

(Chapter ONE)

The Battle of London #

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Shyla stared at the ranks of their soldiers that stood on the walls. Perhaps not since the Renaissance had any human taking to standing on *battlements* like this; say what you would about the brissons, they built really good walls. They were fifteen feet thick on average and about fifty feet high. They gave an excellent view of the surrounding countryside and, unfortunately, the black host that approached them, its fearsome banners waving in the air above their armored heads.

"I never imagined there would be so many." She confided to Abiorn, who stood near. "Even with the losses they've already sustained and the need to have large enough forces to guarantee the destruction of Lana and her people, I would have thought that this army wouldn't be so big."

"It may be a trick." He reminded her. "After all, deception and illusion are two things dark magic uses to make it seem more powerful than it really is."

Shyla shrugged, looking solemnly out. She couldn't refute his statement as she'd been forbidden to actually use magic until after the battle had been joined; they'd hoped to bring the main forces down upon themselves (that's why they'd chosen the area closest to the main gate) so she couldn't see how she could dispel the illusion if there was one, and she had an uncomfortable feeling that there would be almost no illusion to be found here.

The host that faced them now were formed in seven long columns twenty abreast and at least a mile long; Shyla couldn't even begin to estimate the numbers of troops that faced them, maybe fifty thousand, perhaps more. She did know already that they would be hard-pressed to survive the night.

Or perhaps not, she thought fiercely to herself. After all, she had magic of her own, augmented with the strands of hair from the Lady of the Wood, and Asbiorn had his great strength as well, and all the humans were drawn in the perfect formation, crouched behind battlements to prevent the enemy from noticing the differences in height between them and the Brissons that were with them. Hopefully, that surprise would add a nasty, deadly shock.

As time wore on, the marching columns began to fragment, the front ranks peeling off to one side to link up with the other columns in a vast front, stretching to encompass the walls with at least holding strength, while the main force stayed together in a broad front fifteen ranks wide and four hundred deep near the main gate.

Shyla took a few moments to study their own positions

before grunting in satisfaction.

Their plan, partly modified from one of the several contingencies Volgelson had come up with during the voyage, had the humans guarding the main entrance to London. It had the largest battlements so more soldiers could stand comfortably and maneuver in battle; on either side of them, clustered above some smaller gate or weak point, stood the Brisson forces. Altogether they had enough to encompass the entire wall in ranks three deep, but that was all. There was no reserve to send to any point to prevent a breakout, and all knew that eventually the enemy must win the outer wall. The question on all their minds was; how long would it take?

Nearby Volgelson waved a prearranged signal and the riflemen took their places in two ranks.

The goblins were formed up about three hundred yards in front of the walls, well outside the range of the short-barreled Brisson muskets, but within range of the modern firearms, a fact that Volgelson would exploit to its full advantage.

"Pick your targets!" bellowed the sergeant near Shyla, and she saw the barrels bob a bit as the soldiers took careful aim.

"FIRE!" Volgelson's shout could be heard along the wall. Immediately the rifles roared, tongues of flame appearing briefly in the dark light, the bullets hurtling the distance in a couple seconds to strike the goblins as they stood in formation, just starting to notice the winking lights on the wall.

The first rank collapsed! Bodies sleeted from formation, they fell like torrential rain; the ground turned wet and muddy with their blood; the grass vanished beneath the dead.

The rifles ran out of their magazine very quickly and the ranks quickly reloaded while Volgelson's two precious, belt-fed .50 caliber machine guns continued to chatter, the tracers striking the stunned mass in broad arcs, the larger rounds punching through two or three bodies at once.

Quickly the rifles went back to work, but this time the chatter was slower, more deliberate as the soldiers strove to make every bullet count.

Shyla watched the enemy recoil in shock from the horrendous blow it had been struck; the goblins screamed in fear while the ragged front ranks struggled to climb over the ranks in the rear, trying desperately to get away from the strange, impossible weapons killing them. The space beyond the wall became a seething mass as the mob turned on itself in the space of a few short breaths.

For a bare moment it looked as if the teetering army would disintegrate and run, despite their superior numbers, but all too quickly Shyla could see the ranks beginning to reform, their shields coming up in a futile attempt to protect them from modern ammunition. Horns brayed. Chiefs and underlings bellowed, and soon the army began to reform itself.

Clack!

Shyla glanced immediately at the source of the noise and saw a soldier grunt in disappointment as he passed his rifle back through the ranks behind to where a runner waited to collect it, already carrying another dozen on his shoulders. When his count had reached fourteen the runner took off, or rather stumbled off, heading for the castle where they would be collected in a pile and guarded until it looked like defeat was inevitable, then they were under orders to destroy the weapons thoroughly so they could not fall into enemy hands.

The former riflemen of the front rank now dropped to his knees and grasped his shield where it had been placed earlier. He didn't rise, but instead waited for the signal while behind him the other ranks prepared.

All too soon the modern ammunition was used up and the last rifle went quiet, and the machine guns as well.

The sudden silence seemed to embolden the enemy and they jeered loudly in the gloom, waving their black banners high and shouting ugly words lost to the distance.

A foul horn sounded, and the enemy started to charge to the walls, their swords glinting in the light of many torches like tongues of flame winking in the dark.

Volgelson raised her horn and blew a blast! It rang in the dark and overpowered the enemy's cries, causing them to falter.

Shyla watched the bowmen of the second and third lines smoothly unsling their bows, nock their arrows and draw the fletchings to their cheeks.

For a moment, she felt a measure of awe fill her; the flawless execution of the command spoke volumes about the training of their people the past two years, but Shyla also had the thought that it spoke more of the incidental magic of Serena and Jake. She knew little of bowmanship beyond what she'd seen in Hollywood and the History Channel, but she did know that what she saw usually required a lifetime of training. The only answer that she could think of was that the magic of the mountain, or rather the magic of the Lady and Jake *enhanced* or *accelerated* the learning ability of their people.

She briefly reflected on what that would mean in the future as the Vogelsson gave the signal and the bowstrings snapped as one.

The arrows vanished from string and disappeared into the dark, only to reappear seconds later in various parts of the goblin host, and more bodies fell transfixed with arrows.

Again and again the volleys went out, heralded by a blast from Vogelsson or her captains, until the enemy host was nearly upon the wall. Then a different note sounded and the archers began to fire as rapidly as they could draw, sending their barbs down on enemy heads, punching through their smaller shields with near impunity, but now the enemy responded, crossbow bolts shot up from the earth and soldiers began to fall.

As ladders thumped against the stone battlements, the first rank sprang to with their shields, creating a solid barrier of wood and metal to stop the climbers from getting off their ladders. It also stopped the weaker bolts of the enemy who could not penetrate the dwarf-enhanced shields of the humans.

Over the sound of the bellows and shouts of command below, Shyla could hear the crackle of musketry (an alien sound to her, having never heard it before), and knew that the brissons were facing their own assault now. She only hoped that Asbiorn, who'd gone to help bolster the Brissons in his human form, wielding a Brisson long lance he'd got from the museum, would be careful. A glance showed him waving the lance in the air, exhorting the musketeers while Millicent paced alongside of him, shouting encouragement with her daughters and Matcha beside her. While the lance seemed huge to the Brisson knights who'd once wielded it from horseback, it was no longer than a short spear to Asbiorn.

A shout came up and the second rank dropped their bows and drew their swords, the blades glinting like stars in the night.

Over the battlements came the howling horde, the goblins stabbing wildly and hurling themselves upon the shields in front of them and then howling still louder in shock when they realized that their enemies were not Brissons. But the first rank held them, and bodies slid back down or were helped back over the wall. The second rank stabbed at whatever they could reach, and the third rank put arrows in any target of opportunity or volleyed over the wall to the ground below. Occasionally, one would grab a spear and set it on the shoulders of the first two ranks, pushing outwards so the point would ram through an enemy and cast his corpse back onto his fellows.

Soon the goblins were retreating, but they left in good order and retreated only out of bowshot, redressing their lines and evidently rethinking their strategy.

Shyla wondered what they would do; she'd been unscathed at all in the fight (she hadn't even had to raise her sword) and tried to think of what the enemy could do.

She didn't have night-vision goggles, though the scouts did, but there were so many torches that the enemy had made in anticipation of the burning of the city that she could see into their ranks clear enough. She thought they might be dragging something, and gestured for a runner.

"Tell General Volgelson that I think the enemy is bringing up their artillery, but I can't tell if its catapults or cannons."

The runner raced down the line, heading to where Volgelson stood on a raised portion of battlement to better see the enemy.

Shyla frowned, trying to think of what she should do. She was supposed to simply lie low, or perhaps use small, weak spells to hide her presence from the enemy until her magic could be wielded to its maximum effect, but if the enemy blew the

doors apart this early with cannon fire, then the plan they'd made up would fall apart.

As she stood there Asbiorn came up to her.

"An interesting fight." He said calmly as he surveyed the wreckage from the field.

"If you say so." Shyla grunted, not caring for the smell and the spurts of terror that had filled her when the howling shapes had come over the wall.

Asbiorn nodded in agreement. "Personally, I have never liked battles." He told her quietly. "They have their uses, but none are ever cheap. Even one life is too high, and I'm afraid this fight will be very high."

Shyla nodded and patted him on the arm.

"We can only do what we can." She told him. "The enemy has not given us the choice but to fight and means to destroy us and our friends. We cannot let that happen, and if I should die today or you, then at least we will know we've died doing the right thing."

Then she leaned in and spoke in an undertone. "But don't you dare die on me, you overgrown jerk, or I'll haul your kitty ass out of heaven and back to Earth, got it?"

He rumbled a laugh and waved before returning to where the Brissons were wearily preparing to face another assault.

Boom! Boom! Crack-Boom!

Well, I guess that answers the question of what artillery they brought! Shyla grunted as the wall beneath her feet trembled. The goblins were apparently trying to knock down the gate and clear the walls, but their aim was...poor to say the least. Few balls actually struck the wall, and most of them hit the earth embankment in front or simply fell to the earth far short of their intended destination.

Strange. It's like they've never used cannons before...or gunpowder! She realized with sudden, swift clarity.

A lifetime ago they'd learned that the demons coveted sulfur in all its forms, including that of gunpowder. What if the enemy had always had to do without it? They wouldn't have the skills necessary to fire cannons with the proper amount of propellant to actually do damage to the mighty stone walls of the city.

Unfortunately, we've given them too great an appreciation of gunpowder appropriately used. Shyla thought grimly. If even one of them escaped, then it struck her as likely the enemy would do all in its power to either catch up technologically or would double down on its efforts to wipe out anyone who achieved such weapons.

After the almost laughable artillery barrage, the goblins charged again, confident that the mighty weapons had cleared the walls and given them free access to the city.

Volgelson gave the order to fire just as the enemy got within ten yards of the wall. Bows twanged, arrows flew, and the

enemy screamed in baffled rage and indignation.

Shyla wished they had more arrows with them, but their people had nearly shot their limit, and even the small reserve back at the castle (being held for the last defense) would not change the outcome much.

Volgelson evidently agreed, because a runner came to her and told her that the army should begin its retreat as soon as the Brissons and archers had broken free.

Shyla turned and saw that the Brissons were having a much harder time with their foes than the humans; for one thing they were shorter and much more in line with the strengths and abilities of the goblins, and for another they were already wounded and sore before the battle from the previous action and most had never held a weapon or fought before in their lives.

It seemed clear to her that the Brissons would need some help at least, and she thought about using her magic to clear the ranks but held off.

"You men come with me!" she shouted, gesturing with her staff at one formation of twenty men. "The rest of you hold the walls until we return!"

She raced along the battlements, hearing the men hurrying after her in the jingle of their harness and the harsh, heavy sound of their breathing.

Ahead of them she could see the goblins struggling to pierce the Brisson lines, the parapet already carpeted with dead and dying from both sides. She dimly saw Annabel, still dressed in her daywear (what a ridiculous thing to fight in she thought) use a long knife to stab an enemy, while her mother fought with two short truncheons with fiendish delight. Several goblins lay at her feet with dented helms as mute testament to her nerve and strength. Gavin struggled to keep her from harm, but really it seemed to those watching that it was *she* who kept her family safe, and any goblin that came within her reach soon felt the hard wood of her weapons upon his brow.

Yet even they would soon be overwhelmed, and Shyla put on an extra burst of speed.

A single goblin noticed them coming and turned to fight, but his action went unnoticed by his companions swarming up behind him and in front of him, so intent on destroying those in front of it to notice the danger coming beside them.

They fell upon the enemy who'd gained the wall on the Brisson's left flank with howls of rage.

Shyla swung her sword towards a great goblin chief and felt her blade connect with his counterstroke. The sword shivered in her hand but did not bend or break.

The goblin's, however, was not so fortunate; it snapped off near the hilt and he flung it to the ground with a snarl. Sweeping out his belt knife he lunged at Shyla, trying to get close enough to stab her.

Shyla struck him in the helm with her staff and he fell,

the flesh on the top of his head sizzling.

Goblins leaped off the ladders at them, only to be slammed to the ground by the well-disciplined and hardened human forces, who soon pushed their way to the ladders and helped knock them down. Seven more fell to Shyla's blade and staff, and she helped one of her men push a ladder back while a great goblin, almost five feet high, clad in black mail and waving a sharp sword, screamed in anger and tried to hurry his way up, only to fall onto the shoulders of others below.

Asbiorn strode up, covered in blood from chest to foot, spinning the spear idly in his hands and practically whistling a tune as he saluted her.

Shyla glanced down at the carpet of moaning, writhing and still enemy and Brissons. Then she looked at the ones still standing and carrying the wounded away. There seemed far fewer than she remembered at the start of the battle.

"How soon can you get away?" she asked.

Asbiorn glanced at the Brissons and waved. A moment later a bloodied and weary Gavin came over.

"How soon can you get your troops back to the inner wall?" he asked gently.

"But...but we're holding them!" Gavin cried in shock, gesturing to the enemy host outside.

"I understand." Shyla said sympathetically, "But we've got no choice; our people are out of arrows and we're now to the point where we've got to stand and take their assaults on the wall, and we don't have enough people to stand along the entire length; for all we know there could be enemy soldiers in the lower city behind us working their way to attack. No, we have to retreat now while we are still in good order and have enough numbers to fully man the inner wall."

Gavin looked set to argue, but his shoulders slumped as he looked at his badly-depleted units.

"Very well." He said miserably. He raised his horn to his lips and blew a signal, and the Brissons began to hurry down the wall as quick as may be, grabbing the last of the wounded and hurt from the pile and bringing them along; no one would leave anyone to the tender mercies of *that* enemy.

"We'll buy you a few minutes and then follow." Shyla assured him.

She looked at her big friend and protector. "Go with him, Asbiorn. They may encounter goblins along the way, and we don't want them to become bogged down and slow our retreat."

Asbiorn did not look happy, but he put his hand on her shoulder (the most affection he would show) and hurried off, transforming into his cat form to sniff out any goblins that might be ahead of the fleeing host, much to the surprise and terror of their allies.

Shyla and her company flew back to the gate, taking their positions as the enemy horde suddenly broke into a dead run for

the ladders. No signal had been sent to give the defenders any warning, but the humans stubbornly set their shields and readied their swords, the last archers having already left, leaving just two ranks along the wall of about three hundred men.

"Steady now!" Shouted Volgelson, her hoarse voice barely audible. "Hold the bastards and cut them down!"

The goblins came to the ladders and swarmed up; there stood the men with sword and spear to push them down again. Shyla stood in the second line behind a shield-man, using her sword to stab over his shoulder and cut down any that managed to gain the top.

After striking more blows than she could count, Shyla felt, rather than saw, something approaching on her right. Taking a quick glance over she saw the goblins rushing to them along the undefended wall.

"That's it!" she shouted. "They're coming!"

At her words, the line condensed, shortening the distance as some turned to face this new threat and others remained to guard their flank against those coming over the wall.

The clash of arms was short and severe, but they drove the goblins back and when Shyla looked around, panting, she saw over a dozen of her men had fallen.

Their companions picked them up and the army retreated quickly down the stairs before the goblins could reorganize.

Volgelson caught up to her at the bottom and spoke rapid orders.

"Shyla, go with Bravo Company. Captain Fairmeyer, your marines will follow and I'll take Charlie Company in the rear."

They hurried up the streets, making for the castle gates while behind them the goblins cautiously climbed the wall again, expecting a stiff defense but found the battlements deserted and their enemy fleeing.

The goblins tore after them with howls of rage and cries of vengeance.

"Hurry!" Shyla urged, her staff flashing in the dark as she risked a little light to guide the soldiers up the dark streets.

They passed by, weary and footsore, their weapons bloody and their shields looking more like feathered pincushions than wood and steel. Behind them, Volgelson fired the buildings on either side to prevent the goblin archers from having a clear view of the retreating army, and to keep them on the paths she chose.

It seemed to work until the army was halfway to the gates. There fast goblin elements burst from the darkened houses and leaped into the surprised ranks of the army.

Shyla found herself grappling with three goblins that had jumped from a second-story window; the move had left two of them with a broken leg or arm each and they flailed more in pain than in a serious attempt to attack. The third, having landed on the body of the second, was only lightly injured and he attacked

with manic ferocity.

For a moment their two blades sparked and flashed in a wild duel. In flashes, Shyla could see the army disintegrating into hundreds of individual fights in the street, but she could do nothing to direct it. Her sole focus was keeping the goblin's black scimitar from her.

Shyla parried one of his blows and smote him full on the helm with her staff. The helm dented and the goblin fell, stunned or dead Shyla didn't know.

With the main threat out of the way and the other two no threat at all, Shyla turned her attention to the struggle going around her. There were fifty goblins at least, and though they were horribly outnumbered the surprise they'd managed to achieve had proven deadly, and ten of her precious soldiers lay on the ground hacked to pieces.

Rage filled Shyla's heart and, heedless of her instructions, she thrust her staff at the remaining knot of goblins who still stood amidst the soldiers. The white unicorn hair blazed in silver fire like the heating elements of a toaster set on maximum. The staff shone and the goblins paused in astonishment.

"*Pheonixa!*" she cried in shaking voice.

All at once the goblins burst into flame from every pore, every crevice, looking like living torches or Buddhist monks.

As the corpses struck the street Shyla looked around; in the confusion, many units had ended up swirling away down side streets and alleys, with the main force closing rapidly on them.

"This way!" she shouted, gesturing with her staff. "We need to get behind the walls!"

The remaining soldiers, some seventy men and women, followed as she ran towards the yawning gate. To either side, she caught flashes of others racing towards the gate, and over their heads arrows whistled in the dark.

A horn call rang out, then a trumpeter blared a heartstoppingly familiar tune--the Marine Corps Anthem.

Captain Fairmeyer's in trouble! Shyla looked around wildly, but couldn't see where the anthem was coming from. There was only one choice, and she pelted up the final leg to the gate and through and did not stop until she'd taken the stairs three at a time and came to the top of the wall.

Now the height came in handy, and she had a clear view down into the main city. She could see the goblins rushing past the burning buildings like a flash flood in the desert, smashing windows and setting some buildings alight themselves. In one area they were halted, however, and a great battle was underway, nearly out of bowshot range.

Captain Fairmeyer and about sixty men were standing in a double line, the bright eagle and fouled anchor flying defiantly above their formation as they struggled to hold back an ever-increasing number of goblins.

Why did he go that way? Shyla groaned in despair. *It's not even on the way to the gate!*

She would learn only later that Fairmeyer had seen Brisson orphans and street beggars cowering down a blind alley, struggling to climb into one of the large sewer lines from that area that was too small for well-fed, adult brissons or even goblins to use. To buy the children time to escape, he'd planted his men in front of the alley to hold for as long as they could, summoning any marine to their aid. Many came running, breaking out of whatever house or formation they'd been to join that rallying cry, never asking questions or stopping to realize that there would be no return.

"We gotta help them!" Shyla shouted, her Detroit accent raised in a near shriek.

She turned to run back down the stairs and ran right into Volgelson and Asbiorn coming up.

"There's nothing you can do." Volgelson told her in a voice of iron, "The gates are sealed. We can't get out."

"But there *has* to be something we can do!" Shyla screamed in frustration.

"Not this time." Volgelson whispered as she, like everyone else, stared silently out at the last stand of the Marines.

"Then I'll do something!" Shyla shouted defiantly, the top of her wand turning a warning shade of red.

"No!" Volgelson said sharply. "It isn't time for that yet. If you go out there now, you will be revealed."

"So?" Shyla snarled challengingly.

"Think! If you are shown to them, then the goblins will likely dig in and wait for reinforcements. We won't be able to dig them out easily, and we'll be overwhelmed. We must have a crushing defeat, and we can't manage that yet."

"And if we lose our army and ourselves and the Brissons?" Shyla cried. "Then we will lose it all!"

"This plan isn't without risks." Volgelson admitted. "But you knew that. If we force a sally now, how many men will we lose? You are likely to lose us this battle. Fairmeyer knows what he is doing, and those men as well. Perhaps they'll win through." She didn't sound hopeful, and Shyla knew that, for whatever reason, Fairmeyer had chosen to make a stand and would not retreat, ever.

Shyla gasped a sob and turned back to watch.

The goblin numbers were finally causing the Marine's formation to bend in on itself, caving under the pressure. With appalling suddenness it collapsed, the goblins bursting through and turning to surround the marines.

However, Fairmeyer leaped into the stream with his sword, helmet gone and one arm hanging useless, slashing like a maniac as the rest struggled to reform into a square. They nearly made it, but the goblins managed to bring down Fairmeyer and charged the remaining marines.

Shyla watched as the flag rose high and thrust downward, quivering violently a moment as its banner carrier slammed the solid metal pole deep into the squared stones of the street, the flag still flying high in the air.

Around that flag the twenty remaining Marines held their ground, hacking and stabbing their foes, selling their lives dearly as the writhing mass seethed around them.

They went down. The goblins cheered wildly, waving their swords in the air, clashing against their shields and breaking into dance. Others tugged and pulled, and pulled and tugged, trying to bring down the flag, but it stayed firm. Some tried to hack down the metal pole with their swords and axes but their blades chipped and broke while the flag remained standing.

Shyla watched as the goblins turned their frustrations onto the bodies of the Marines, and she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Archers, fire a volley onto those bastards!" she screamed.

The soldiers, already fingering their bowstrings and muttering darkly with impotent rage, instantly obeyed.

The arrows fell amongst the goblins with surprising and deadly accuracy, while some, enhanced with Shyla's vengeful magic (the little she could do, she thought bitterly), caused terror to spread amongst the living and sent them scurrying away.

In seconds there wasn't a living goblin anywhere in the alley; leaving it in the care of the dead.

Shyla ground her teeth, wishing she'd thought of the fright spell earlier. Had she used it on a well-aimed arrow, it might have been enough to break the goblins and let Fairmeyer and his brave Marines to live.

Terrible guilt assailed her, and she started to cry; she wasn't cut out for this! This was madness! It was nuts! She was just a poor girl from the wrong side of the tracks in Detroit! She was no warrior, no hero! She was a barely competent witch who should still have been an apprentice!

Before she could delve deeper into her self-loathing, Asbiorn put his massive paw on her shoulder.

"Shyla," he rumbled in his slow, gravelly voice. "You must stop this. There wasn't anything you could have done, not at this distance, to save them. Not even a fully trained witch like Shadoiux could have done anything, even if she'd wanted to, in the limited time at hand. Those spells take a great deal of time, and you had none."

Shyla looked up at his blurry image, before collapsing against his chest, sobbing.

"There has to have been something! I just stood back and let them die! It isn't right!"

"No, it isn't right, but it is the way of war." Asbiorn told her, steering her slightly away from the soldiers who seemed too completely absorbed in the sight of what faced them.

"Shyla, your compassion does you well, but you cannot save

everyone, not here, no matter how hard you try it will be impossible." He said slowly. "You and I know this, so while it is hard to bear, remember this; they chose to come here, and chose to fight there against those odds. They were very brave, and though I don't know the reason why, I'm sure it was a good one. We will mourn them, when we have the chance. For now, we must continue to fight, and not let them have died in vain." He comforted.

Shyla nodded, wiping her eyes on her sleeve.

"You're right." She nodded. "I'll try to be better about it next time."

"Let us hope not." Asbiorn said quietly, "Or soon there will be no more tears left to shed."

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He left her then, heading back to the Brisson lines while Shyla resumed her station near the archers, exhorting them on as they spent long, careful moments aiming at their targets and sending the arrows speeding to their destination. She kept her enhancements up, thinking she should be able to get away with this light magic until she got the signal to really unload, a moment which she yearned to get there.

Their plan, discussed on the march to London, had been all along to retreat to the inner fortifications once spied in Serena's pool. By that time there would be far fewer enemies in play, especially if they could fire buildings that the goblins would be using as shelter and firing points. To that end, each building had been wetted or doused in sticky black tar and what black powder that could be spared (which wasn't much more than a small pile for a flaming arrow to hit and help kindle the blaze) with the idea that the goblins would swarm into a building, and a flaming arrow would set it alight, and possibly its neighbors as well. Then after the fires had burned to death what it could, and the host had come back to finish the fight, Shyla would unleash the full strength of her magic and Serena's hairs, in a single spell that she would have been working on to wipe out the survivors or leave so few left that they would be easy prey for their allies.

And it shouldn't be long before that plan becomes a reality, Shyla mused as she stared over the wall at the burning city below. Both their fire arrows and the goblins own torches had set hundreds of houses ablaze, and the smoke was thick and choking while the firelight seemed as bright as noonday in the dense flames and the heat was nearly overwhelming.

Soldiers panted or sweated heavily as they waited for the next onslaught. Young boys and girls raced with heavy water buckets from the spring to them so they would stay hydrated; Shyla smiled at one such, a young girl with the markings of a collie, who smiled shyly back and ran away excitedly; she couldn't have been more than seven years old.

A dull booming came to her ears and she leaned over the

wall a little. At the main gate under the Brisson positions, around a thousand goblins pushed and jostled for position, firing back at any Brisson that tried to send rock or musket ball below and ramming the main gate with a battering ram made of house timbers that weren't too badly damaged.

Shyla watched them critically for a while, but she thought the ram was too small to cause any actual damage to the doors and dismissed the effort from her mind.

It shouldn't be too long now, I think she thought to herself. *The goblins seem nearly done in now, and I bet they'll never breach the walls.*

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The moment the thought passed her head, she wished she could have taken it back: the light in the burning city seemed to dim, and down near the furthest gate she could see a shadow walk past the shattered doors and stride up the street past the burning buildings, their light unable to bring the thing into clear focus. It walked upright on hind legs, towering over the buildings around it, yet still of lesser stature than the one that had destroyed their city Ages of the World ago, and Shyla felt terror claw at her heart at the beasts approach. She briefly wondered how it had come to this world when the summoners had all been killed in that last great battle when they brought forth the Great Demon Chief; possibly the goblins had tricked a Brisson into summoning it, or like as not they had summoned it themselves, and there was a truly terrifying thought. If the creature had been summoned by the goblins, then there would be no telling how many there were in the world, and she shivered as it passed by the rearmost goblins, each stride four yards long at least.

It gave a roar of triumph, louder than a jet engine, and in its eyes there came a gleeful malice and delight of battle to come.

"A demon!" Shrieked a human soldier nearby. "A demon!"

The cry of alarm began to spread as the apparition approached. The humans crouched behind their shields in fear, they knew only too well what the monster ahead of them was capable of. The Brissons stared in horror at this thing so strange to them, and a few cried out, "Moldra! Moldra has come!"

"Ah, crap." Shyla said quietly. She didn't know what a Moldra was, but it obviously had some effect on the other Brissons. Most cast down their weapons and ran for the seeming safety of the castle.

Fearing that the humans would panic and run as well, Shyla cast a small spell, hopefully unnoticed, to ease tension. She prayed it would work, and she made sure she herself stood defiant and unbowed on the walls in plain line of sight despite her own overwhelming fear. If the spell worked as she planned, or whether seeing her stand there seemingly unafraid did the trick, she didn't know. But the men stood fast behind the wall.

Others Brissons, after glancing at the humans standing still at the wall, seemed to take heart and remained at their posts, clutching their weapons with foam-flecked fingers.

The shadow walked unhurriedly, seemingly unconcerned with the forces confronting its minions. The goblins below clashed their weapons against their shields, cheering and laughing as they capered at its feet, looking like worshipers around some ancient, terrible god.

The demon opened its fanged mouth and gave a bellow like the collapse of a mountain as it tumbles into the sea. In its clawed hands it held a shadowy sword wreathed in smoke, while in its left it carried a huge spiked mace made of flame and shadow. Its huge, raven-like wings with feathers of smoke were tucked against its body and its cloven hooves burned the street where it walked.

If it gains the gate, then everything is lost, Shyla realized. Indeed, it seemed to think along the same lines, for it walked confidently towards the bronze-clad gate, brandishing its club in the air, though it remained a dozen paces away.

Shyla started running towards the gate, knowing even as she did so that it was crazy, even crazier than when she wanted to take on the entire army single-handedly to get to Fairmeyer and his marines. The soldiers watched her go, their faces betraying their surprise at her passing and the despair at seeing the demon. Most appeared to have resigned themselves to making their end as best they could, taking as many of the enemy with them.

As she drew near, she saw the gates begin to open outward, the bronze doors groaning as they slid along the grooves made especially for them.

The goblins must have gained the guardroom and opened the gate! She thought in despair, but a glance at the gatehouse showed three brissons standing guard at its door, dressed in resplendent, shining armor.

Shyla had no time to ponder this riddle, for the demon was nearly at the gate, and about his feet the goblins surged towards the open breach with eager shouts and coarse laughter, sensing easy prey inside.

Shyla leaped from the stairs to the top of the gate, standing before the demon. Summoning all her strength she stood rooted like the Great Tree of the Lady and from the upper part of her staff where her hair was twined about the head a silver light blazed forth, shining like the sun. Her voice rent the air and brought the charging orcs and the demon to a halt.

"Stop! You have no business here! Go back to the black realms where you belong!"

The goblins stared in shock at the star upon the gate, and the Brissons looked upon her in awe. The demon made no answer but seemed surprised. It stared at the blaze of light in front of it with curiosity turning into menace in its black eyes, darker than coal but with a cruel green flame that burned

brightly in their sockets, and it raised its mace in retaliation.

Shyla raised her wand as the mace fell. The two met in a fiery light, there came a noise like a cannon shot, and the mace shattered in millions of red sparks. The Moldra shook its hand in pain and stepped back, perhaps reassessing the threat presented it. Around them the two armies watched their duel with bated breath.

Again he reached for her, but Shyla's staff sent forth lightning which smote his hand and he leapt backwards to avoid a second hit, crushing some of the goblin horde beneath his feet.

Shyla racked her brains, trying to think of all the spells and incantations that she'd ever heard or read of to deal with the demons, but she could think of nothing at first. Then a spell from her first grimoire came to her, and she realized that it had been a desummoning, or banishment spell, made for the witch that had foolishly summoned a demon to her command that broke free of its bonds. It was long and complex, which made Shyla wonder if it had ever been used successfully, for though it required none of the ingredients of the summoning spell, it demanded the complete concentration of the witch, which meant she would be terribly vulnerable.

She didn't have much of a choice here, however. These early blows were tests of each other's strength, and Shyla knew that this demon was far more powerful than her, and if she let the battle progress there would only be one conclusion.

Shyla began to chant the words of the banishment spell, keeping her eyes focused directly on the demon as it recovered itself from the lightning attack. It saw her and perceived her spell, and lunged at her, seeking to knock her off her perch and crush her in its grip, or trample her beneath its hooves, or cast her to the goblins below.

Whichever choice it had made, it didn't get the chance. Asbiorn appeared on the top of the wall in his great cat form and launched himself into the air. He latched on to the demon's chest and bit and kicked, his claws rending and tearing while his teeth pierced and crushed.

He paid a terrible price for his audacity; the demon's skin cooked his flesh from the fiery heat within, and his skin blackened and peeled away, his hide turning pink and raw as he clung stubbornly to the wildly shaking demon. It tried to slash at him with its sword, but couldn't bring it to a position where it wouldn't cut itself. Finally, it tried to crush him with its free arm, but Asbiorn dropped off and fell to the earth. He landed with a cry of agony, struggling to get away, but the demon gave a soccer-style kick that hurled him into the top floor of a house which, having been partly burned, gave way and collapsed with a rumble and a groan of falling wood and breaking glass.

Shyla stared in horror, her mouth continuing the spell but

her eyes searched desperately for any sign of movement. She saw none, and a terrible pain slashed through her. It felt as if her soul had been rent in two, only once when Jake had seemingly killed Asbiorn had she felt such pain like this. Determination welled up inside her, and she turned her full attention back to the banishment spell. Let the goblins and the demon try what it like to her now! She would continue the spell and see him sent back to the fiery pits of hell where he came from!

The demon swung its sword high, intending to bring it down and cleave her in two. Her eyes tracked it and she crouched, ready to fling herself off to the side when she saw where the blow would fall, but it never did.

Volgelson's horn rang out, loud and clear in the night. There came a snap of bowstrings and the whistle of arrows, and the demon screamed as almost a hundred arrows pierced its hide, the shafts kindling into flashes of flame like muzzle flashes in the smoke.

The demon hurled its sword at where the arrows had come, the blade cleaving the stone like butter, the black, flame-bound hilt quivering.

The goblins charged into the breach, madly angry and howling and cursing in their foul language. Dimly, Shyla could hear the ring of steel and the shouted cries of battle.

The horn fell silent and no further arrows came, and Shyla felt a pang of sorrow for the gallant Vogelsson and her brave soldiers, but she did not falter. She was nearly done with the spell.

The demon saw and in desperation hurled its own counterspell at her in a hideous language like the hissing of snakes the size of battleships.

Shyla braced herself to take the spell, whatever it was, for if she lost her place now they would certainly lose. She felt the spell run full into the shield surrounding her, and for a moment it held, the light from her staff forming a bubble of safety between her and the shadowy spell of the enemy, but it shrank as her reserves of strength were exhausted, and at last collapsed entirely, her staff cracking and the light flickered and dimmed. But it had done the job of absorbing most of the counterspell.

A burning heat erupted in her belly, spreading like fire through her veins! She was burning up! Shyla felt tears spring to her eyes, but they seemed to smoke and her vision began to swim. If she could have looked on herself, she would have seen flames shooting from her eyes like geysers as her flesh crinkled and bubbled around them. The pain nearly overwhelmed her and she almost lost the thread of the spell, but the counterstroke had come too late!

"*Intolegra transportior delandrido drick folmet ta Ra*" she ground out in a voice like the croak of a bullfrog.

She heard the demon scream, and a noise like a thunderclap,

and then silence.

She slipped down to the cold ground, in more pain then she'd ever felt in her life.

I think...I'm dying she thought as a strange gentle warming sensation crawled up her face. If she'd had a moment to think, she'd have realized it was the light of the rising sun, but she didn't. It was the last coherent thought she had for a long while.

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