

Chapter 16  
Onset of Night

Serena watched the weary and exhausted wolf-folk below her straggle from their cook fires towards their tipis, the set of their shoulders bespeaking their weariness while their faces were set in frightened, determined masks.

*They look nearly dead on their feet, Serena worried. I hope they'll be strong enough to last this last night.*

She stood at the top of one of the surrounding hills where Josh had landed. He now lay wrapped around them like a wall of reptilian flesh, invisible to all eyes as if he'd become glass. Serena could see out, but no one could see in. It remained, she thought, one of his more impressive tricks.

The last children were ushered into the tipis, already crying, by their mothers who shuffled after them with bent back and bowed head.

"We must hope that they will attack tonight." Brian murmured in her ear. "Or they will not be able to help us."

Serena shook her head, sending her mane flashing in the evening. 'We will not let them suffer any more.' She told him angrily. 'If the goblins do not choose to attack tonight, then I will lift the spell that surrounds them.'

Brian looked alarmed. "If you do that, we will lose all surprise." He argued. "I know it is hard, but we do not have the numbers to meet them face to face in battle." He reminded.

'I understand.' Serena told him hotly. 'I understand that these people are terrified of going to sleep at night! I understand that their children cannot have a peaceful moment! I understand that they are all *suffering* under the cursed spell, and I understand that I can alleviate that suffering! Do you not think I can't feel them?!' Her horn wobbled dangerously close to him. 'Look over there!' She commanded, jabbing at a most un-extraordinary tipi, one of the hundreds with nothing to recommend it above the rest.

'In that tipi there is a little girl who is currently gripping her mother in a death grip, terrified that she'll be dead when she wakes. Her brother isn't even old enough to grasp the idea of death, yet he is terrified and screams in his cradle while the mother is ready to lie on the floor and give up. It will only take another night of this before she will not wake in the morning. *We will not let them die.*' She told him so fiercely that he backed up with his hands out in a placating gesture.

"I had no idea that it was getting that bad." He admitted to her softly. "I'm glad now that you are here, and you are right, we will have to try and make a new plan that doesn't include their aid."

"It is too late for that now." Jake told them, a thin ray of red marking his eye.

"Our troops are already hidden," he continued, "and we have no way of speaking to them until tomorrow during the day. Frankly, from what you've said, I'm surprised the Brissons are not awake at night and sleep during the day when the sun will chase their nightmare's away."

Serena was already shaking her head. 'This spell doesn't work like that.' She told him. 'It is active in both day and night, so they are trapped in their own bodies regardless of the time.'

Jake chewed on the silence thoughtfully.

"Then we will give them a day of peace in the morning," he rumbled. "If we do not engage the enemy tonight." He sounded eager for the chance to fight the enemy at last.

"Agreed." Brian said just as eagerly

'Hush you two.' Serena chided them. 'The sentries are coming.'

# # #

The sentries were four men-groups that were set strategically around the camps on the surrounding hills in distances about forty yards apart. Each of the positions had a small fire and the sentries took turns, two on and two off, patrolling the darkness around them. Two of the sentries carried bows, and two large shields and lances, and all of them were armed with short spears. At their hips were large signal horns, while they were dressed in what seemed to be thick buckskin leggings and jackets. Serena suspected that the jackets were so thick so as to be a form of natural leather armor She briefly wondered how well it worked for them.

Putting the thought out of her mind, she focused instead on peering into the night, looking for any sign that the goblins were preparing their attack. She wondered what it would be; the attack was supposed to begin underground, after all, so they wouldn't have any warning until the goblins began to pop up like nasty weeds, or the ground collapsed.

Their watch became very long. The watchstanders traded twice as empty moon climbed higher in the sky, blotting out the stars as it passed.

The peace shattered into a roaring, sliding, breaking din, unlike anything she'd ever heard. Serena turned to see three enormous trenches, perhaps fifteen yards across that faded into the twilight appear suddenly in the bare, parched earth.

"It appears that Tom's efforts were successful." Brian commented dryly.

Serena spared a glance at the alarmed sentries whose gaze, she noted, were fixed on the spectacle unfolding in front of them.

'Yes, but how much?' She fretted. 'The Brissons are not in shape for this! Look at how slow they are to respond!'

Brian turned and studied the camp. The roar had gotten the Brissons moving, there was no doubt about that. But he could

instantly see her point; the warriors were not fresh and seemed already to sag as they shuffled out of the camp and made their slow and painful way up to the crest. Yet their numbers swelled with each arrival, and they began to form themselves smartly into a fighting line.

Meanwhile, a fourth tunnel entrance appeared not fifteen yards from the base of the hill, and out of the yawning opening sprang a goblin. He was short and broad, even for a goblin, with long fingers, a hideous, sallow face, a long, bent nose and abnormally large eyes that glittered in the dark. He held no weapon but gripped instead a digging tool that seemed to combine the sharp point of a pick with the broad head of a shovel.

Without a glance at the Brissons, he set to the entrance with a will; clearing fallen rubble and hammering braces that someone handed him from the inside without bothering to glance at the enemies on the hill. He stood in easy bow shot, but no Brisson raised a weapon against him.

"Why aren't they shooting?" Brian asked in surprise and alarm. "Are they beaten already?"

Serena didn't think so; she felt a grim determination emanating from the warriors, and fear, but not of the goblin.

'I don't think so. I think that this must be one of the engineers that Grolbark spoke of.'

"That would make him a priority target." Brian frowned.

'I guess not.' Serena gave her equivalent of a shrug.

'Perhaps they are the goblin equivalent of a civilian?' She speculated. 'Or perhaps killing one of the engineering classes brings a terrible form of retribution that no one dares lift a hand against them? I don't know.' She admitted.

"Well, considering we know that they want to kill everyone here, I don't see how their retribution could be any worse." Brian pointed out.

'I know, but I have nothing.'

"Perhaps it's a spell," Jake mumbled, trying not to be overheard. "The Brissons can't kill him because of some spell that slays whoever gives the killing blow."

They sat digesting the thought.

'There is a form of magic on him.' Serena agreed reluctantly. 'I can feel it now that I am looking for it, but as to what kind it is, I do not know.'

"All right, we'll hold off killing engineers as well until we can secure one for interrogation." Jake decided. "We can't risk losing a valuable fighter killing an engineer until we've determined what that spell is."

"It can't be a Mutually Assured Destruction spell." Brian shook his head angrily. "Otherwise they'd put such a spell on their soldiers."

'It would be an immensely complex and difficult spell.' Serena put forth. 'I can't begin to know all the intricacies of casting one or what would furnish the power for it; likely the

subject himself,' she said thoughtfully. 'It could be that, but such energy would mean the engineer would likely have a short lifespan as the spell draws life energy from the host.'

They fell silent as they pondered the horrible likelihood of such an event.

"Every time I think I have a handle on these goblins..." Brian trailed off.

'How can we?' Serena asked. 'After all, they are so different to us...'

"But are they though?" Jake interrupted. "Were men so different? What about the dictatorships of the world? Can we honestly say that they wouldn't have done this if they'd had the opportunity? I don't think so, they would have immediately jumped at the chance to have a guaranteed spell to put on their soldiers and would have done it in a heartbeat...if they'd trust their soldiers enough to put the spell on them in the first place."

"I doubt it, but..." Brian began.

'Guys! We don't have time to debate this.' Serena barked, sounding more like her old, college-age self that got annoyed with some antic or another.

A glance showed her to be right; goblins were streaming out of the tunnel as fast as they could, the engineer panting heavily as he sat on the ground. Big goblins, small goblins, goblins in heavy armor with huge curved swords of foul design, goblins with little or no armor, goblins carrying the staffs of shamans, all came pouring out of the tunnel to form into their own battle line.

'I hadn't thought there would be so many regular soldiers.' Serena told them in dismay.

"I hadn't either." Brian admitted, trying to get an accurate count. "I knew they'd need some to protect the mages from counter-attack and for mop-up operations, but this is more than I counted on."

'I wonder how many Volgelson is facing.' Serena worried.

"Can't worry about that now," Brian advised. "We've got other things we've got to worry about."

Serena nodded. Below them the goblins had started to advance on the Brisson line ahead of them, the goblins smelling victory that the shamans were left behind before they could even launch their attacks.

"That might be to our advantage." Jake rumbled, seeing the break in the line forming. "Their sorcerers are exposed. A quick flame attack from above might be enough to destroy them."

"It would help, but not destroy them." Brian said, pointing. "See there? The goblins are continuing to come through, and there are far more shamans than any other type."

"Do I wait then?" he asked.

'No!' Serena declared before Brian could respond. 'Our allies are exhausted. The goblins are on the verge of breaking

through to the tents, and the children and elders that shelter behind their thin walls. Are we to abandon them to death and torture for the slim hope that we could catch their entire army in the open? If that were to be, then why did we come at all?’

Her voice, regal and commanding, made their cheeks burn with shame. They turned back to the struggling figures below them, seeing the sentries run down to join the fight.

‘Our time of hiding is over.’ Serena commanded. ‘The time of war is now.’

“Then let us strike deep today.” Jake rumbled.

Suddenly their sight of the battle rippled as Jake unfurled himself and took to the sky, the din of his takeoff lost in the shouts and screams below.

Brian raised a whistle to his lips and gave a short blast.

Instantly bushes and rocks stood up to reveal themselves as men and women. They hurried into two lines with their bows, just showing above the crest of the hill where they could see the battle below.

Another blast put arrow to string as the bowmen drew the fletchings to their cheek. The last blast sent the flight arcing high into the diamond-studded sky. The arrows hung, poised, before slamming down onto the goblin lines below. Screams and shouts of surprise came from the main body of the enemy as the arrows took their deadly effect.

Before the goblins could figure out what was happening, there came a tremendous roar. Fire fell from the sky, carving a path through the mass of terrified shamans who could only stand and stare as their ranks were devastated.

Jake’s pass brought him close to the knoll where they stood, and now that they had no protection from being spotted, Serena could feel all eyes snap to her.

She stepped forward almost daintily, her golden armor making no sound as she stood poised on the edge of the embankment. Atop her head, her horn blazed in an angry light that speared into goblin eyes and caused them to throw their arms up protectively in front of their faces.

Unnoticed, the archers continued to ply their deadly trade, sending flight after flight of arrows into the enemy until their quivers were empty. A carpet of dead surrounded the living, whose gaze remained hypnotically fixed on Serena like birds caught in the gaze of the cobra.

Serena felt the fear and rage course through her, the same feelings she got every time she went into battle. Rearing, she split the night with her piercing whinny, almost immediately swallowed and lost in Jake’s second pass.

That broke the goblins from their trance, and they came to themselves long enough to set themselves in another fighting line, while the Brissons, caught in the same web as their foes, took sudden heart as hope blazoned to life in their chests. They swung onto the offensive, leaping upon their distracted enemies,

stabbing with their spears, swinging their clubs with wild abandon, while their pitifully few archers sent their own arrows into the hosts arrayed against them.

Serena, without waiting for Brian's signal, set off at a walk down the hill, her horn aloft, her steps firm and sure.

Behind her she felt the humans following closely on foot, their bows left behind. In their hands gleamed their great swords. Their cloaks were cast aside revealing their bright armor and mail while their grim faces promised no quarter.

Beside her Brian strode easily along, his rider with his round shield and sword ready to defend his flanks while Brian carried a lance and shield, his sword hanging in its sheath.

Serena picked up the pace to a trot, then a full gallop, her horn lowering to the enemy as she raced the last few yards, her light blinding the enemy to who followed behind. With her sensitive ears, she heard the footfalls of her soldiers as they ran silently, giving no voice to the rage that burned in their hearts with cold flame.

Goblin soldiers cast themselves aside in terror at these new giants that appeared unexpectedly from the shadow of the light and charged with such utter lack of fear. Serena's armor turned aside the pitiful few blades that struck out at her while her hooves trampled any enemy that got in her way. Brian stayed with her as they carved a deep line into the packed formation, his lance shattering after the tenth strike; his sword sweeping out to remove a goblin's head before stabbing into another's heart, Brian yanking it almost casually out of the crumbling body.

Serena could not risk looking back to see how her soldiers fared, yet her magic gave her such sensitivity that she could feel the battle around her with stunning clarity. She could sense the humans cut through the badly frightened and astonished goblins, their superior strength able to overwhelm their foes with contemptuous ease. In front of them the brissons recovered, pushing forward into the teeth of the lessening pressure, their own war cries shrieking into the night.

She sensed the edges of the goblin formations beginning to fray, some of the more cowardly beginning to run back towards the perceived safety of the tunnels, over the charred bodies of the shamans and through the still smoldering killing grounds.

Jake didn't make it easy for them, he still passed overhead on constant strafing runs, an arrow flying from his back with deadly results regularly; Serena knew that his saddle held over a dozen quivers and nearly a thousand arrows that Nacomi could and would use with deadly precision.

They carved their way to the Brissons, linking up with the warriors and pushing the few goblins who fought stubbornly back.

Serena noticed a well-dressed Brisson elder hurrying up, followed closely by Lana and Mausi.

When they drew near, Serena fell back behind her soldiers,

who pushed forward with a yell, leaving them standing alone.

The old chief's footsteps faltered as he looked wonderingly at this creature with no recognizable rider, but his eyes became huge when Mausi and Lana dropped to one knee on either side of him.

"Greetings, Lady Serena, Guardian of the Forest; welcome to our fires." They intoned in the traditional greeting of the Howloot tribe.

Serena felt sorry for the old chief, who stared at his two warriors as if they'd gone completely insane, while behind them she could see an older woman hurrying up, one she recognized from descriptions as being Mausi's and Lana's mother.

She was tall and firm, weathered like old sandstone yet filled with the beauty of the desert in the twilight. Serena was impressed with the graying wolf long before she'd even met her.

Serena realized that her form wasn't conducive to speak, so she turned herself human. Unlike other times, where she had to summon a dress to cover herself, her armor shifted with her, becoming a suit of overlapping, leaf-like scales that formed a tight, impenetrable piece that moved like chain mail with the stopping power of plate. Upon her fair brow she felt a delicately worked golden helm gilded with silver leaf and sapphire rivers, while in her hand she grasped a spear that stood taller than her, with worked leaf point and steel-shod staff.

The look on the chief's face almost made her explode in giggles, he looked so lost and befuddled! Yet she managed a smooth exterior and an expression that Mausi called stern and forbidding for years afterwards.

"Greetings, Lady Mausi and Lady Lana. It is good to see you again, though I wish our meetings could have been under better circumstances." She ignored the sudden surprise and consternation that flashed across those within earshot as they looked at Mausi and Lana who made a supreme effort to appear unruffled, though Serena could feel the sudden fear that filled them.

"We have never been properly introduced." She continued, turning to the Chief. "I am Serena." She bowed slightly towards the Chief.

He, recognizing his turn, spoke. "Ah te mewahatap se Barknaluk te meh cogta fe..." and on. Serena froze, she hadn't expected this problem: the dialect the chief spoke was different than what Mausi and Lana had spoken, though she'd had the benefit of Mausi and Lana speaking excellent English. Apparently, this chief never had learned, or preferred speaking in his native tongue for formalities, which she couldn't understand unless she laid her horn on his arm!

Fortunately, Mausi seemed to recognize the situation and immediately stepped in to act as translator for her.

"This is Chief Barknaluk, the leader of our tribe. He gives

greetings to you, High Priestess, and speaks of joy at seeing friends in our most desperate hour."

"It is our joy in being here." Serena assured him. "We will never allow our friends to slip into darkness; weak as we are we shall still fight. To bring peace back to the world."

At the word weak, the brissons turned to stare at the single line of human warriors, carving apart the last resistance with flashing swords and bitter expressions of hate on their faces, the ground turning black with goblin blood.

"Do not think that the goblins have brought forth their full strength yet, Chief Barknaluk." Serena said sharply. "This is merely the first wave, the skirmish before their war to destroy the Twelve Nations. There shall be much bloodshed before the morning light." She said sadly. "But there is one thing more I can give you to help you."

At these words, Brian and his Rider appeared, as if summoned by magic, bearing a long, cloth-covered bundle.

"Lana, step forward." Serena suddenly commanded.

Lana's eyes were wide as she took one step forward, and then another, until she stood only an arm's length away from Serena.

"Kneel." Serena commanded, calm and unruffled as if there wasn't a battle raging just a few short steps away, that the night was filled with agonized screams and the clash of arms.

Brian passed the bundle to Serena as Lana knelt to the ground, her face tilted upwards, her features awed and a little frightened.

"Lana, the vision we have shared together is unmistakable. As such, we have labored long to ensure its passing: you will wield the weapon that will destroy this Demon who has pursued you for your entire life. Now the ghosts of the unjustly slaughtered, the spirits of your people, shall guide and protect you this day as you fight to defend your new family from the horrors of your past." Her eyes swept the assembled. "It is the duty of every warrior to stand against the darkness to allow the innocent to live in peace, to help the weak against the strong. May this tool aid you in that task!"

And with those words she whipped aside the covering and held aloft the sheathed sword that Brian had labored to make. The sheath shone in the dim night as if lit from within by fey light, the pommel flashed from the sapphires set in the cold blue eyes of the snarling wolves who seemed to dance and sway in the breeze. The tooled leather seemed to change color, fading into the background wherever it strayed.

With trembling hands, Lana grasped the handle and drew forth the blade. The *Wolf's Fang* glittered coldly with delight, eager for its test. As she held it high in front of her, the desert seemed to moan and the fires whipped in the wind, the goblins fell silent as a new fear and dread overtook their hearts while upon the Brissons courage fanned to life in roaring

bonfires, brushing aside fresh weariness as the battle lulled. Heads turned to look at the young fox-girl and the gleaming human who stood in the center like two flowers upon a hillock surrounded by seething flood waters.

Serena, sensing the mood of the moment, took a step back and then another. Electing to remain human, she turned abruptly on her heel and strode towards the line of men. Like guilty children, they resumed their terrible work in silence, wielding their blades in swift, strong strokes. The spell shattered and once more battle resumed as the two sides struggled to gain the mastery of the other.

Serena came to the front line and a goblin rose up to face her. She thrust with her spear, felt the sharp shock of impact, heard the howl of her foe as his blood sprayed the ground. She expected to feel disgust, horror, pity or something. Instead she felt...empty. There wasn't exhilaration, or horror, or anything like she'd read of in her textbooks. If she felt an emotion, it might have been regret. Regret that she had to be here, Regret that the goblins wouldn't let the green world grow and peace flourish. She waded into the fight as if born to battle, her spear felling chief or shaman in front of her, while her cold, set features set the goblins quailing before her even more than the dragon inspired their terror.

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Had they only had to deal with the goblins left from their initial attack, they would have done in minutes and been able to collapse the final tunnel. But as they'd expected, the goblins poured out of the tunnel over the bodies of the fallen with no hesitation. Shamans hurled spells to weaken the brissons or inspire terror, yet the flashing blade of Lana and spear of Serena gave them courage and strength when they needed it most.

Somewhere a cock crowed, signaling the end of the night, and the last chance of the enemy before morning light would spell his defeat.

They pushed now with almost manic strength, determined to overwhelm all defense and snatch victory by brute force.

Jake appeared in the sky, swooping down upon the goblins and shredding them with tooth and claw, smashing them aside with his tail and roasting them with his breath before taking to the sky again. It appeared to Serena that Nacomi was carefully husbanding her remaining arrows, for she only loosed one or two in all the time Serena saw her there on Jake's back, aiming for the large headdress of a chief or the stick of a shaman. Serena lost sight of them as a surge of the battle spun her around and towards Brian.

The centaur stood with his rider impassively, his great hand-and-a-half sword cutting vast arcs of the goblins in front of him while he blocked blows easily with his shield. Around him rallied two dozen soldiers, Brisson and human, fighting like demons under his calm leadership.

Serena knew it wouldn't be much longer now, for she could already see the lightening sky that spelled doom for the goblins and their plans."

"At them!" her voice floated above the battlefield. "Push them! They are nearly finished!"

The goblins gave back stubbornly, step by step, closer to their tunnel.

Serena felt the close taste of victory when the tunnel erupted, dirt and bodies flying high into the air to come cascading down on the followers beneath. A huge form towered into the night sky, its mouth working in rage, a monstrous creature of fire, holding a flaming blade in one hand and a buckler of shadow in the other.

The humans stood firm, though despair flooded their faces as they prepared for the end. The Brissons threw themselves to the ground in disbelief and terror.

"The Demon has come." Serena whispered, and her mixed emotions of elation and fear for Lana fought for dominance in her heart as she opened herself up to the magic and brought forth the lightning to smash the final armies.

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