"How long are you expecting the crossing to take?" Jake asked in concern.

"Two weeks at maximum length." Volgelson said. "Grolbark says it takes that long to travel along the sea lanes. The Brissons probably take the shortest routes though, and we'll be moving a little closer to them, but not by much."

"Why is that?" Jake asked, interested.

"Well, the goblins apparently like to keep their movements secret from everybody, their own people and the Brissons. So they travel far from the sea lanes of the others, though there are references to 'Molma', which I don't get, and Grolbark wasn't helpful there, as he'd never seen one, but they are very aggressive and sink whatever boat they come across, according to the legends of his people."

Jake looked thoughtful and concerned. "Take extreme care, general." He told her. "We do not want to lose any of you."

"Of course you won't!" a new voice said from the door. "After all, I'll be there!"

Everyone turned to see Shyla leaning against the doorframe,

looking tired and careworn, but her face was split nearly in two from the triumphant grin that crossed her features.

"What have you found?" Asbiorn asked eagerly, before anyone else could speak.

"Lots of things." She waved her hand airily. "But what matters most...is this." She held up another white volume, but this one looked thicker than any that Volgelson had ever seen. "And this." She admitted, pulling from behind her back a nearly identical book; though its natural color was black, it seemed scorched to Volgelson's eyes, and she wondered why that would be.

"Isn't that?" Asbiorn started to ask concernedly.

"Yes, Shadouix's book." Shyla nodded. "I know it's evil, but a lot of the spells in there are ones that are likely to be used against us, and fortunately, it's pretty complete and easy to read." She said. "And it has some spells that are there simply to survive in harsh environments. It has a really cool dousing spell that should make it easy to find any hidden spring or oasis on the march."

"That will be a huge help." Volgelson said, looking right at her in surprise.

"I hope so, how about the food situation?" Shyla asked.

"It is good." Asbiorn told her. "Grolback had been most helpful to us."

Shyla frowned, instantly going on point. "Had been? He's dead now?"

"Yes." Volgelson told her shortly. "We have kept our word to him."

"Hmm." She shook her head disbelievingly. "I have a hard time imagining anyone going through something like that."

Volgelson shrugged. "It depends on how they were raised. Remember, American soldiers couldn't believe the Japanese civilians that threw themselves from cliffs during the conquest of Okinawa. Babies, kids, girls, mothers, old men...all of them tried to throw themselves off the cliffs before our boys got over the shock and horror long enough to put a stop to it. Nearly the whole population." She shook her head. "Stupid, stupid waste of life." She added sadly.

"Well," Shyla finally broke the silence, looking a little sad herself. "Let's see about getting the last details out of the way."

"I've packed and said my goodbye's to mom. How about you guys?"

Asbiorn and Volgelson shook their heads.

"My family has been dead for centuries before I met you." Asbiorn rumbled.

"And mine were in Washington." Volgelson said heavily. "So I don't have to worry about making any goodbyes here."

"Of course you do!" Shyla scolded, looking angrily at them. Volgelson blinked, not having expected her to turn angry; maybe

embarrassed at her gaff, or commiserating the loss of friends and family, but not angry.

"Asbiorn, if you don't say goodbye to Serena, I'll kick your ass from one side of this mountain to the other for being stupid, and you too Mary." She rounded on her.

Volgelson took a step back and raised her hands.

"Whoa! I don't--", she began again.

"Can it." Shyla made a firm shutting gesture. "You've got lots of family around here. I'm one, and so's Asbiorn; Jake and Serena too! Brian, and Rachel and Tom and Stacey and Lana...you've got lots of good friends here that would consider themselves part of the family, as it were. So don't be giving me that crap about not having anyone here that would miss you."

Volgelson reeled, her mind blanked as she struggled to find words to say.

Shyla seemed to understand, for she grinned cheekily and said, "Now that we've got that settled, time for you to go and say goodbye to your family; we've a long way to go day after tomorrow, and we want to make sure everything is ready."

As she turned away Volgelson heard her mutter, "honestly, it takes a girl from the hood to make her see that? Folks up top really are dumb."

The remark, so unexpected from the sweet-natured and friendly face of Shyla, set Volgelson to laughing long and hard. She hadn't stopped by the time her staff had turned away from their boards to troop upstairs for dinner.

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Two days later, Volgelson watched her soldiers march out the mouth of the tunnel and down the slopes; each man or woman clad in gray cloaks with primitive webbing in the stitching, bright metal armor or here and there the older bullet-proof vests, and tough boots; each of them had at their hip a longsword, and on their back hung a square shield of their hardest steel stiffened and supported by boards sawn from the greatest of dropped limbs. The trees, perhaps sensing the upcoming storm, had shed many of their largest, lowest branches, which the foresters gathered and brought to the carpentry shop. Strapped to the shields were great, heavy packs that every soldier carried, filled with foodstuffs, waterskins, canteens, and what little medical supplies they possessed. On their shoulders or being used as walking staffs were bright spears shod with steel.

All in all, her soldiers were carrying close to a hundred and fifty pounds on their backs, but none of them complained; all realized their packs would get far too light too soon, and the heaviest gear they would need at the end of the journey.

Volgelson fretted at their burdens; she wished she could have had at least a pair of trucks to carry supplies in, or even some wagons pulled by horses! But Jake had been adamant that they wouldn't have the means necessary to bring the equipment to

battle; they would have to abandon it in the desert and who knew if the goblins would take them? The handful of armored fighting vehicles, trucks and heavy equipment would have to remain in storage for a very long time yet.

Shyla puffed up next to her, wearing her own set of bright armor, covered by the gray cloak, and carrying a heavy pack. She bore no shield but instead walked with an oak staff that Volgelson hadn't seen before.

Catching her curious look, Shyla answered the unspoken question.

"Serena gave it to me." She explained, "On my way out this morning. 'This staff is from the Great Tree, may it aid you in your casting'. Funny, isn't it?" she laughed lightly. "Me, walking with a staff! None of the spells I've read call for one, but with this," she shook it slightly, "I feel like I can do anything! Anyway, this stick is nearly as important."

From her pack she pulled a small willow branch, cut and smoothed into a supple rod.

"This has spells wound around it for finding water." She said. "Kind of like an actual dousing rod, if you will. With luck, we can find springs along the way that we'll mark on the maps we bring back; our scouts can use them on their patrols."

Volgelson nodded, relieved. That Shyla could do as she promised didn't faze her in the slightest; she'd seen too much magic too doubt much of anything these days.

Seeing the last rank exit the cave, the three started to walk with the men, walking faster than the column to retake the lead.

As they walked under the eaves, flowers fell in their path from the trees, while squirrels and birds trilled overhead and animals looked up from meal and sleep to watch them pass.

Nor were they the only ones; it seemed the entire mountain had beat the army out the gates and lined the trail on either side. Some cheered as they passed, others threw flowers of their own under their feet, a symbol of hope that they would return Volgelson learned later.

At the far edge, past the river for three leagues, they found Jake, Serena, Tom, Stacey, Brian and Rachel waiting for them.

"Good luck to you all." Serena told everyone, the sun shone like white fire on her hair, on her brow glistened a silver crown, her fair raiment, girt with a belt of wrought silver, gave her a regal cast while the sun showed the tear in the corner of her eyes, the only emotion on her otherwise expressionless face.

Volgelson found herself coming to attention and bowing.

"Thank you milady," she stumbled.

Looking around she realized she hadn't been the only one; it seemed the Lady had an impact on the entire army.

Jake spoke, pulling her attention to him.

"May you all return safely." His solemn gaze swept the assembled. "You are their only hope, the strength of our ancestors goes with you."

No one said anything, nor did anyone see the need to say anything. What had been said had been. The army turned to the desert and trooped away, Volgelson, Shyla, and Asbiorn at their head.

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Shyla proved as good as her word; the divining rod led them to small springs every couple of days along the route, and they learned to take that as a sign to search for the goblin caves; many times they were built close by if they couldn't be dug over the spring itself.

In some areas, there weren't natural springs or natural wells, and in these places the goblins had created deep holes they'd lined with rocks and mortar to create a waterproof chamber in their caves; how they got the water there in the first place, Volgelson couldn't guess, unless they carried them through the desert nights in buckets.

The shifting desert sands gave way to hard-pack, then to clay. Volgelson realized that they'd traveled almost eighteen days and nights. Her army had begun to look a little tired and careworn, with the endless marches every day.

A change in the wind brushed her face, and she sniffed deeply, detecting for the first time, the scent of salt water.

Shyla came up to her as she stood silent watch over the camp below; placed at the base of a dune, every tent faded into the gray twilight, the sand packed around the bases to keep them from vanishing.

"Do you smell that?" Shyla asked finally.

"Do you mean the smell of the sea?" Volgelson asked her.

"Yes. We are nearing the port, I'm thinking." Shyla nodded. "I actually wanted to talk to you about that. We should send Asbiorn and me ahead to wipe out what scouts we can find, and locate that port."

"I've been thinking much the same." Volgelson nodded. "But one person would have to cover a lot of territory, moving very fast, and that would leave them easily seen, I think. Even Asbiorn. We should send several scouts, along different paths, and bring them back at the end of the march tomorrow."

"But the more we send, the more we risk revealing our hand." Shyla pointed out. "Worse yet, they could let a goblin get away, or be captured themselves, and our secret is out. Asbiorn in cat-form, while exciting comment on his size, wouldn't be necessarily linked to humans."

"Point." Volgelson conceded, chewing her lip and thinking.

"I think," she said slowly, "that you raise a good point, but we will definitely reveal ourselves when we attack the port. Despite my confidence, I don't think we'll root all the survivors out and kill them before we have to take to ship if we

want to get to London on time."

Shyla joined her in staring at the camp, catching sight of three men hurrying far outside the camp where a small basket had been planted in the desert sand.

"It's a good thing you thought about that latrine system." Shyla interrupted her thoughts.

Volgelson snorted. "Every military commander worth his salt knows the importance of latrines; even on the fastest march. Rommel was defeated by sickness spread by flies caused by his lack of sanitation, while the British still had a strong, healthy army."

Shyla looked blank, so Volgelson sighed and continued, bringing back the old lessons from her West Point days.

"Rommel's Afrika Corps were the terror of the British for a long time because of their lightning speed and Rommel's daring attacks, right?"

Shyla nodded. "Right, he marched rings around the British and bypassed strong points to starve them out."

"Right. He's been called the father of modern tank strategy, and his tactics are studied tod...er, in the old days. But he had a problem; he would move so fast that his soldiers wouldn't bother digging holes or if they did, they left them wide open and didn't bury their waste when they took a shit or what have you. The smell attracted flies that not only landed on the open waste, but also on the rations Rommel's men were eating, and what he ate himself. I think nearly half his force fell to disease at the worst times, and the rest were sick as dogs. He was forced by the doctors to abandon his men and return to Germany."

"The British, meanwhile, weren't facing any such problems. While they were waiting for resupply, they had a very strict disciplinarian in command,"

"Montgomery Scott." Shyla supplied. "We studied WWII history in high school." She explained to Volgelson's questioning look.

"Right, well. Um, so Montgomery had his soldiers take crates and cut a hole in the bottom, leaving the lid off. The crates were placed over deep holes in the sand or dirt and the hole in the bottom had a heavy burlap fabric nailed over the top. The flap kept flies out and could be flipped up when the toilet was in use, and the flies weren't contaminated when they got into the food."

"I see." Shyla nodded. "Well, whatever the case, I'm glad we have the system in place...and no flies!"

"Yeah, for now at least." Volgelson resumed thinking about the challenges ahead.

"Well," she said sometime later. "I guess we still want to have some sort of surprise when we go after that port, we'll have to do it your way."

"Don't worry General." Shyla patted her arm. "Asbiorn won't

be seen."

"Let's hope not." She muttered. "It'd be nice if we could get the drop on them completely."

#

Volgelson led the army out of the camp long before the sun rose into the sky, trying to cover the most distance before the sun rose too high in the sky.

They marched until late in the morning before erecting shelter to hide from the blistering heat of the sun.

While halted, Volgelson took a few moments to study one of Lana's maps. Beside it lay one of the maps she was used too, of the home she knew the best.

The differences between the two were nearly as alien as if she'd stepped off a starship onto Aries 12 or another of the near-Earth-like planets that had been discovered in their own time. She could recognize few landmarks on the map, despite the changed names, and she marveled anew at the changes.

Perhaps the biggest one was the loss of the eastern seaboard. All the lands to the Mississippi were underwater, the Appalachian mountains were considered small islands that were eroding. Back from the new shoreline, the country had a huge finger of water running into it where she remembered the Grand Canyon being. Yet it stopped south of where the old state of Colorado would have been. Beyond that shore lay a huge desert (at least that fact hadn't changed much), but the mountains that had served as the bulwark between sand and rain had vanished in the countless years between.

Of course, if the east had vanished and the middle diminished, then the west had certainly grown. Severe volcanic activity could account for some of it, but vast stretches of what had been canals and coastline had become dry land, and the new shores stretched many miles past that.

A huge symbol near the upper western limits, and the evidence of her own sight, showed a huge volcano had risen. According to the map, it was hundreds of miles across and almost ten miles high. It would be right about the place where the enormous Yellowstone Crater would be, she thought and assumed that at some point the supervolcano had become active again. She just hoped it had died out again, or gone dormant, or whatever it was volcanoes did.

Daydreaming! She gave herself a mental tap to bring her attention back to plotting their course.

Placing her finger on where she thought they were, she paced it out to where Grolbark had indicated the port lay. It wasn't far, maybe a day's march if they were lucky.

She glanced up at the sun and then turned to her men. "All right, we'll let them sleep for another hour, then we start marching again. The sun will be down a ways, and we can make good time." Her mouth tightened. "But that won't be able to happen tomorrow. If we're going to have good light when we

attack this place, then we've got to march all day to have enough time."

"Sir, what if they have heavy wooden doors?" a major asked. "We didn't bring with us a battering ram or high explosives to force something like that."

"Thank you, Major Donaldson." Volgelson nodded to him. "As it happens, we do have a small amount of high explosives for this job, but I'd rather not use it if we can help it. We can't get any more, for one thing. Still, it's our hope that Asbiorn can kill all the scouts that might be on our route. If he finds a large door, he will see if he can take out their door wardens himself. If so, then the door will remain open and in the sunlight, we hope. Then all we have to do is march inside."

"If he cannot force the door, or it faces away from the sun and remains in shadow most of the day and they close it anyway, then we'll have to use the explosives." She finished.

Everyone nodded; they knew it would be a difficult fight. Volgelson took their measure and realized none of them showed any hint of wanting to leave; there was some trepidation to be sure, but not one looked incapacitated with fear. Emotion surged in her chest and she recognized the pride she had in her army.

"All right ladies and gentlemen, we know what we have to do, so let's get it done, shall we?"

#

They made the final preparations for the assault in the last minutes of the fading light after they made camp; soldiers checked their armor and equipment, sharpened sword and spear and checked fletching and rounds of ammunition. Volgelson didn't want to use any of her precious ammunition and rifles in the upcoming attack, but neither did she want to lose men y not using weapons available to her.

Volgelson returned to her tent, wore out from the march, the equipment search, and the final battles. The lack of plans for the port concerned her; Grolbark had given them a lot of good intelligence on the parts he'd seen, but he hadn't been able to provide them with detailed information about the rest of the structure. How big was the thing, really? How big was the entire garrison? How much was given over to logistical support? He didn't know, as he hadn't cared about the answers when he'd been there.

Asbiorn hadn't returned to give a report either, and they'd come across four dead goblin scouts earlier in the march, their heads torn clean off and bits of them piled neatly for them to find. They'd buried the remains (not wanting to give themselves away with the circling carrion eaters, who'd flown up smelling the meat and flown away, disappointed when it couldn't be found and by Shyla's use of mirrors to blind the birds and annoy them into leaving).

Of course, he isn't supposed to come back and give a report if he's lying in wait for the door guard, but dammit, I'd feel a

lot better if he'd had, or at least reported what was waiting for us!

She had to take comfort in what she could control, and right now it was literally at arms reach; her own sword and shield lay next to her bed. That would be all she could control as she slept, but tomorrow, that would be a different story.

Indeed, the first thing she noticed when she woke was the sound of footsteps coming towards her tent. Leaping to her feet, she snatched up shield and sword as Shyla stepped inside. The younger woman's face looked pinched and worn, and Volgelson wondered if she'd gotten any sleep in the night, but admitted that with Asbiorn gone, she probably hadn't.

Without realizing it, she reached out and patted the girl's shoulder.

"It'll be all right, you'll see." She said quietly. "The Lady willing, we'll all make it through today without a scratch."

Shyla quirked an eyebrow at her. "The Lady willing? You starting to fall for the hype of those Maidens now?" she smiled.

A flutter of fear cut through her, but was immediately tamped down sternly.

"Of course not," she said aloud. "I keep saying that with time this nonsense will die out."

"I doubt it." Shyla shook her head. "Especially after Serena used some of them in that spell...I guarantee that they are all but being worshiped by their fellows now."

She sighed. "What fools." She said. "They've got to know that Serena *doesn't* want to be worshiped or waited on...she just wants to live quietly in her Glade and be pretty much left alone."

"Then she shouldn't be leading as much as she has been." Volgelson remarked dryly. "She's put herself squarely in the pickle she's in right now."

"Well, her and Jake." Shyla allowed. She thought for a moment and then laughed. "And all of us! God above, aren't we all leaders of our little band of escapees? God, who would have thought it of us?"

"No one back home, that's for sure." Volgelson agreed.

"Certainly no one in the hood!" Shyla laughed.

Volgelson looked at her, startled.

"What?" Shyla asked, catching the look.

"Well, I never thought of you as being from 'The Hood' before." She admitted. "You speak...well, you speak like an Oxford student most of the time."

"What, you think a poor kid from the wrong side of the tracks can't go to college and university?" Shyla demanded with sudden heat. "That we aren't as 'cultured' and 'well-bred' as you rich folk? There were plenty of poor and flat ass broke like us, and they were pretty good folk."

Volgelson held up her hands hastily. "I didn't mean

anything by it!" she cried. "Never was very rich myself; the only way I could go to college was through the military; liked it so much I...I never left. But I've met and worked and lived with people on all levels, and you sound very upper-class to me. It...caught me by surprise is all."

Shyla deflated a little, though she still looked a little hard-eyed at her. But she nodded. "Yeah, I guess so." She said at last. "It comes from hanging around Jake and Serena and the other changed for so long I guess."

"What?" Volgelson asked, wondering how many more surprises she was going to hear before she had breakfast.

"Yeah, Jake and the others talked about it when I was their...um, 'guest' in the mountain." Shyla explained. "They'd been normal kids, but after the changes, they found themselves thinking and talking a lot different then they used to...Brian and Rachel for example...you know they were only middle of their classes? Nearly at the bottom in some subjects and complete bottom in others. When they became centaurs, they found everything coming naturally to them, like someone flipped a switch inside their brains and said 'Boing! Congratulations, your geniuses now!' and that was that."

Volgelson shook her head slowly, imagining such a drastic change occurring to her.

"It's amazing that they didn't go mad." She said at last.

"Magic, right? Very unusual, very powerful stuff. No wonder it's such a Hollywood favorite." Shyla commented.

Before they could speak further, one of her aides came interrupted, saying the army was awake and preparing to march.

"Good." Volgelson said briskly. "Make sure every one of them is fed and watered before we begin. In the afternoon, we shall have come to either the doorway or the sea...and I don't want to be caught at the sea. Put out a light screen of scouts ahead, we need to make contact with Asbiorn."

The army uncoiled itself from the dark dell like a dragon waking from sleep, stepping briskly into the cool morning.

All day they marched, while the sun rose steadily into the sky and the heat began to become unbearable. All drank thirstily as they went, sipping from their skins and taking what salt had come from the old supplies under the mountain.

A scout ran back to them when the sun seemed three hours from setting. The army looked up like wolves seeing prey ahead.

In her heart, Volgelson felt the thrill and eagerness for battle like any of her men. The feeling surprised her; in the battles she'd suffered through in the Middle East and for the City, she'd never remembered feeling so *alive*, so *ready* before.

She shrugged off wanting to analyze it further as the scout raced up to her.

"Sir!" he saluted sharply as he spoke. "We've made contact with Asbiorn, but it's as you feared; the door is sealed in the shadow of a narrow valley, the sun can't reach it to blind the

door guards, even if we should pass into the door, and it shut tight this morning."

Volgelson sighed. "Well, we shall have to use the explosives then." She said regretfully. "Prepare the charges."

She beckoned the staff close. Colonels and Majors appeared from nowhere, as well as Captain Fairmeyer, of the sole Marine contingent left.

"Gentlemen," she said as soon as they'd appeared. "We have learned that we'll have to blow the doors. We need to have the army ready to attack before that time. Colonel Barnes, you'll unit will support Captain Fairmeyer's initial assault. Fairmeyer, you have to have your men through the breach in good order as soon as the charges have done their work."

The muscular, fair-haired man nodded. His shield, Volgelson saw now as he shifted it in his hands, bore the standard of the Marines, the eagle and fouled anchor above the world.

"All right, then we'll move up in this order; Wallace, Reilly, Patton, Dorgood, Lewison. The archers will come last and behind us." She said. "Stick to the plan, clear out as many of the buggers as you can without taking heavy losses." She added sternly. "Remember, we're doing this so we can sail halfway round the world and fight *another* battle at the end of it."

The men nodded, and she dismissed them.

"If you don't mind." Shyla said mildly. "I think I'll go with Captain Fairmeyer. My light spell could come into good effect in those tunnels against the goblins."

Volgelson hesitated; on one hand she was loath to put their only working magic user into such danger so early, but if she could lower their casualties and counter any magic before resistance could *really* get organized, perhaps it would be worth it.

"All right." She said at last. "You can go, but be careful!"

"I will." She said, saluting sharply before hurrying away.

Volgelson frowned; they'd never really discussed her role in the battle order, she realized now. Did she technically outrank her? Or did her magic abilities and longer association with their leadership place her above Volgelson and in technical command of the army?

No, Jake said the Army was mine to command. Volgelson thought irritably. Shyla would be under her.

Her moment of crisis over, Volgelson hurried to take command of the last ranks going in; like the old days of fighting, she would be going in with her men, something her warrior's heart looked forward too with something approaching glee.

It seemed a long, interminable wait before the quiet morning found itself violently rent by explosions it had not heard for many millions of years. The ancient Thermite, protected by Dragon Ice, had not been touched by the passage of

time, and performed as if they'd been made only yesterday.

From her position, Volgelson could see very little; but experience told her that the door had been turned to matchwood, and the marines were charging in (she could hear their yells and cries of, "Semper Fi!"), and the army in front of her began to move forward at a jog.

The gaping entry yawned suddenly over the heads of her soldiers. Volgelson watched as her ranks disappeared into that abyss, and she felt a momentary pang of fear, but she buried it deeply and let no hint of it to touch her stern features.

Following behind, she blinked in the entryway. When her eyes had adjusted sufficiently, she followed on, stepping over the bodies of the door guards. Even in the momentary glance, she could see that the explosion had killed all of them, and there were far fewer than she expected; indeed, there were only two there, and she pondered at that; she would have expected a major port to have far more.

The tunnel wound deep into the hill, shored by large timbers. It wasn't straight, but had several bends as they went further, and she thought that they would make great defensive points, and wondered why it wasn't better protected until she realized that they were there for the simple purpose of blocking any light from the entrance. Dim gems were studded into the walls that appeared to provide the only needed light for the goblins.

Great, if this is what this port is like, it's going to be a nightmare to take one of their main cities. She thought grimly.

Now bodies started to appear; defenders hurrying to the noise that had run right into the Marines, who with their longer legs could outrun the goblins and slay them before they could turn and flee.

Abruptly the walls vanished on either side, and Volgelson realized she'd stepped into a vast, shadowy chamber. The smell of the sea filled her nose strongly (which she realized she'd been smelling for some time), and there was a chill and dampness in the air.

A white light burst into the air, making Volgelson throw her hand up to her face to shield her eyes, while terrified cries, both the familiar screams of the enemy and something else came above the din of swords.

Blinking her still smarting eyes, Volgelson lowered her eyes and saw Shyla at the front next to her marines with Asbiorn at her side. The witch seemed to be engaged with no less than three goblins of larger size than ordinary, one of which appeared to be a sorcerer! Balls of fire struck her shield, though most now went horribly wild, and burned several goblins nearby as the caster threw blindly, shielding his eyes with one arm. It proved his downfall, as Shyla abruptly dropped the magic shield and vaulted over one of the terrified guards, stabbing

the sorcerer through the heart with her sword and shoving the crumpled body off with a swift kick. Turning to the other guards, she killed the two others with her sword.

Asbiorn turned from the pile of goblin bodies that lay as mute testimony to a force that had managed some discipline to try and stand together in formation. He was in his cat form of course, and he seemed a veritable mountain of flesh racing along with the speed and grace of the mountain lions he looked like.

The marines had driven most of the goblins against the far wall, and were in the process of slaughtering them where they stood.

Looking round, Volgelson could see that a great space just to her left and extending out in either direction in a large, graceful circle. In the cavity, she could see the sea only four feet below the ledge, with stairs, carved into the rock and disappearing down into the green waters, spaced regularly every fifty feet along the edge. Docks floated on the limpid surface gently, with several ships of great size snugged neatly next to them.

The ships elicited her particular interest; they all had very tall funnels that stuck up between the tall masts, but the rest of the ship appeared to be unlike anything she'd ever heard of.

For example, they had no open top deck that she could see; no wheel, handrails, raised platforms, or any of the normal ship clutter she'd come to expect. About the only familiar thing appeared to be the watertight hatches that lined the deck, six that she could count spaced evenly along the top deck. No porthole existed that she could see on the drab, solid sides of the vessel, except for the piercings on either side of the hull for the paddlewheels that drove the vessel forward or backward through the sea.

How on earth do they actually drive these things? She wondered. She hoped it would be something relatively easy to figure out, or the plan would be scuttled before they could get the boats ready to sail.

The sound of sword fighting died away, Volgelson noted with relief, but the shrieks didn't. Confused, she looked up to see what was taking so long in dealing with the last of the goblins. She realized that the marines had backed away from the wall where the last of the creatures lay in tangled heaps, but that wasn't where the cries were coming from. They came from a series of cages stacked neatly like the rest of the supplies to be ready to board the ships bobbing gently in the harbor, but these cages were filled with hundreds of Brissons!

No, not hundreds, she realized in some remote, tiny portion of her brain not affected by the horror she saw in front of her. Instead, there seemed to be at most a hundred brissons chained in five cages, one for each ship. Their clothing seemed tattered and torn, while great iron collars circled their necks. Most

were very lean, but not scrawny, and a few appeared to be missing limbs.

They had to be slaves to the goblins, chained when not given specific tasks or assigned to a ship. Only later would she learn how the goblins also used them as living provisions for longer voyages, deeming them unworthy to convert in the exception of only taking control of their minds to a limited degree, so they wouldn't fight back or rebel against their eventual fate.

Now, though, broken free of the sorcerers that had held them enthralled, they were clearly terrified out of their wits at the appearance of strangers unlike anything they'd seen before, dressed in bright armor and heavily armed, regardless of the fact they'd killed their cruel masters.

Shyla fought her way through the press of people and stood next to Volgelson, her lips compressed into an angry line.

"We'll have to free all of them, immediately." She said. "But we need to make sure they don't hurt themselves or us in the process."

"How do you suggest we do that?" Volgelson asked her.

Shyla gave her a sickly grin. "Actually, I'd hoped you had an idea on that."

Volgelson shook her head. "We had some training on who to contact when we came into contact with modern slaves." She said. "My group was out of the Middle East when the terrorists started wholesale slavery." She explained. "We don't have access to those resources anymore."

"Serena could help them if she was here." Shyla sighed. "But I might be able to do something." She said thoughtfully. "Let me check on something while you detail some men to help me. I'll take care of these poor prisoners while you prepare the ships for transport."

"Right." Volgelson nodded, noting her selected staff already gathering to pass her orders out.

"Remember," Volgelson told her as she thought hard about the time schedule. "Whatever you do, we cannot be known to the outside world for as long as possible, and we also have to leave as soon as possible."

"All right." Shyla nodded, her hand already thrust into her pack, no doubt to search for her spell books.

Volgelson left her to it and turned to start issuing orders for the clearing of any goblins left on the ships and the embarkation of the army. They would both, she thought grimly, be very easy tasks compared to what lay ahead.

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