

(Chapter ONE)

Port #

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Shyla watched Volgelson hurry away to deal with her officers and clearing the boats. She felt a momentary pang of guilt, thinking that she should be helping the Marines in the effort; no doubt they would need good light to blind the goblins and with the enclosed spaces torches would do no good.

What we need are flashlights or something that gives off light like... she froze, remembering the stones the goblins used as torches along the cave walls.

Hurrying to the nearest, she used her knife to pry it free from its holder and examined it.

The green crystal shone dully in her hand, like a flashlight that had run out of energy in its batteries.

Batteries... the thought crossed her mind and she wondered.

She remembered an energy transference spell in one of her books. The spell had talked of using it to pass energy to a locus in order to store it for use later. Of course, the spell required a gemstone, but perhaps she could use this crystal in the same manner?

She spoke the words to the spell, "Mothelden mora soldictulor crodlin..." and on.

Abruptly she became aware of the energy in the crystal in her palm, like it had become a clear glass with colored liquid inside. It seemed nearly empty, with the withdrawal so slight that even the tiny amount could power the stone for years, she judged.

She delicately increased the reserve inside the crystal, filling it slowly as she tried to guess how much of her own strength it sapped. To her relief, she discovered the draw minimal, not even noticeable even with the crystal brimming with energy. Then she altered the regulation spell on the crystal.

The result proved dramatic; the green light turned white and shone with the power of a spotlight in her palm.

She saw heads turn towards her, attracted by the light. She glanced down again at the brilliant jewel in her hand and raised her voice to fill the cavern.

"All assault teams to me! You," she pointed to a sergeant and his squad who snapped to attention, "take your men back up the tunnel and collect every stone you can. Bring them to me."

The soldiers took off at a dead run back up the tunnel, pulling short, wicked prying knives from their sheaths. Shyla watched them go, satisfied that she could help the soldiers in their attack.

It took a while for the stones to come back, and when they did she enchanted an additional eight of them and handed all of

the glowing stones to the assault team leaders who came to her as word spread that she wanted to see them before the attack.

"Take these stones." She said. "They will light your way in those hellholes, and may force the enemy to retreat even before you come to grips with them, and may hamper their fighting when you corner them."

Identical grins split their faces and they took the lights like children with Christmas presents. Saluting her, they passed back to their teams, who were preparing to attack the dock.

Shyla watched them go for a moment, then turned back to her original task. Sliding her finger down the spine of her book, she searched for healing spells that would help calm the terrified prisoners. For some minutes the tome refused to aid her but at last, she uncovered what she sought.

Reading the spell quickly, she hurried to the cages. There she found several Brissons lying on the ground nearly catatonic, these were the smallest, she noted, and seemed none-too-well cared for. The others were standing in tight clusters near the center of the caves watching with wide wonder at the people now moving through the cavern and their guards.

The strongest and healthiest of them, a scarred gray tomcat taller than the rest by a few inches, stepped from the group as she approached.

"Hello." He spoke in a voice roughened from disuse and uncertainty. The language seemed almost universal, a rough, barking form of English that Shyla remembered Gavin, Matcha and Annabel speaking. The near parallel histories they shared were...eerie, she thought. In fact, she wasn't sure she wouldn't have preferred the Brissons to speak some completely alien, nearly impossible to pronounce language all their own. Jake theorized that English had been taught to their earliest ancestors by their creators during the war, probably by American and British scientists.

She jerked her mind back to the present and focused on the speaker. Regardless of how he'd acquired his language, it did make things more convenient for her right now.

"Hello." She said simply. There came a stir amongst the prisoners, and the gray tom blinked, struggling to come to grips with an alien that spoke just like him.

Buster, just you wonder what its like for me! Shyla thought with a smile.

"Um... who, who are you?" he managed to say in a slightly strangled voice.

"My name is Shyla," she told him. "And we are here to help you."

At that his face took on a ray of hope, and the others let go of their clutch, just a little.

"If what you say is true, then that will be a great thing." He said cautiously, "But what do you intend to do with us, once we are out of these cages?"

Oof, that's a good question. Shyla thought. They wanted their people to remain unknown, at least for a little while longer. While no one thought that the evil lords or goblin chiefs had any way of communicating beyond the usual runners, they couldn't be sure, and if the host they were attempting to follow and overtake should get wind of them, then it could be a disaster.

On the other hand, these poor people had suffered enough, in her opinion, and needed to be returned to their families and homes. They shouldn't be made to wait for them to return to be freed, and what if the goblins should come back?

No, Shyla shook her head, there wasn't any way for it, they had to go wherever they willed, despite the danger.

Aloud, she said, "I shall do nothing to you, except heal you, if I can. Otherwise, once these cages are opened, you may go wherever you wish. We would ask that you not reveal our existence to anyone, however. We mean to overtake the host of goblins that came through here and sailed to England. This task, and the saving of the English people, would be greatly aided by our remaining secret."

The gray tom raised his eyes still further, seeming to look at her eyes for the first time in the conversation (before he'd always just looked at her mouth), and his eyes were cored with sudden fire.

"You are going to England?" he asked quietly, a strange emotion in his voice.

"Yes." Shyla nodded. "On those vessels that remain." She pointed to the black shapes in the harbor, with the lights already swarming over them as the marines boarded and searched them for the last remaining holdouts.

"Could we go with you?" he asked at once, and most of the Brissons looked up eagerly.

"Umm." Shyla looked at him doubtfully; they were so thin! And while heavily muscled from hard labor, she doubted any of them had the strength to be of any sort of aid in the upcoming fight. Not to mention how to integrate them with the fighting units at such a late juncture!

Some of what she thought must have shown on her face, because the tom smiled at her. "I don't think we can fight, at least very well, compared to such big people as yourselves; but we do know how to crew those hellish ships, and to do so as free men would be a joy unlike any we've known in a very long time."

Shyla blinked; that would solve a lot of their problems right there! Few of the people in the army had been anything but pleasure boaters in civilian life, and fewer still had served in the navy (with the exception, of course, of the Marines), and none of them on these old-fashioned steamers. Having skilled hands on board would greatly ease the challenges.

"Of course!" she said eagerly. "We would be delighted to have you, mister...?"

"Applegate, Edgar Applegate." He said quietly. "But before we can serve you, perhaps you could help us still further?"

"How's that?" Shyla asked, using a short magic blast to melt the locks on the cage.

"Well, our families--those that survive--are being held further in. If possible, we would like to go and see if our wives and children are still here, or if they've been taken as food."

It took a moment for what Edgar had said to register in her brain, but the words percolated through her subconscious until they reached her conscious thought. At them, her anger turned cold and she looked up from her work. Edgar drew back in fright.

"Did I hear you right?" She said icily, "Did you say that your wives and children were being used as *food* for the goblins?"

Edgar nodded, seemingly with relief that she was not mad at him.

"Yes." He said. "Just like us, they are given to the cooks when they can no longer work, or the Dolna are especially hungry and haven't found anything else to eat, or when we are hurt or sick."

Her staff glowed an angry red, but Shyla barely noticed. The ice in her heart had exploded in red flame, and she whirled towards the blackened passages behind the cages, the "further in the mountain" that she had to go.

Striding forward, her duty to the prisoners abruptly forgotten, she blasted the locks from the final cages and continued on into the nearly black tunnels that led away from the main chamber.

She hadn't gone far when she heard human voices ahead of her. They were from the army contingent that had been sent to check this tunnel for signs of goblins and to kill any they saw. They were surprised to see her, but she brushed past them without a word, just as she ignored the gentle green illumination that lit the tunnel, caused by some sort of strange fungus that grew on the walls. That light became overridden by the brilliance of her staff as she passed swiftly down the tunnel.

Abruptly the tunnel opened into a small chamber off to the side, and here she found twenty goblins pressed against the wall, shrieking and wailing in fright. They were dressed in bloody aprons and in their hands were short butcher knives and cleavers and tools of their trade, as well as the remains of their last meal. Not a brisson, she noted with relief, but a small desert deer.

However, beyond the door, she could hear the soft weeping of Brisson voices, while behind her the soldiers entered the tunnel, weapons poised to finish off the cooks.

But Shyla would not be denied! Her wrath turned to words springing from her lips and a whip of fire appeared in the air

before her. It struck the goblins as they cowered against the wall, their knives forgotten, one by one and killed them, their flesh sizzling and filling the chamber with a foul reek like pork left on an open fire until it is nearly ash and not fit to eat.

The soldiers stared at the smoking corpses in awe and fright. They jumped when Shyla spoke commandingly.

"Take those cloths down from the tables, and those spare aprons on those pegs and toss them over those things." She pointed at the bodies. "Those poor kids don't need to see that!"

The soldiers hastened to obey, some dragging the corpses into a corner and stacking them while others covered the top bodies with bits of cloth to hide them.

Shyla, meanwhile, opened the door to discover nearly seventy wives and children inside the door, pushed into the locker like sardines in a can. Alarmed, she pulled them out as rapidly as she could, passing young and old alike to the soldiers who spaced them out on the floor of the kitchen and into the tunnel even. The Brissons came from the room panting and dizzy, seeming not to notice who had pulled them from the room at first, but grateful just to be free from the press.

When the last of them were pulled from the furthest reaches, Shyla let the light in her staff die, and the room turned black, for there was no light in there to be seen, not even fungus.

Turning to the victims, she passed rapidly through the throng, using spells for the aiding of breathing and general hurts to soothe them. The Brissons reacted remarkably well to her magic, their eyes clearing rapidly and becoming fixed on just who exactly had saved them.

Rapid footsteps coming up the tunnel made her look up in time to see Edgar and his people coming through the tunnel mouth (it had taken them this long to catch up with her longer strides and to get over their natural fright of the sounds of battle), but upon seeing their loved ones sitting upright or standing with awed expressions they gave a glad cry and rushed forward.

Concerned, Shyla raised her staff to prepare a spell to trap the eager brissons so they didn't trample anyone, but she realized she didn't need it. The Brissons were being very careful of those on the floor, even gently pulling some to their feet, hugging each other in a rare show of affection or petting one another and speaking softly in their language like a cavern with six cats and dogs speaking to each other.

"Ma'am?" one of the soldiers asked, everyone staring uncomfortably at the reunion, feeling like they were intruding on a tender and private scene.

Shyla realized they were talking to her and thought about the question.

"We must return back to the main chamber." She decided. "After we've ensured that everyone that is left has been

accounted for. Then we'll sail for England tonight."

Those words brought new life to the rescuees, and they broke into broad smiles and their talk turned bright and cheerful.

To Shyla's surprise, none of them seemed at all horrified at the dead bodies on the floor; they ignored them entirely unless it was to aim a swift kick at a charred foot or perhaps spit onto a shrouded form.

Once everyone had gathered themselves into the central chamber and counted themselves, Shyla learned that most of the Brissons that had once existed in that miserable city had been taken by the armies as they crossed the sea, the goblins assuming that there would be plenty of victims to seize from London to use on the return trip and still have slaves to work for them. Of their own losses, the surprise and ferocity of the assault had caught the goblins completely unawares, and none of them had been their best warriors; only a dozen had suffered wounds in the fight, and none had died.

"That's...something else." Volgelson shook her head. "I'd expected there to be far more casualties than this."

"Hey, don't knock it." Shyla said. "We should count ourselves lucky that it wasn't worse."

"You're right, of course." Volgelson nodded. "I just thought it strange."

Shyla shrugged. "I don't find it that way." She said seriously, "as I suspect that they took the best soldiers with them when they set out to sea, and left pretty much the dregs and raw recruits behind. Even the mages weren't anything to really talk about."

For just a second, Shyla caught an approving glint from Volgelson's eye, but it was gone almost as soon as she thought it, and she wondered if she'd really seen it.

"Well, I guess that we should try and get this show on the road." Volgelson told her, becoming brisk and martial again. "Shyla, take charge of the Brissons; if they are willing to help us, we can certainly use them. In the meantime, we need to try and recover as much of the edible supplies as we can."

"We should also try and find some sort of fishing line and tackle." Shyla suggested. "We might run across a school of fish or something on our way across that we can catch."

"Maybe." Volgelson nodded. "Who can say? In the meantime, we need to get ready to leave."

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