

(Chapter ONE)

Aftermath #

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She never lost consciousness, but lay there for how long she couldn't guess. Hours, maybe, though it felt like days. There were sounds around her, but she barely heard them. They sounded distant and far away; shouts and the ring of steel, and a loud cheering.

We've lost, she thought dismally to herself. *We've lost and now the goblins are cheering their victory over our dead bodies and will go into and through the castle and get Annabel and Matcha and Diane and the Princess and the children as slaves and kill the rest of us, probably.*

Furry hands grabbed her and she wished she had the strength to go for her sword, but her limbs refused to obey her. Instead, she remained limp as if she was already dead, wishing the goblins would kill her quickly and end her torment, though she feared it would not be so.

"Mistress Shyla! Mistress Shyla! It's me, miss! It's me, Matcha." The tearful voice sounded shockingly close, and Shyla realized who it was that had a hold of her.

"Matcha?" she gurgled. "What are you doing here? You must go, the goblins are here...they'll find you. Don't wait for me, you'll have a better chance if you go alone, I'll catch up." she added, though she knew she never would. The danger for her friend had given her new strength and resolve, but it wasn't enough yet for her to stand, or run, or escape. The most she could do was bring the goblins down upon herself and let her friend escape.

She felt Matcha take her hand, though she couldn't see.

"Mistress Shyla, you are talking nonsense you are! The Dolna are gone! They are gone! You are victorious!"

Shyla seized Matcha's arm, her strength returning a little. "We've won?" she asked, hardly believing her ears.

"We've won." Matcha told her firmly.

We've won, she thought numbly. It hardly seemed possible, but there it was.

"Help me up." Shyla asked her.

"What?" Matcha asked in a stunned voice. "But, you're injured! Hurt! And...you have no clothes!"

Startled, Shyla checked and realized that her clothes had burned off from the demon's spell.

"Give me my staff." She croaked.

"It's cracked." Matcha warned. "I can see the splintering along the side."

"It'll do for what I want." Shyla assured her, though truthfully she didn't know.

She felt the smooth oak staff placed in her hand and she fingered the unicorn hair wound about the head.

Mellock deltridium moltrenolos burniclardos..." she chanted slowly, and she gradually felt her pain ease, but not the darkness. Despite her best hopes her world remained shrouded in night.

With effort, she regained her feet, feeling the morning light warm her skin and lift her spirit. Turning to the sun she welcomed it with open arms.

I just wish I could see it, she thought.

A funny feeling came over her, as words to a spell came to her mind, one that she'd once read for Soul Sight. She didn't understand what that meant, but perhaps it could at least let her see the world again?

She spoke the words to the spell slowly and clearly, wondering what would happen.

Matcha screamed in surprise and fright (the horrible, burned and empty eye sockets of the witch now glowed with silver-white light in the shape of eyes) and nearly made Shyla forget the last words, but she as she finished, a dim and shadowy sort of vision came to her.

It felt almost like looking through thickly smoked glass, but at least it was better than absolute darkness.

She turned to Matcha's voice to ask her what was wrong and froze; Matcha was there, or at least someone was, but she glowed brightly from within. The white light tinged in warm hues swirled like smoke inside the shell of Matcha's body and Shyla realized numbly that she was seeing Matcha's soul.

"Matcha..." she fell silent, struck speechless by what she saw.

Matcha appeared to tremble, the light became shot with pale colors.

"What is it?" Shyla asked.

"I'm sorry." Matcha said on the verge of panic. "But...your eyes! Those glowing eyes! They're terrible! They seem to look right into my soul!" She remained upright but shook like a leaf in a high wind.

Shyla heard her terror and turned hastily away.

"Quick, find me a cloth to bind my eyes." She instructed.

She heard a tearing sound and a cloth was put in her hands.

"Thank you." She told her sincerely and quickly wrapped her eyes.

To her surprise, she realized she could still see out, though everything became a little dimmer. When she turned to Matcha, she could see the white light but not the tinges anymore, and she realized that she'd been seeing the truth of Matcha's soul, her fears and emotions swirling around her body, and the delicate pure white tinged with gold where her heart beat in her chest must be her personality or something.

Shyla pondered further as Matcha searched for a dress that

she could wear amongst the human luggage train. When she returned it was in the company of Volgelson and Asbiorn.

Shyla never felt more delight then when she saw those two walking towards her. She would have danced for joy, if her limbs had obeyed her. Instead, she managed a lurching stumble towards them and nearly collapsed in Asbiorn's arms.

"Are you all right?" Asbiorn asked concernedly as he swooped down upon her and lifted her in a hug.

"I'm fine." Shyla placed her head against his furred chest and relaxed; she felt safe again. "Just exhausted."

"And no wonder!" Volgelson shook her head wearily. "An actual Demon Lord here? It's a good thing you'd managed to fight it off, or we would have been doomed."

Shyla looked at her, focusing fiercely through her mask. Now that she knew what to look for she could see Volgelson's weariness and pain, an intense pain that seemed an ocean, crushing the soul under the burden. She thought that she knew why, too.

"It wasn't our fault." She said, wiggling one arm free of Asbiorn's grasp to take Volgelson's hand in hers. "We didn't know and expected the Demon Lords to form the brunt of the army facing Lana and her folk. Perhaps this is the only one for this nest." Shyla continued thoughtfully. "After all...let me take a look at something."

Grabbing her dress from Matcha, she slipped it on speedily before seizing her satchel, who'd brought that along with her spare dress, she plunged her hands inside without thinking and withdrew a faded black book, stained and burned with a huge hole in the center of the cover.

Opening it, she started to flip through the pages: the words on the page stood clear and bright in the shadows of her eyes as if they were lit from within.

Shyla didn't question her good fortune at being able to read her spell book but continued searching through the pages for the one she remembered being there.

Coming to it at last, she read down the page while her companions stood there uncomfortably, wondering if they should break in and remove the book from their blind friend. Only Asbiorn, whose experience with magic taught him that anything at all was possible, did nothing. He simply folded his arms across his chest and waited to see what would happen.

"Aha! I have it! Here it is!" she cried out in relief, and Volgelson and Matcha jumped.

"What do you have?" they asked before they could stop themselves.

"Remember that time we were looking for any information on Demons back in...our old world?" she asked.

They made an *'of course, get on with it'* motion with their hands.

"Well, Shadouix's grimoire also had a section on them that

deal primarily with summoning; that's how Brian got all of his information on the ritual by the way, and I thought it should have some sort of additional information that we might have missed, and I was right! Listen to this:

Like other demons, the great Demons are highly territorial and never allow others near their nests, though they might occasionally meet on previously agreed neutral ground. Therefore, if there is a Great Demon plaguing a specific area, then there can only be the one and, if desummoned, there will not be another to take its place unless that particular demon is resummoned."

"Well, that is a relief." Volgelson sighed. At least we can feel better about leaving our friends behind."

"Leave?" Annabel asked, coming up with the others.

"Yes," Volgelson nodded to her but looked at the queen. "I'm afraid that we have to get back to...our home as soon as possible. If the attempts to defend Lana and Mausl and their people fail, then the Demons will scour the land to find and destroy us; we must be there to stop them, or at least delay the inevitable as long as may be."

"I see." The queen said startled.

Lord Quinnell snorted angrily. "Let them go!" he said in a surly tone. "They've managed to defend us, and that's fine, but now I fear what they will demand of our people in return for this service!"

"Whatever they demand of us, they shall receive, Lord Quinnell." The queen declared; "For they have certainly earned it and our thanks for delivering us from the Dolna and...the demon." She shivered and Millicent crossed herself.

Shyla barely heard the exchange, she was busy looking at Lord Quinnell; even from behind her mask she could see a black taint on his soul, like oozing oil, and his heart light was black. Abruptly the memory of the Brisson in the gatehouse rose and she realized everything in a flash.

Her staff pointed right at him and all fell silent. Shyla spoke.

"Lord Quinnell, what price did the goblins offer you to open the inner gate?" she asked coldly.

There came a chorus of gasps and Lord Quinnell spluttered but made no answer.

"Answer her!" the Queen snapped when she saw him remain silent.

"I shall not!" he shouted. "She is lying and has sullied my name! I should demand her execution for this insult; in fact, I think I will!"

"You shall demand no such thing." Asbiorn growled, flexing his muscles. If he thought to defend her, however, he was mistaken. Shyla continued to dominate standing tall and proud. Those that looked upon her wondered, for she held grace and nobility about her as a weaver holds cloth around her, more so

than even the actual royalty that surrounded her.

"You are the one who is lying," Shyla said, her voice turning colder and harder than frozen steel. "I remember seeing a brisson in the gatehouse as they opened wide. In front stood three brissons dressed in fancy armor and gear of war, but with no mark on it! They did not fight! Which forces were not engaged throughout the entire fight! WHO REMAINED BEHIND? It was your forces, Lord Quinnell, and so there could only be one man in that gatehouse. What was the promised price? When all the soldiers and men were driven out and killed you and your men would have the pick of the women to take with you into the wilderness?"

His heart light trembled and the color of fear shot through the blackness, and Shyla knew that she was on the right track, but she reckoned without his courage, and he gave no sign of being anything other than properly outraged.

"No such deal was made." He sneered. "You came here and make these accusations randomly and against those that you do not like. Is this all that we can expect of you and your people? To sow distrust amongst us?"

There came an uneasy shuffling and muttering around them-- they'd drawn quite a crowd.

"No." Shyla said in harsh tones. "Only to bring to account those who would sell out their own people. You bluster and bluff, and try to cast aspersions upon me, but I have seen how you do not ask how I can be certain it was you when all I saw were your men and a shadow: I did not know it was you until you walked up with the Queen. Then I knew, and I spoke. How?"

She drew the cover from her eyes, and quite a few people screamed, and Lord Quinnell stiffened in terror, his eyes locked on the white orbs of fire that burned in the fire-blackened sockets where human eyes once looked out. These held a terrible power, and all who looked at them felt stripped bare, their sins laid before their feet as if they were a book to be read by this person, this supreme judge and read aloud. He twitched, as if wanting to look away but could not break contact.

With the blind gone, Shyla could see everything so much sharper, so much clearer. The shape of his soul stood in crystal relief. It whimpered and cowered, stretching out of its flesh prison as if trying to escape the purifying fire of her eyes; hard gems of diamond in judgment.

"I can see your soul." Shyla finished in a quiet voice, as he trembled. Smaller figures danced in front of him, smoke shapes that Shyla knew showed the wrongs he'd done, and the dreams he'd hoped to accomplish.

"You sent the army away to die, but some lived to your discomfort. You arranged things so your soldiers would command the gate, claiming prestige and the right of honor, but so your forces would be able to open the gates and allow the goblins to sweep in. You wanted to rule, you hated being under a woman,

didn't you? They gave you a chance to turn all women into chattel under your thumb, as you and those loyal to you went north and left the kingdom in ruin."

This time he didn't deny it, only whimpered.

Shyla drew herself up; a stern judge passing sentence, cold and remote.

"Lord Quinnell, you have betrayed your sovereign and your people; If you'd succeeded, your lot would have been little better off than theirs, crawling around on all fours to the amusement of the goblins like beasts of burden. You led men who placed their trust in you to their doom and tried to do the same for your people. In that, I pronounce you guilty."

He cried out in terror and cast himself on the ground, stripped of all dignity.

She looked at the Queen, who stared back at her. You might have heard a flower strike the soft earth in the silence surrounding them. The flapping of the banners on the battlements the loudest noise in the world, it seemed. Not even gulls or birds spoke. All seemed aware that a monumental choice was being offered and made between these two powerful women.

"Yet," she said regretfully. "While I have found you guilty, it is not my place to pronounce punishment upon you. That unhappy duty lies with your sovereign. May she show as much mercy upon you as you showed for those that followed you or the women in your care."

He moaned in the dirt.

She replaced her cover and everyone slumped a little.

The Queen's voice shook a little as she commanded two guards to seize Lord Quinnell and escort him to the dungeon immediately.

To everyone's eyes, it seemed he was relieved not to be standing in Shyla's presence any longer and made no fuss as he was led away.

"And that is that." Annabel sighed as the silence grew uncomfortable.

"I never would have suspected Lord Quinnell of treachery." The Queen sighed. "His family is very old and well respected!"

"Even the oldest and wisest may turn to dark things to achieve their ends." Shyla said quietly. "But it is in everyone to return to the light. I do not think that he will make that change, however, even if given the chance; his dreams of power are too great to contain, and he will seek out ways to achieve them once again."

"What do you think his plans were, Shyla?" Annabel asked.

Shyla thought a moment, remembering the moment of clarity that had occurred when she'd cast aside her mask. "I believe he'd made a deal with the goblins," she said at length. "That is why he sent the army out so ill-equipped and unprepared to that exact point for the ambush. If all had gone according to plan, there wouldn't have been a single soldier left in the city but

him and his chosen guard, if he had any guardsmen with him."

"He did." Princess Alise confirmed. They were guarding the women and children during the fight."

"They will need to be questioned." Shyla sighed. "Likely all of them were working with the general on the hope that they would secure their own slaves and lives, but I can't be sure until I've spoken with them, and I do not have much time."

"We shall handle it ourselves." The Queen assured her.

"Then I shall not worry about it." Shyla said.

"Do you really think that he believed the goblins would simply let him keep his slaves and walk away?" Diana said incredulously.

"Most likely." Shyla nodded. "And it would fit with our strongest suspicions about the nature of our enemy."

"What is that?" the Queen asked.

"Simply that the goblins were NOT interested in exterminating you entirely, but wanted your city destroyed and your kingdom smashed. Those they spared would have been reduced to mere savages or tribesmen like Lana's people in America, of little threat to them, but available for their constant sport."

"Sport?" the Queen said in affronted tones.

"Yes." Shyla said bluntly. "The goblins are new to us, but their masters are very, very old, and in the intervening millennia have become bored with ruling absolutely; there is no challenge to them, no delicious fight for life or hope to break. Therefore they tended your people, all brissons really, like cattle, to be used and thinned when appropriate, but not exterminated or completely converted to evil purpose, lest the Demons fall back into boredom again."

There was silence at the end of this as each thought in horror that the great battle that surrounded them had been done expressly as a way to "cultivate" the herd.

"That's impossible." The Queen said, but she sounded unsure to Shyla. "It simply must not be true; it would imply that even free and walking, we are still the slaves of the Dolna!"

"No!" Shyla told her fiercely. "In that they are wrong; the very quality that they so desire in you is the very weapon they fear: your independence and freedom. They cannot understand them, and so they cannot fight them. That is why they've done their best to keep all the kingdoms small and separate, so they cannot communicate or form a solid fight against them. In this, I may hope to play some small part in bringing about the day of their destruction, but they will be doubly angry with this defeat and, it may be hoped, their defeat in America."

"And this is victory." The Queen sighed, looking around at the field of battle.

Shyla turned, despite herself and looked about.

The butcher bill had been very high for the city of London; the entire city past the inner walls had been burned to the ground, and any who hadn't escaped or been too stubborn to leave

their homes were most likely dead beneath the blackened skeletons. Of the army and people who'd fought on the walls, over half had been killed and another four hundred severely wounded. Millicent Tidwell stood nearby with her arms in slings, and Diana had been found broken and nearly mad in front of a slave who'd once been her young husband. Annabel had suffered slight cuts to her arms but these had already been bandaged and cared for. Gavin had been struck several blows but came through in one piece, Alise had fought as well, driving back a horde of goblins.

The battle had been costly for them as well, Shyla grimaced. The Marines had been completely wiped out with Fairmeyer's last stand. Out of the entire army of six hundred souls, two hundred had been slain. That would rise as the most severely wounded perished in the long hours ahead, despite her best efforts.

Volgelson looked haggard, but she raised her horn to her lips and blew a signal. The human army hurried to reform, stumbling with weariness and pain.

"What are you doing?" the Queen asked in surprise.

"We must leave." Vogelsson said sadly. "I'm sorry, but we cannot delay our return. The goblins fled when their master was destroyed, and we can safely assume that their army, for all intents and purposes, has been destroyed. Now we must look to our own defenses back home, or avenge our people if we find that all have fallen."

"But, but you just fought a great battle here, at the tail end of a march!" the Queen cried, shocked. The briscons that heard her words stared at the humans with slack jaws.

"Yes, and we have a very long march ahead of us again." Vogelsson said. "It's about fifty miles to the coast, in direct line, and we have to be there before the sun sinks so we may depart in reasonable safety."

"There is one thing, though I would beg of you to do after we've gone." She said, turning to the queen.

"Anything." The queen said.

"Please find our dead, and burn their bodies in the light of day, so their spirits may find their way home." She asked solemnly.

"We will do this." The queen promised. "And hope that the dead may find their way to quiet lands where all is peaceful."

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Shyla sighed as she rode Asbiorn. Her cuts burned and her eyes itched; that was unexpected; a strange side-effect of the magic, she guessed. The army marched wearily behind her, scored and wounded, but proud.

"Is this always the way of war?" Shyla asked.

"I do not know what you mean." Vogelsson asked as she rode beside them. The horse she'd been given had been the finest of

the royal stables, and he looked it: a glossy chestnut with a proudly arched neck and a high-stepping prance as he tugged eagerly at the reins, but he was still small by their lights, only the size of an overlarge pony.

Others had been given to them as well; so many in fact that Volgelson had to beg that no more be given, as they would have no room to spare on the ships for the beasts and their fodder.

Marching with them as well were over two hundred Brisson soldiers; Gavin, Annabel, and Matcha at their head. The Queen had declared that; as the humans had marched so hard and so far to their aid, then whatever strength they had to spare would do the same for them. Volgelson had hesitated, and the queen, understanding her nervousness, had added that her army would not seek to learn the secret ways of their home, or make any map that led to its location. Any who went would be willing to be searched and judged by the Lord and Lady.

Shyla had been amazed at the number of volunteers; not just the professional soldiers, but many of the volunteers that had been granted leave to fight with Shyla's declaration.

They may not march as smartly as soldiers, but they'll still be able to get the job done. Shyla thought to herself.

Most of the people she saw were wounded, or their motley collection of weapons were notched and stained.

"I mean this." She gestured around them. "Fighting one hell of a battle then turning around and marching straight for another thousands of miles apart, with almost no rest, no plan, and no idea of what the enemy has in store?"

Volgelson's laugh was hard and grim. "No, at least, that's not the way I've been trained. Yes, our battles were usually pretty far apart, but then we had enough soldiers that we could rotate units out of the line of fire, and fighting vehicles and helicopters, and air support; I would kill for air support right about now."

"We have Jake." Shyla reminded her.

"Yes, but he's only one...um...dragon, not an entire air wing of fifty or more aircraft loaded to the teeth with smart bombs and enough firepower to clear the way." Volgelson responded. "And there's usually enough that we can have them at all points of the battlefield no matter how small, or large, the battle was. And usually, we wouldn't go into one firefight and turn right around and jump headfirst into another."

"Well, I'd just thought that I'd ask." Shyla sighed.

They continued on for a while in silence.

"What do you think we'll find when we get there?" Shyla asked quietly.

"Honestly?" Volgelson replied equally softly. "I don't know. It all depends on Jake and Serena, and their own powers. I have hope that we'll come back and find the enemy driven back, but at what cost, I don't know."

"I guess we have to have faith." Shyla said quietly.

"That's what the Maidens say." Volgelson agreed.

"I knew it!" Shyla laughed suddenly, looking at the surprised and guilty woman. "I saw it when judging that snake Quinnell. You're a Maiden now too, aren't you?"

Volgelson looked panicked. "Please, not so loud!" she shushed.

"Why?" Shyla asked in little more than a whisper. "I mean, you hardly seem the type."

Volgelson was silent a while before she spoke. "I know. It's odd, isn't it? I've never been part of much in my life, I never even joined the Brownies or the Girl Scouts, but then they came along and...what they were, what they could do, all without seeming to think it amazing or wonderful...It...changed me. I couldn't figure out how or why for the longest time, until Mulan."

"That girl is something, isn't she?" Shyla murmured.

"Yes, more than I expected, to be honest with you."

Volgelson nodded. "She convinced me in a way that I never imagined, in the power of the Lady."

Shyla rode quietly for a while, then said, "I hope your faith is justified, though you know the others won't be pleased with this."

"I beg of you, don't tell them." She begged. "I don't want..."

"To lose their trust." Shyla finished. "All right, I won't tell them."

"Thank you." Volgelson said quietly. "All right, let's see what home looks like now, shall we?"

"I guess we shall." Shyla agreed.

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