

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 7 “Revelations”

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The Orc War Campaigns – Revelations

In the blink of an eye, everything around you could change. Your status, the very course of your future, all from a single moment in time. Zerek never imagined that facing off against a bunch of orcs invading Archanon would do anything more than keep his own heart beating.

Now, as he entered the men's quarters in the servants' house, he was greeted jovially by everyone.

"Hey, it's Zerek!"

"Buddy, you're back!"

"If it isn't the Defender of Archanon himself."

After weeks of praise, he was used to it, used to everyone wanting to talk to him. Him, a simple miner from the Ilari Mountains, now lauded as a hero by his peers. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined this.

With the battle already two weeks behind him, he had expected the commotion surrounding his presence to subside, and in actuality it had a little. But only a little. Speaking with everyone in turn, all of these like-aged or older men that he had spent the past few months bunking with, he'd found that they all weren't such bad people.

In those early days in the castle, he had avoided talking to them, and they avoided talking to him. Little Endel had been his only companion, his only friend.

In fact, he was saddened to see that Endel wasn't at his bunk or anywhere else in the room. It was not yet midday, so he was probably out in the stalls performing his duties. Zerek was experiencing

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an unusual lull in activity. Kai had no new orders, no new errands for him to run, and in a time of war, especially now that the Allies were reinforcing all city defenses, he was usually busy.

He hadn't had much time to speak with Endel in the past couple weeks, so Zerek excused himself from the crowd and quickly left, making his way through the hallway and out into the courtyard as fast as he could. The stables were on the other side of the castle, so he took off into a run, anxious to find his friend.

Until he heard Kai's voice call out, "Zerek!"

Screeching to a halt, Zerek turned to find the Steward of Archanon Castle just coming out of one of the back entrances to the castle. She wore another pencil-thin dress, this time one of burgundy. She wasn't rushing towards him, which disappointed him – she always looked comical trying to rush in those outfits.

The Steward waved him over, and his heart sank. The lull was over, and he wouldn't get to see Endel after all. He jogged over to the entrance to meet Kai, where she looked him up and down appraisingly.

"You've been summoned before the King," she spoke sternly. His heart skipped a beat at her words, and a feeling of shock slammed into his chest, so much so that his hands went numb. "We both have."

"The...the King?" he stumbled over his words.

Ignoring his blabbering, she nodded in approval, "You look well enough for a court appearance. Come along at once." Spinning on the spot, she made her way through the entrance, the castle guards opening the doors once again for her.

Zerek was too shocked at first to immediately follow, but within moments, he was chasing after her. "Why are we being summoned?"

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He'd only appeared before the King twice before, three times if you counted the Allied Council meeting. The first time had been to bring the news of the orc attack on his mining camp. The second had been to tell the King about the orcs' second attack on Archanon.

"I imagine it has something to do with your heroics," she scoffed. Zerek couldn't figure out why, but she had treated him with increasing coldness ever since the battle. Was she jealous of the attention he was getting? She didn't seem the jealous type, but then again, Zerek really didn't know her.

In fact, the Steward never talked about herself with him, or with anyone it seemed. How lonely must she be?

Their trip through the castle was quick, as it always was following the bustling storm that was Kai. They did not enter the throne room through a side entrance, as servants usually did. No, as they skipped all of them and moved towards the front of the castle, Zerek realized that this was an official meeting with the King, and they were to enter through the main doors.

Twice as tall as the servants' entrances, and twice as wide, the double doors were already wide open, bracketed by two castle guards in their finest leather armor and black and silver tabards. Suddenly Zerek was very conscientious of his own clothing, a simple blue tunic and brown trousers, well-worn leather boots, and his dagger, still strapped to his belt in one of the scabbards given to him from the castle armory.

He was a commoner. No, he was less than that. He was just a servant.

As they came to stand in the center of the door, he could see King Beredis, standing before his throne atop the stairs at the back of the throne room. The giant statues that lined both sides of the red carpet intimidated Zerek, as they always did, and he felt as if the kings and queens of old judged him while he and Kai walked towards the King.

At the foot of the stairs stood the king's most trusted guard, Draegus Kataar, father of the now-famous Cardin Kataar. Like the other castle guards, he wore leather and the kingdom's tabard.

However, unlike those other guards, he was a former member of the Warriors' Guild, and the hilt of his longsword, strapped to his left hip, set him apart from the other guards.

Beside him stood yet another unexpected figure. Another castle guard, also wearing the standard armor, and also bearing a unique looking sword that indicated she was once a member of the Warriors' Guild. It was the woman he had fought side by side with two weeks ago against the orcs.

"Steward," the king spoke jovially, descending from the throne to greet them.

Zerek and Kai stopped a dozen feet away from the foot of the steps, and together they bowed.

"My King," Kai spoke with absolute respect.

"Please stand tall," King Beredis said, coming to a stop at the foot of the steps. "I believe you both know Captain Draegus Kataar."

Kai nodded respectfully to the Commander, "Of course."

Moving to stand next to the woman, the King added, "And this is Lieutenant Amaya Kenla. I believe you, young Zerek, have already met her."

Unsure what to say, he glanced first at Kai, and then at Amaya. He hadn't known her name before now, the chaos during and following the battle had not allowed for pleasantries to be exchanged.

"Yes," he said. Thinking he should say more, he added, "I think I owe her my life."

"As I owe you mine," Amaya nodded. "You aided me when you could have escaped. I'm not sure I could have faced all of those orcs alone."

Zerek felt his face grow warm, and he averted his eyes from her appraising smile. A part of him found her to be very attractive, and he loved the attention from her. But upon thinking of that, he immediately felt guilty, and he thought of Laira. He'd seen her maybe twice since the battle, his duties keeping him from seeing her more than that.

"In fact," King Beredis continued, smiling, "the Lieutenant has spoken very highly of your skills, and that of your companion, the young woman you were with that night."

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Naturally, Zerek also considered that the Kai was still furious with him for being out so late at night. And the existence of the 'young lady' he had been with was no longer a secret, though she had slipped away and never had appeared before the King.

She had explained later that she was afraid she might be recognized as a thief by a castle guard. He wondered if there was more to it than that. Something about what she wanted to tell him that night, moments before the orcs invaded.

"And I have spoken with your defense trainer, Torick Alixton," Draegus added. "He tells me that you have advanced quickly for what little training he's given you. Your physical fitness, your reflexes, all are higher than he expected."

"In short," the King stepped closer to him, "you have impressed a great many people in recent days. And you have proven yourself a willing defender of your kingdom."

His cheeks burning even hotter, all Zerek could think to do was bow his head, "Thank you, my Lord. It..." Pausing, he considered his next words. Was it appropriate to confess to the King his greatest desires? "I have always dreamt of being a Warrior. Of protecting others. Fighting for others."

A giant smile blossomed upon the King's face. "So I have heard. That is precisely why I have called you before me today." He then turned to Kai and nodded to her, "I know that he is your newest servant and our newest courier. However, could you bear to lose his services at this time?"

The look of shock on Kai's face didn't quite mirror his own, but it came close. She looked completely taken aback, and even took a step backwards. "My Lord? I, well, of course. I mean, he is not *my* ward. He is a servant of the castle, and therefore he is your servant to do with as you please."

It was the first time he had ever heard Kai stumble with her words. Her response was one of complete shock.

"Excellent," the King smiled. "Then we have quite the offer for you," he turned to Zerek. "If you feel up to the challenge."

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Draegus stepped forward and nodded to Zerek. "There's a spot open for training to be a city guard, and it's yours if you want it." This time it was Zerek's turn to stagger backwards. They were offering to make him a soldier!

"I know it's not the Warriors' Guild like you wanted," Amaya stated, "But trust me. This is better."

Zerek wanted to rush forward and hug her, hug Draegus, shake hands with the King, do anything to express the joy that was quickly rushing into every corner of his body. "I...it...it's beyond my wildest dreams! I accept! Of course I accept. Yes. Absolutely!"

Almost everyone laughed at his emphatic response, and he felt himself once again blushing in embarrassment. Except for Kai, she did not laugh. She did not smile. In fact if anything, her face grew longer, but Zerek seemed to be the only one who noticed.

"Excellent," the King replied. "Then, unless you have any duties for him to perform at this very moment, Steward?"

She slowly shook her head. "No, Sire."

"Then go pack your belongings," Draegus nodded. "Torick will meet you and escort you back to the Red District. You'll join the latest trainees in the training barracks for the next few weeks."

Brimming with excitement, Zerek very nearly ran out of the throne room at that very moment, but then stopped when hard-learned etiquette kicked in. He paused, and looked to the King.

No doubt seeing Zerek's excitement, the King nodded his head. "You may leave. Steward, if you would remain behind for a moment..."

Without another thought, Zerek ran out as fast as his legs could take him. It felt as if his legs had an unlimited supply of energy, and he would never stop running so long as he was fueled by the fact that dreams he never thought could come true were finally happening.

However, it wasn't the servants' quarters that he ran to. He had to tell someone else.

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He had to find Laira!

Blessed warmth.

It was the first thought Arkad had as he and his surviving darksteel orcs crossed onto the brown, crunchy grasses of the Wastelands. They had finally left behind the wretched cold in the north, with only warmth ahead.

The Wastelands were aptly named, very little of sustenance grew there, unless you knew where to look. The orcs that had lived in the Wastelands for millennia had survived there because orcs were very good at finding food in the unlikeliest of places, and they could drink almost any water without fear of poison or disease.

More than that, they thrived in heat. While he wished it were a bit more humid, it was the closest thing to home they would find.

Home... Should he resign himself to this fate? Would the Wastelands forever be their home? If so, then they could never rise to the empire they needed to become to protect themselves against the inevitable coming storm.

If he knew his troops well, the ones that had retreated from Valaras and the borders of Saran Kingdom, then any survivors would have made it back to the Wastelands by now. He felt his stomach twist and turn. Had their gamble paid off? Did their assault on Archanon force the humans to pull their troops back and allow his kin to finish their run without harassment?

He hoped so, but mostly he just wanted to stop running. He was tired, so very tired. Even as strong as he was, he was reaching his limits to how far and how fast he could run. If he felt this tired, he could only imagine how the rest of his party felt.

More than that, however, he was tired of, well, everything. Of failing. Of being an outcast.

Of killing.

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Shaking his head, he tried to banish the feeling from his heart. He was an orc soldier, he should never tire of the battle! That was what he was born to do. That was what he was meant to do. From birth until death, until the gods came down to relieve him of his duty.

He was a soldier. Arkad had to remember that.

As the sun drew high in the sky, he caught his first glimpse of the most welcoming sight he had seen in months. Through dry, gnarled forests, he saw orcs. Hundreds, no *thousands* of orcs spread out in a wide frontline in a deep valley, with trenches dug, pikes laid out, and catapults and archers ready to defend.

The defenses were still under construction, so he knew the line had only recently been formed, but orcs were efficient, and very soon, they would be so dug in, the humans couldn't hope to penetrate them.

A dark hole formed in the pit of his stomach when he realized how false that was. When he had first come to the Wastelands, he had been told just how difficult the Wastelands were to traverse for humans. The landscape changed so quickly from swampland to dead plains to impassable brambles. Orcs were tougher, more robust, and could make it through the worst that Halarite could throw at them. It was their greatest advantage to staying in the Wastelands.

Now, however, the humans had Wizards, and portals. The front line could be bypassed and their enemies could attack from behind. Whoever had ordered the creation of this new frontline had not taken that into consideration.

Never-the-less, to see so many of his kin in one place again warmed his heart. They weren't all dead yet.

Even though they were still well within the cover of the trees, someone must have spotted them coming, and a deep, throaty horn sounded to alert all troops to their arrival. He felt that tone vibrate his very core, and for a moment, he felt at home.

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At first the orcs on the front formed up to defend against an assault, but the moment that Arkad broke through the tree line, he could see their formation slacken. When they finally approached the front line and slowed to an exhausted march, they were greeted with great fanfare. The orcs roared in hearty cheer, shouting in triumph at the return of their General.

Their troupe was surrounded, jostled about as their kin brusquely slapped them on the back or tried to shake their hands. Arkad's heart swelled, and no matter how he felt or what he thought about their situation, in that moment in time, he felt welcome, wanted, *needed*. He was their General, and despite his failures, they still loved him.

As he looked around, he saw very few darksteel orcs aside from his party. Almost all had been deployed in the two armies that had marched upon the human lands. Had any others survived, or were these all the ones who had been left behind to defend against counter attack?

When the initial celebration had ended, he and his team were taken to a large camp in the rear, where a fire roared, and he could smell fresh meat cooking. His stomach gurgled angrily at him and his mouth watered. How long had it been since they had eaten fresh meat?

They all sat around the fire, Kilack sitting next to him, looking completely spent. However, when food was in-hand, served by their lowest ranking soldiers who looked simultaneously terrified and honored beyond belief to be serving their General, they had the energy to devour their food in minutes. The taste of the sweet, juicy meet exploded in his mouth, and he was ever so grateful to be back.

That is, until he heard that horrible voice call out, "General!" The voice was clear, confident, and for a female, very low. She also annoyed him to no end.

Looking to his left, Arkad snorted at the figure that approached. When both stood, she was half of his height. Now, however, with him seated, she was able to look at him evenly as she stepped up next to him. She still wore her simple leather armor, blackened to try to make her look like she belonged amongst the other darksteel warriors.

“Orinda,” he looked away. “Couldn’t I have gone another day without seeing your abysmal face?”

Orinda grumbled at him, but ignored the jibe. “I always knew some day you would fail so horribly that even She wouldn’t be so forgiving of you.”

A sudden lump formed in his throat, and feeling drained from his arms and legs. It was the inevitable conclusion to his epic failure. Punishment was due, and he would get no stay of execution.

The entire camp grew deathly quiet at her words, and all eyes fell upon him. Normally he would have glared at them for their stares, but all he could do was stare into the blazing fire. Somewhere in there, he saw his life behind him, and wondered if only his fate with the gods remained in his future.

Knowing there was nothing else to do, he stood up from the ground, pulling his axe along with him. He couldn’t help but grin when Orinda watched nervously, her eyes fixed on his axe. But he would not take her life. That would only make his situation worse.

Securing the axe on his back, he narrowed his eyes at her with a confidence that did not mirror what he felt inside.

Somewhere inside, he found the courage he needed to tell Orinda, “Do not worry, whelp. I will survive long after you have perished. I promise you that.”

For a long moment, she stared up at him, her eyes searching his for the terror he felt but would never show. Scrunching up her nose, she shook her head and pulled out a lilac-colored vial. “We shall see about that, General.”

Turning, she threw the vial down against a rock, where it shattered and spilled out its contents. Within moments, a lilac-colored wall of light appeared before them, stirring the dust and broken, dry grass around them in a flurry of wind.

Without hesitation, Orinda walked through the shaft. Arkad scowled after her. He’d give anything to twist her head right off of her shoulders. If only...

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He looked at Kilack, and nodded. “Take command, and reform the line to protect from all possible avenues of attack.”

With a grimace on his face, Kilack nodded. “Yes, General.”

Without another word, Arkad faced the portal, faced his fate, and walked forward with as much pride and confidence as he could muster. If he was to die for his failure, then at least the last memory his men would have of him would be that of a proud General.

Even if he didn't feel like it anymore.

It was as if every single person in Archanon was out in the streets today and wanted to get in Zerek's way. Somewhere in this gigantic city was the one person on Halarite that he wanted to talk to, and he couldn't get to her!

Of course, he didn't even know where to begin to look, so he ran through the streets as fast as his legs could take him, dodging every person meandering about, running into a few, eliciting more than a few grunts and complaints from random people.

Where could she be? In the past couple months, when he'd wanted to find her, he found she often stayed near their spot, the landing on the river. But now, even after hasty repairs to the grating where the river passed through the city wall, the landing was under heavy guard. No way she would ever go near a city guard, not if there was even a slight chance someone would recognize her as a thief.

So where, then? He thought maybe she would be in the alley where she had slipped the note into his belt, but she wasn't there. And the bread lady hadn't seen her that day. She wanted to reminisce with him about her own love-filled youth, but he was too excited to listen and excused himself.

When he found her, it turned out she was near where they had first met, what felt like a lifetime ago. The Market District, where she had stolen his dagger and his first charge from the King.

She was perusing a stall, and he noticed her pouch looked a little full, so he assumed she had or was in the process of stealing food. He didn't even give her a chance to react or notice him, he simply grabbed her by the hand and pulled her along.

"Zerek!" she objected, trying to resist, but only just enough to let him know she was annoyed.

"Come on, I have to tell you something!" he said excitedly, his heart racing and his mind spinning with the reality of what had just happened.

Within moments, he pulled her into an easement between two shops. Laira yanked her hand free and glared at him. "You almost got me caught! What's gotten into you?" Then she stopped, an eyebrow raised as he practically jumped up and down in excitement. "What's going on?"

"You're never going to believe what happened!" he started. "You see I was out walking when Kai called me into the castle and said the King wanted to see me about something she wouldn't say what but I thought I was in trouble and then--"

"Woh," she clamped down hard on his shoulders, "Slow down there, lover-boy. You're talking too fast. Just breathe."

Zerek's face grew warm in embarrassment, not just at what she had called him, but at his own outburst. So he took a moment to close his eyes and take in deep breaths, an exercise that Torick had taught him.

When he finally had forced himself to calm down, he opened his eyes, and felt a smile blossom across his face when he saw her own gorgeous smile aimed right back at him.

Once again, Zerek launched into an explanation of what had just happened, only this time he managed to keep his excitement under some semblance of control. When he finished, Laira's smile had grown ever bigger, and she clutched her arms around him in the biggest hug she had ever given him.

"Oh my gods, that's amazing, Zerek!" she pulled away, giving him a kiss that made his lips explode in tingles, just like her kisses always did. "I'm so excited for you."

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His own excitement and happiness was palpable. Finally, after so long, everything was going right! His dream was coming true, and he was falling in love with a wonderful, exciting woman. He was making a name for himself, and had the respect of the King of Tal and his guards. His life was finally coming together.

Remembering that he had left one final piece out, he added, “Oh I almost forgot, I’ll be moving out of the castle today. I’ll be in the training barracks for the city guard, over in the Red District.”

It was as if a dark cloud had overcome Laira’s face. Her hands stopped squeezing his in excitement, and in fact quickly seemed to grow cold, colder than the fall air around them. Her smile didn’t just fade, it vanished in an instant, replaced by a look of dread.

She started to pull away from him, but he held on to her hands. “Laira?” He heard his own voice tremble when he said her name. Fear struck deep into his heart, his mind racing with how what he had just told her could elicit such a reaction. “What’s wrong?”

Closing her eyes, she stopped pulling away and just stood there for a moment. Something terrible was coming, he felt it. He didn’t know what, he just knew that he had only ever seen her react this way once before, and suddenly he suspected what was coming.

“I have to tell you something,” she finally said, opening her eyes. Her voice was quiet, barely audible over the din of the Market District. There was a world still moving all around him, but he was scarcely aware of it, of the dozens of people streaming by on the street behind her. The entire world didn’t matter to him, only she mattered.

Her hands trembled, so he tried to step a little closer to her, but she backed away to maintain their distance. Afraid that if he let go of her hands, he’d never be able to hold them again, he held on tight, and wouldn’t let her move further away. Somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach, he thought he was about to lose her.

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“I should have told you this a long time ago,” she started, shaking her head, unable to look at him. “Maybe...maybe I never should have let you find me in the first place.” She took in a giant breath, and then let it out in a long sigh. “Zerek, I’ve deceived you. I mean, not entirely. Well I did at first. But I’ve been lying to you. Or holding something back.”

He felt his heart twist. What could she have lied to him about that was so horrible? Dread filled him, and ridiculous situations began to play through his head. Was she really an orc in disguise? No, that was stupid. Was she a murderer? He’d never seen any evidence of that. The only thing she had ever killed, as far as he knew, was an orc. So what? What was making her act this way?

Finally, she explained. “When I stole from you the first time, you were just a random target, a mark carrying the very documents we needed from the castle. But then, you started looking for me, telling everyone you could find in the city that you were looking for me.” She shook her head, “It was apparent you were infatuated with me.”

He frowned and tilted his head, “Infatuated?”

She stared at him for a moment, then shook her head, “Sorry. It means you are, well, head over heels for me.”

He nodded, that dread in his stomach mixing with the warmth he felt towards her. “Yeah, I am. So just...tell me already. What’s wrong?”

“I’m part of a...I don’t know what to call it. Like a guild, of thieves.” She shrugged, “Nothing official, just a bunch of us working together for mutual benefit. We do, however, have a leader. And he decided your interest in me was worth...” She trailed off and stared at him, sorrow and regret in her eyes. When she took in a shuddering breath, she finished, “Worth exploiting.”

At first, what she had said didn’t quite register with him. When it did, his heart sank to the deepest, darkest pit of his stomach. All warmth faded, and the edges of his vision began to grow dark. “You...what?”

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He didn't know how to interpret the look on her face. He didn't know how to interpret anything going on around him. All he could focus on was the horrible darkness that had just clutched onto his heart and squeezed.

"Our leader ordered me to let you find me," she continued, her voice almost a whisper now. Or was that just part of his perception? "Told me to win your heart, so that I could someday convince you to join our cause. Not to become a thief, Zerek, just to help us prove that the monarchy was hiding something, and was doing everything it could to prevent its own downfall, at the expense of innocents."

Zerek couldn't think. It was as if his mind had stopped working completely, and there was just that moment. That moment of shock, where the world he had built up around himself had frozen itself. Nothing moved forward. Nothing went backwards. It just was that moment in time.

Until the anger started. First as a light simmer, then a boil, until it was ready to explode.

"You lied," he spoke. He was barely aware of how his voice sounded. Was it angry? Was it hateful?

Her eyes turned downward, and she nodded. "I did. But something I didn't expect happened, Zerek." She looked up at him again, her eyes pleading and hopeful. "I really did fall for you. I really...I really do love you, Zerek."

He'd let her hands go, but he didn't know how long ago that was. A pain he had never felt before welled up in his chest, as if something or someone had taken a hold of his heart and was squeezing it, harder and harder until it felt ready to crumble.

"Shut up," he said. "I don't...you lied." He backed away from her. "YOU LIED!"

There must have been more rage than he realized in his voice, or he must have said it louder than he intended. She backed away, as if he had physically hit her, and what color there was in her face drained completely. A couple of people in the street behind her stopped and gawked at them.

"Zerek, I..."

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He didn't let her finish. He didn't want to hear anything she said. He didn't want to be there anymore. Tears started to blur his vision, and he couldn't cry in front of others, in front of her. He had to get away, to find some place to hide. He had to get away. From her. From the world. From everything!

Without realizing what he was doing, he ran. He didn't know where he was going, he wasn't aware of any of the people he ran past, he just knew he had to run.

He had to find somewhere safe.

For the second time that day, Amaya had been called to the King. Only this time, the King was in an unplanned meeting with the Allied Council, so she was stuck waiting in the corridor outside of the Council chambers.

Last time she sat on the bench that she was currently warming, she had been enraged by Din's false claims, and had been ready to storm into the room to demand that the King retain her services.

Sighing, she leaned back against the stone wall, the cold seeping through her leather tunic and giving her a chill. Annoyed, she sat up straight again, adjusting her posture to try to relieve the pain in her butt from sitting on stone.

A voice from her right startled her, "Used to be you could sit anywhere for hours and never get uncomfortable." Elic, her trusted second in command, strolled up and folded his arms. He too wore the castle guard armor that helped them blend in when they were not on a mission. His black hair was pulled back into a very short pony tail, and he grinned at her. "Getting old, are we?"

She rolled her eyes, and then slid over a bit to give him room. He sat to her left and leaned back against the stone, never unfolding his arms.

"We've barely started our lives, Elic," she sighed. "But right now, I swear I feel like I've lived a hundred years."

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“Stress will do that to you, you know.” He shrugged and looked at her. “Gods know you’ve been through a lot lately.” For a moment, his eyes took on a distant stare, and he added, “We all have.”

With a nod of her head, she thought of his wife and asked, “Have you heard from Denora?”

One edge of his face turned up in his attempt at a fake smile. “Yes I have.”

When he didn’t elaborate, she figured it was a subject he was not ready to discuss, so she didn’t press further. None of them had been given leave to visit family since the war started, so all correspondence had been through letters. The quiet smile that Elic usually wore had faded over the past month, and she wondered if that had to do with Denora.

As always, however, Elic turned the topic of conversation to Amaya. “How are you holding up?”

Letting out her own giant sigh, Amaya leaned back, no longer caring about the cold. “I’m not.”

That admission startled even her. She never let her true feelings show through to her subordinates. She had to look strong, look infallible, so that they could trust her command. Trust her.

Then again, she realized that they were no longer Warriors. There was no official chain of command amongst them, they simply looked up to her for leadership because that’s what they were used to.

“You must be doing alright if you can hold off darksteel orcs with nothing but a dagger,” he said, genuine enthusiasm in his voice. She felt something stir inside of her, a memory of her anger from that night. “You clearly didn’t lose control.”

Shaking her head, she looked into his eyes, their darkness mirroring the darkness in her stomach. “Yes, I did. I left it out of my report, but when those three charged, and I thought I was dead...” She paused, looking down at her hands, palms facing her. They were gloved, but she could feel blood on them. Even if she had washed all of the blood away.

"I felt so much anger, Elic," her voice trembled a little. "I just launched myself at those orcs without a care in the world. I wanted to hurt them. Hurt *someone*. Anyone I could, and they were just there, conveniently."

For a long moment, Elic was quiet, and she continued to stare at her hands. She wouldn't allow herself to cry, but the feelings inside of her were enough to make her shake. Even the memory of the anger she felt was terribly strong.

"What you did to them, you wished you could do to Commander Din," Elic spoke softly.

She nodded, looking at him with a small smile on her face, glad that he understood without her having to say it. He just looked back, sorrow on his face.

"What you're feeling is normal, Amaya," he nodded. "He betrayed you. He betrayed all of us, and if I feel the way I do about him, then I can only imagine..."

"It was stupid of me," she scoffed, leaning forward and planting her elbows on her knees, her head turned down and her black hair falling around her face. "I should have never gotten involved with my commander. Even if he wasn't a gutless, backstabbing rat, it was still a stupid thing to do. We were taught early in training never to get romantically involved with your commanding officer."

"Hey," he rested a hand on her back, a physical connection that she wanted to shy away from at first. "The blame doesn't lie solely on you, you know. He was the commander, it was his responsibility to follow and enforce the rules. He failed. He failed you, and he failed all of us."

She shook her head, glancing at him through her hair. "That only makes it worse. My failure hurt more than just me, it hurt all of you."

"Really?" he asked, something strange in his voice. She looked at him and saw a skeptical look staring back at her. "You're going to take the blame for all of our misery? We supported you when you decided to disobey him. We've always supported your decisions, and we always will. So don't try to take the blame for everything."

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She felt herself give a half-hearted, silent laugh. “You’re all fools for following me.”

“And damn proud of it,” Elic patted her back, and then retracted his hand.

Sitting up straight again, she stared across the corridor at the opposing bench. “One thing is for sure. I don’t think I can ever be in another relationship again.” She felt her throat clamp up for a second when she said that, the realization of what she’d just said sinking in moments later. “I don’t care what that means for my future. I don’t care if it means I never have a family. I can’t...” She trailed off, gulped, and then finished, “I can’t go through that kind of heart ache again. Not when you all are depending on me to have a clear head.”

Elic said nothing to that, and for the next several minutes, they remained silent. Finally, when the air felt so heavy that she could slice through it with her sword, the doors to the council chambers opened, and crowds began to stream out of it. She and Elic stood up and remained where they were, watching as the Allied leadership passed them by.

A moment later, Draegus was next to them, beckoning her to follow them in. She looked at Elic and was about to bid him farewell, but then another thought occurred to her. “Come with,” she nudged his arm towards the chambers. “You’re my second in command, it’s about time you saw how these meetings went.”

Elic glanced at the chamber doors, and then back at her. Shrugging, he motioned his hand, “After you.”

Passing by him, she followed Draegus into the council chambers. After Elic passed through, the doors were closed by the guards behind them. The chamber was void of people except for King Beredis, Draegus Kataar, and Amaya and Elic. The doors on the opposite side were also closed by the guards outside, leaving them completely isolated.

King Beredis wore his usual black and silver robes and stood in front of the Tal table. He glanced at Elic curiously.

“With your permission,” Amaya looked at her friend, and then back at the king, “I thought Elic could join us this time.”

The King raised an eyebrow, but nodded. “I have no objections. He would have learned about your next mission soon anyway.” Turning his eyes to her, he asked, “What do you know of the orc General?”

Once more, the night of the Archanon attack flashed through her mind. Taking a moment, she nodded, “I know that he is called Arkad, and that he is one of the most formidable orcs anyone has ever faced. Even the Keeper of the Sword could not defeat him.”

Stepping up beside the King, Draegus nodded, “He has killed more of our soldiers and Warriors than any other orc. We also know that all orcs look up to him as their greatest leader.”

“Yeah, every time he’s been in a battle, the orcs have fought with a noticeably greater ferocity.” She frowned, “but he also has eluded us quite readily. We had no idea where he was until he attacked Archanon.”

“Indeed,” the King nodded. “We need to eliminate him.”

Glancing at Elic with a raised eyebrow, she asked, “We’ve found him again?”

Draegus folded his arms and nodded. “He was just spotted by our scouts entering the orc frontline in the Wastelands. All of the orcs that survived their invasion attempt have gathered there, and have had their numbers bolstered. They formed up a line facing north to defend against us, so with the help of the Wizards, our forces are forming up behind enemy lines.

“Then General Arkad showed up. Our scouts couldn’t keep him in sight for long, but shortly after his arrival, the orc line reformed to defend against all directions, effectively canceling our advantage.”

The King sighed deeply, his brow furrowed tightly. She noticed that, as the war raged on, his face looked harder and more wrinkled. “We need to eliminate him, and we need to do it fast while we

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know where he is at. I am afraid that this mission will be a longer, less directed one, but I feel like your team is the only one truly up to the challenge.”

“Your orders are simple,” Draegus stated, though she felt her stomach twist a little. Nothing was simple where Arkad was concerned. “Find General Arkad, and eliminate him.”

Once more she looked at Elic, who frowned. “Obviously a frontal assault won’t do the trick,” Elic stated, planting his hands on his hips. “If their entire army is gathered around him...”

“We’ll have to find a way to separate him from the rest,” she looked to the King and the Commander. “Or wait until he does it himself.”

“Which could happen very soon,” Draegus nodded. “Arkad is smart, and has a propensity to go off with his own unit and cause greater damage. So you’re going to keep an eye on him, and follow him if he leaves.”

Elic frowned, “What if he uses a portal? We can’t track him then, and we know he has those strange vials that make portals.”

Draegus and King Beredis exchanged hesitant glances. “Wizards can determine where a portal leads to when it is created,” the King stated, surprising her with that news. “However, they must be in close proximity. You must get Nia close to the camp to watch until he leaves.”

Amaya sighed deeply, looking down at the chamber floors. She wanted to say it was a ridiculously impossible mission that would require a lot of things to go right for them to succeed. Nothing felt right about the mission.

“This will be a long one,” Draegus stepped closer to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. She looked up into his blazing blue eyes, and he smiled. The confidence behind that smile, even if it was false, was enough to make her own courage stir a little. “And it is a vital mission. We need to stop Arkad, and demoralize their troops.” Draegus hesitated and looked at the King for a moment, before

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looking at her and Elic again. “We’re fortunate that Sal’fe can resurrect all of our fallen troops, but it costs us every time he does. The sooner we can end this war, the better for everyone.”

With a deep sigh, Amaya nodded. She did not feel confident at all, but she had to show confidence. She had to ensure the King did not lose faith in her. So she said, “We will not fail you.”

Only two months had passed since Arkad had last seen the black Fortress of Nasara, but when he emerged from the portal and the great monolithic structure stood before him, he was shocked at how much his perception of it had changed.

It had once filled him with hope, and even pride as his kin worked on finishing the repairs that Klaralin had ordered. Fewer worked on it now, and he even noticed that some of the repair work had temporarily been abandoned. Many must have been pulled away to bolster the new front line on the northern edge of their borders.

As he and Orinda strode towards it, he felt a chill crawl down his spine. This was no longer the seat of growing strength and power that he thought it was. It was not the beacon of hope for the rebirth of his culture and heritage. It was nothing more than an ancient, damaged building that held within the last vestige of a dying race.

Arkad could feel her power even now. Her power flowed from the Fortress as a mist flowed from a lake down a river. It coated everything he saw, gave a sickly smell to an otherwise pleasantly pungent Wasteland. Of course, it was all perception, and none of that was real. But it twisted his stomach none the less.

And yet, it was his reaction to it that gave him pause. Was his perception of the feeling different, or was the magic itself somehow different? Tainted, somehow, like poisoned water. It also felt like it affected him far less than it should have, and that made him wonder even more.

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They passed through the main gates and into the foyer, the black stone within absorbing the light of the blue-white everlasting torches. Two guards, clad in darksteel, remained on guard, but there were no others around. His kin had been spread thin.

As the general of the army, he should have been aware of how great their losses were. Yet the fact that there were not enough of his darksteel kin to guard every corridor meant their losses had been staggering. Nothing was more precious than the being who resided within these dead walls.

Orinda looked back at Arkad and smirked. Grunting, he furrowed his brow, “You have something to say?”

“I can smell your contempt,” she narrowed her eyes before looking forward again. “I hope it is towards me and not towards her. You will be fortunate if she does not take your head off the moment she sees you.”

Though he dared not show it, he genuinely felt fear for a brief moment. Their leader was powerful and respected, and honor demanded that he bear the brunt of any punishment she deemed worthy of his failures.

Yet for a brief moment, a spark of doubt entered his mind. He was the most powerful orc alive, more skilled and cunning, by far stronger than any other. Coupled with his enchanted armor and weapon, he could likely destroy their leader if he wanted to.

The thought was scandalous and he felt his stomach twist in greater fear. Orinda brought them to a halt before a single iron door and sniffed the air.

Looking back at him with a leer, she nodded, “That, General, is more like it.”

He wanted to take her head off at that remark, but knew that such an action would surely result in his execution. His hands clenched into fists, but he did nothing more. Orinda opened the doors and preceded him into the library.

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The carpet was old and dry, the dark finish on the furniture worn almost completely off, leaving only hints of the grandeur of the library. Stacks of book shelves lined the square room, and within them were books of all shapes and sizes. In fact the only thing they held in common was that they all looked ready to fall apart by the lightest touch.

In the center was a circular table with a gap in the center, surrounded by opulent chairs. Even the orcs did not know who had once held council in that chamber, nor did they know who built the ancient fortress. All he did know was that their leader, the last orc shaman that any knew of, now used the library as her personal study.

Even compared to Orinda, the Shaman was quite scrawny. The skins she wore hung loosely around her body. She could have easily had clothes tailored to her size, but she seemed not to care about her appearance. She stared at him, emotionless, her eyes piercing into his very soul.

Did she see the spark of doubt he had felt only moments before? Were shamans truly as powerful as legends spoke of?

More importantly, would she give him a chance to defend his failures? Could he even defend them?

Realizing he had momentarily forgotten his manners, Arkad bent to one knee, his body aching in protest after months of running and fighting. "My Shaman."

For a long time, the Shaman did not speak. Arkad bowed his head and studied his boot carefully. His heart thundered in his ears, and he began to suspect that this truly would be where the gods would forever relieve him of his duties.

Finally, the Shaman let out a long sigh and walked from the stacks to stand near Arkad. He flinched, fearing the worst.

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“Our hopes and dreams have been dashed, General,” she stated coldly. Her words were very proper and held a confidence that could only come from a shaman. “You have failed not only me, but every single one of your brothers and sisters.”

He didn’t know what to say, he didn’t know if he should say anything at all. Should he defend himself? Could he? Had the battles been unwinnable, or had he simply failed to account for all possibilities?

As he debated those questions, a sudden, staggering thought occurred to him. He should have focused on figuring out the answers to those questions for the past several weeks. Instead, he had mulled over whether he wanted to continue to fight or not, whether or not he was doing the right thing.

Were the human lands making him weak? No...no, he could not blame external factors for his own internal battles, his own failings. He had to take responsibility for his actions, his thoughts and feelings. No one else could take the blame.

“Our entire future is at stake, General,” the Shaman spoke again, her voice making him flinch out of his reverie. “Do you not take this effort seriously?”

Without looking up, his reply came automatically, “Of course, my Shaman.” Even as he spoke those words, he suspected that it was no longer true. Considering his next words carefully, wondering what really was important to him, he added, “The future of our species is of utmost importance to me.”

She reached a hand down, and he prepared for the inevitable death to come. He knew the Shaman kept a long, impossibly sharp dagger on her at all times, and all it would take was a quick swipe across his throat to end his life. It would be a shameful death, but perhaps it was what he deserved.

Instead, her fingers touched his chin, and beckoned him to look at her. Despite his shame and failure, he brought himself to look her in the eyes...and felt nothing.

Those eyes had always instilled the greatest fear, commanded only the greatest respect, and her voice alone was usually enough to make any and all orcs follow her every command without question. But now they no longer affected him.

“As you have always said,” she narrowed her eyes at him. “And so I have believed from the moment you arrived.” Her voice was soothing, even understanding, until she spoke again. With contempt, she spat at him, “Yet your failure is almost complete.” She pushed his chin back down. “We now stand on the brink of complete extinction. You know what the future holds, what dark forces grow in the Universe.”

She turned away and began to pace, her hands clasped behind her back. With imperfect posture, it almost made her look comical, but of course Arkad could not say that or laugh at it.

What was wrong with him? Why had he lost respect for her? Why did he no longer revere her? Was he losing his mind? The moment she realized his inner betrayal, she would strike him down without a second thought. He had to hide it from her, from everyone.

“Worse still, more orcs have dissented,” her voice grew louder, anger spilling into her tone and the waving of her arms. She turned and looked at him, though he only glanced at her eyes, unwilling to look deep into them again. “An entire tribe has defected, refusing my orders to join the front line and defend the only home we have left.”

This news startled Arkad more than any other had. An entire tribe? Even at great range, the Shaman was able to directly influence orcs if she chose to. She had the gift of sight, able to conjure visions of her children from hundreds of miles away.

Which was also why he was unprepared for her next order. “If you wish to redeem yourself, you will find them.” It was as if all thoughts evacuated his mind, and he was left stunned. “Those are your new orders. Find the rogue tribe, and any who joined them. Execute half of them as an example, and offer the others a chance to return. Any who still refuse should be executed in front of all others.”

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Execute their own people?! How could she possibly ask him to destroy their own people, especially when there were so few of them left in the Universe?

Even more shocking was that she couldn't see them. She didn't know where they were, which meant she couldn't see them, possibly hundreds of orcs, with her vision. That was impossible!

Realizing she was waiting for him to respond, he quickly came up with the only response that was appropriate. "It will be done, my Shaman. They will regret ever crossing you."

Once more, she closed the distance between them and extended a hand, holding a single lilac-colored vial. As he reached up to take it from her hand, she said, "This will take you back to the front. Gather your darksteel brothers, the ones who share in your dishonor, and find the To'kar tribe."

Placing the vial in a pouch on his belt, he lowered his head further in one final act of reverence. Without another word, he stood up...and took one moment to look her directly in the eyes. He should have felt her power, should have felt her control. Once more, he felt nothing.

Turning away immediately, he left the library, barely noticing as he passed by a disappointed-looking Orinda.

The Shaman's powers were waning. Such had not happened in a long, long time, not since the days of the civil war. Legends say that the only reason a Shaman loses her power is because she has failed the gods in such a manner as to anger them beyond reckoning, and only after the gods had selected a successor.

He still felt her presence, still felt her magic in the air, but she could no longer control him, and she could no longer see from afar. So what should he do? What could he do?

Barely paying attention, he traversed through the Fortress of Nasara until he stood at the portcullis, staring out into the empty fields. The fields that had once been filled to the brim with his kin, preparing for a war that was, perhaps, unwinnable.

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So much death. Thousands of his brothers on Halarite, tens of thousands at home. Were his people in danger of vanishing from the Universe completely?

Staring out into those fields, and past them at the dead forest beyond, he realized how lost he suddenly felt. Everything had fallen apart in the past year, and it was only getting worse. What was the point of it all? Why did he continue to fight if there was no hope?

Suddenly he realized this was neither the place nor the time to show his uncertainty. The Shaman could still kill him if she suspected his internal battle. *Then again, she might already suspect it,* he realized.

Without another thought, he pulled the vial from his pouch and threw it against the nearest wall. The two orcs guarding the entrance were startled by the sudden action, but relaxed when the portal appeared. By now, they were no doubt used to such sights.

He took one more moment to consider his options, and decided on at least his next step. So he passed through the portal to return to the front. To return to his friends.

Arkad needed time to decide what to do with everything he had just learned. The only way he could do that was to pretend to look for the To'kar Tribe, as he had been ordered to do. Out there, in the field, away from the army and any possible spies the Shaman might have amongst his people, he could think freely.

When Zerek had run away from that alley, he had no idea where he was going. He didn't even really care, he just ran. Unexpectedly, he found himself back in the Castle District, at the royal horse stables. When his mind cleared enough for him to bring him back to reality, he found himself standing in the middle of the long walkway that led down between the stalls. The horses were accustomed to his presence by now, he had spent enough time there with Endel, so none of them reacted to his presence.

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Through tear-blurred eyes, he looked around frantically, needing to talk to the one and only real friend he had. But Endel was nowhere to be found, and Zerek realized he was likely out training or exercising one of the horses.

The hole in his heart threatened to consume him entirely, and he didn't want to talk to or see anyone else. So he found one of the only empty stalls and went to the darkest corner he could find. Sliding down into the hay, ignoring the pungent smell of a stall in need of mucking, he buried his face in his arms, and he stopped trying to contain his feelings.

Everything came crashing back all at once, all in a torrent of visions that he couldn't hope to control.

His father, cut down by one of hundreds of orcs. The sudden emptiness he felt at the sight, how his limbs had begun to grow numb. He even remembered hearing someone scream out "no!" and, after a moment, realized it had been his own voice. Somehow, Zerek remembered more of that day now. Even though he didn't want to. The three closest orcs that heard his scream. Elina grabbing his arm and pulling him along.

Elina... He saw the light fade from her eyes, as if her very soul had expanded out from her body, leaving only an empty shell behind for him to cry over.

An empty shell...exactly what he felt like now. As if losing her was the same as death. A feeling of emptiness crawled from his chest out to the rest of his body, consuming every fiber of his being. Until he thought of Laira. And then the emptiness was suddenly replaced with a rage beyond reckoning. He jumped up from his corner and began pacing back and forth, not caring if he stepped in the muck. His hands were clenched in fists, trying to hold back the pressure that built inside of him, threatening to tear him apart in one great explosion.

Visions of them being together, of chasing her, their first kiss, holding each other at the riverside, her smile, her kind words to him, her encouragement, he remembered it all. With each memory, the pressure inside of him grew ever greater, until he could no longer hold it in.

He roared in rage and pounded his fist into one of the support beams. But it wasn't enough. He punched again. And again. And again. Until his hand screamed in pain, and he collapsed to his knees.

Cradling his throbbing appendage, the tears came back again, in a flood that he could not stop, no matter how hard he tried. And he gave up trying. He gave up holding it all in.

He gave up...

Until a quiet, worried voice called his name. Startled, and feeling embarrassed, he tried to sniff back the tears and glanced behind him. At the entrance to the stall stood the small, skinny figure of Endel, a giant of a horse waiting nervously behind him.

"Endel," he managed to say through his tears.

"My gods, what's happened?" Endel hesitantly led the horse into the stall. The horse stomped a bit, and Zerek realized his outburst had spooked it. Fully aware of what could happen if the horse decided its life was in danger, Zerek retreated back to his corner, giving the graceful beast all the room he could under the circumstances.

"I...I don't know where to begin," Zerek slid back down to the ground. His fist throbbed even more, and he feared he had broken it in his rage. How would he explain that to whomever his new trainer was to be?

He could see it now, 'I'm sorry, I can't hold a sword for the next couple months, I broke my hand in a stupid act of rage.' Yeah, he'd be rejected from the guards before he ever even started.

Taking off the lead rope, Endel left the horse on the other side of the stall, dropped the rope over the door, and then came over to Zerek, where he knelt and looked at him through worried eyes.

"Zerek, tell me. What happened?"

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Barely able to keep the tears from coming forth again, he looked down and stared at his swelling fist. “It’s...it’s Laira. She...”

“She broke up with you?” Endel asked.

That almost would have been better, Zerek thought. He shook his head, “No. No, she betrayed me. She lied.” He looked at Endel, the anger within flaring again. “She lied, Endel. The entire time I’ve known her.” Which he suddenly realized hadn’t been very long. But when there were so few people left in his life that he loved, every moment with every person counted. Didn’t it?

Endel hung his head low, the look of regret and sorrow in his eyes almost driving Zerek to cry again. At length, his friend sighed and rocked back on his feet, somehow balancing in a way Zerek found uncanny.

“I’m so sorry, Zerek,” he shook his head. “So very sorry.”

Zerek clenched his eyes shut, forcing the tears to stay back. Forcing the emotions that wanted to burst out back into the depths of his soul. He had to control himself, before he did something else stupid.

Looking at Zerek’s swollen hand, Endel grimaced. “That looks painful. Come on,” he stood up. “I know just what to do.”

Reluctant at first, unwilling to go out in public with how red and swollen he knew his eyes must be, Zerek finally assented and stood up. He followed Endel out, closing the stall door behind them, and into the fenced off area outside where they sometimes let the horses roam when they couldn’t take them outside of the city.

The air was getting colder, and clouds had begun to build up overhead, partially covering the sun. Zerek shivered and tried to rub his arms, but that made his swollen hand hurt even more.

“I know it’s cold,” Endel said as he walked them over to a water trough, “but trust me, this will help with the swelling. Stick your hand in the water.”

Gawking at Endel, Zerek replied, "Are you kidding me?"

His young friend looked at him with exasperation. "Would you just trust me? It'll hurt at first, but give it a few minutes, and it'll start to feel loads better."

Grimacing, Zerek sighed and began to lower his hand towards the water. The moment his fingertips touched the surface, he retracted it and shivered.

Rolling his eyes, Endel grabbed Zerek's wrist and plunged his hand into the water. With how cold the air had become, the water bit at every inch of his skin, and the ache in his hand increased.

"Hey!" Zerek objected.

"Just do it already, will you?" Endel shook his head.

Zerek wanted to pull his hand out, but he did not try too hard, and just resigned himself to the pain, gritting his teeth.

"This had better work," he glared at his friend.

Endel rolled his eyes again. "Big baby," he whispered.

"I heard that."

After another few moments, the biting sensation faded, though the ache did not. Not at first anyway. More and more, he wanted to pull his hand out, but Endel kept stopping him.

"Tell me what happened," Endel crossed his arms. "What do you mean, she betrayed you?"

Sighing, Zerek shook his head and stared down at the water, watching the rippling surface reflecting the sky. "Where do I begin?"

"Usually at the beginning," Endel replied evenly. Zerek looked at him, and his friend stuck his tongue out at him. Before he could think to stop it, a small chuckle escaped him, and then quickly turned into an outright laugh.

"Yeah, I suppose," he shook his head, trying to stop the laugh. He wanted to stay angry, he wanted to stay sad, but apparently Endel wasn't going to let him.

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Finally, with another giant sigh, he launched into the description of the conversation he'd had with Laira. At first he was afraid it would bring the pain back to the forefront, but as he spoke, it felt like he was describing something that happened to someone else. In doing so, it helped him feel better about it, or at least feel numb about it, and not react.

When he was done, Endel's face had soured, his attempts to humor Zerek defeated. Or so he thought. Suddenly a great big smile drew across his face, "Wait, you're going to train to be a soldier?"

Feeling the glee from earlier in the day threatening to return, Zerek nodded. "Yeah. I start tomorrow! In fact," he suddenly felt his stomach drop, "I'm supposed to be packing right now."

That's when he realized he had forgotten about his hand. He pulled it out of the water, which no longer felt cold to him, and examined it. His knuckle was still swollen, but it had noticeably gone down. A slight breeze cooled his hand further, but the ache was so much better now.

"Hey, that actually worked," he smiled. Then he looked at Endel. "How'd you know how to do that?"

His friend's smile faded, but just a little bit. "I wasn't always a stable boy, you know. I was pretty street-smart before they brought me into the castle as a servant."

Feeling shocked, Zerek tilted his head to the side. "Wait, you never told me that before!"

"Yeah," he nodded. "I've only been here a year."

Then it clicked in Zerek's head, and he felt his stomach plunge into another endless pit. How Endel knew how to get in and out of the Castle District unseen. How he leapt from rooftop to rooftop effortlessly. Just like Laira could.

The look on his face must have changed to reflect the horror he felt inside. Endel's smile faded completely, and he looked at his feet. "You just figured it out."

It didn't make sense. "But, you can't be. You're younger than I am!"

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“I’m thirteen, remember?” Endel shook his head, resting his hand on the water trough. He looked Zerek in the eye, “And I’m not a part of them anymore. Not exactly.”

The rage threatened to come back, Zerek could feel it boiling up inside of him. First Laira, now Endel? Had everyone lied to him from day one?

“You’re a thief,” he whispered, afraid someone else might hear him.

“I was,” Endel shook his head. “I’m not anymore. I mean, I still agree with what they sent me in here to do, but I won’t go back. I messed up and didn’t get the job I was supposed to.” He gulped. “You’re job.”

He wanted to shout, to scream at the kid, to hurl something at him, to run. Gods, he wanted to be anywhere but there. Anywhere but near Endel.

“Zerek, I-“

“No,” Zerek backed up further. “Just, no, Endel. Shut up.”

When he turned to walk away, Endel put a hand on his shoulder to try to stop him, but he jerked his shoulder free and stomped away. He completely ignored Endel’s calls for him to wait, to let him explain. Endel stopped following him after he left the small pasture, leaving Zerek to his emptiness.

Leaving him to his loneliness.

After Arkad’s return to the front, he immediately sought out his team. He hadn’t been gone that long, but his team was dedicated, and they had wasted little time on their meal. The orc troops were already in the process of a massive reorientation to protect from all directions.

Kilack was at the center of the camp now, directing the restructure with only some amount of frustration. Only a handful of the rest of his team was actually present, but Arkad soon learned that everyone else was out helping the less intelligent Wastelands orcs figure out how best to redeploy.

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He was fine with that for the moment, but they would need to depart soon. The camp's Commander, Zinrel, was also present. Also a darksteel orc, Zinrel was one of the best strategic minds Arkad had come across. But he lacked actual combat experience against the humans of Halarite, and like Arkad, underestimated their new Wizard allies.

"General," Zinrel nodded, his unusually dark face giving him a more ominous appearance, even to the taller, stronger Arkad. "I have trusted that your Lieutenant has conveyed your orders, but I must protest at this rearrangement of our troops. It weakens our northern line too much."

Arkad glowered at the Commander. "It is not your place to question my orders, Commander. Especially when I have fought our enemy and you have not. I guarantee you, if they have not already formed up on our flanks or rear, they soon will."

Zinrel raised an eyebrow, and then nodded. "By your command, General. I place my trust in the hero of Akaida."

It was good someone still trusted Arkad, even if he no longer trusted himself. Maybe that was where he was going wrong. He had started to doubt himself after his failure at Valaras. And now...now he doubted their Shaman.

After allowing Zinrel and Kilack to finalize the redeployment, Arkad asked of the Commander, "Tell me, what do you know of the To'kar Tribe?"

The fact that Zinrel did not look surprised told Arkad that his mission was not unexpected. "Their village is not far from here, so they were expected to bolster our numbers when the decision was made to hold our line here. They refused, and even managed to persuade several of our Wastelands soldiers to join them in their dishonor. By the time additional troops had been sent, they had cleared out of their camp completely."

Arkad frowned at that revelation. Honor was important even to the Wastelands ilk. To disobey their shaman... Did they know about her powers waning? Hoping for a clue, he asked, "Why would they disobey so blatantly?"

"I don't know," Zinrel scowled and spat on the ground. "Cowards, all of them."

Smirking, Arkad refrained from pointing out that every single orc now considered the To'kar Tribe traitors and targets of opportunity. It was likely courage that spurred them into rebelling. Or stupidity. He wasn't actually sure yet.

Then Zinrel said something even more curious. "Rumors abounded that their tribe was led by a female that had begun to lose her mind. Tana, I think. You know the influence a female can have over males."

All too well, Arkad grimaced. No matter what, he had to talk to them, to find out what they knew. Maybe Tana was crazy. Or maybe she knew why the Shaman had begun to lose her control. Either way, the only real recourse he had was to take his troops and move out. At least give the appearance he was following the Shaman's orders, until he knew what his next move would be.

Turning to Kilack, he nodded, "Recall every darksteel that fought with us at Archanon." When Kilack raised a questioning eyebrow, Arkad nodded, "We've been ordered to hunt down the To'kar, as punishment for our failure at Valaras."

Grimacing, Kilack nodded, and turned to a messenger to pass out the order.

"Until you receive other orders, remain in this formation," Arkad spoke to Zinrel. "Be prepared to retreat in any direction if the enemy brings an overwhelming number."

The Commander did not object to his orders, but for Arkad, it felt weird leaving someone else in charge this time. Their troop strength was badly diminished. He should be with his men, ready to fight off the humans, to the last orc if necessary. Instead, he was leaving them behind with a Commander that did not know their enemy.

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He knew he had no choice, of course. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

When Amaya passed through Nia's portal, the stark change in temperature was like walking into a furnace. Fall was in full swing in Archanon, with winter not far behind, so the oppressive heat of even the northern Wastelands shocked her.

She preceded her team into the designated arrival area near the Allied army. Many Warriors and leaders hoped would be a final assault against the orcs, so the gathered Allied army was massive. It was an area deep inside of a forested area, several miles behind the orc front.

Of course, calling it a forest was a bit of a stretch. Sure, there were plenty of trees and she could not see further than a few hundred feet beyond their small clearing, but the trees all appeared lifeless and twisted, with not a single leaf in sight.

And the stench, oh gods the stench! She gagged a little, never having breathed such a wretched, foul smell before in her life. It was as if someone had thrown month-old corpses, rotting fruit, and rotten eggs into a room and let the smell permeate every corner.

Coughing and bringing her hand up to her nose, she stepped aside to allow the rest of her team to follow unhindered. A squire was there to greet them, though unlike the squires of Archanon, he was clad in leather armor and armed with a simple sword and shield. This was a war zone, where everyone was prepared to fight, regardless of title, rank or purpose.

The squire bowed deeply before her, "Lieutenant Kenla. We've been expecting you, milady."

Elic stepped through the portal after her, and likewise began to gag. Amaya pulled him out of the way as the others came through, and then looked at the squire, "Is it always this bad?"

Pointing to the west, where the sun marched steadily towards the horizon, the squire replied, "It gets worse as the day wears on, especially in the evening. You get used to it after a while."

"Not likely," Elic gagged, his eyes watering a little.

As more of her team came through, she asked, "How long have you been here?"

The squire considered her question for a moment, and nodded, "I believe three days. It's already starting to blur together."

When Peren, Idalia, Nerina, Vin, and Gell had followed, Nia finally passed through, and the portal closed behind her. Everyone stared at Nia, waiting for her to react to the stench. Even after nearly three months of working together, she still seemed deadpan to them all, and never spoke of her life in the Grand Wizard Hall.

The Wizard's head perked up a bit, and she took in a few tentative sniffs of the air, but did not gag or cough. Instead, she simply replied, "Intriguing."

"No doubt," Gell replied. "I'll bet you don't smell anything like that in your Guild Hall."

Raising a curious eyebrow, she planted her staff in the barren dirt and shook her head, "No, we do not."

Gell exchanged a smirk with Peren and Idalia, then caught Amaya's stern look. His smirk faded, and he nodded.

Then to everyone's surprise, Nia added, "That has been my favorite part of our journeys together. New experiences, new smells, new feelings." The slightest hint of a smile crossed her face and she looked at Amaya. "New friends."

In the dead heat of the day, silence fell upon them all. No one replied or made a single sound. Amaya didn't know how to react, it was the most personal thing Nia had ever said. The friendliest.

Hoping to spare their Wizard friend embarrassment, Amaya stepped closer to her and clasped a hand on her shoulder. "Well said, my friend."

The slight smile on Nia's lips stretched up just a bit more, and she swore some color reached the Wizard's cheeks.

Letting go, Amaya then turned back to the squire. "Well, then. Take us to the General."

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Bowing again, the squire led the way out of the clearing and into the forest. Within minutes, Amaya began to sweat profusely, and she was glad they had brought extra water in their travel packs. She was also glad that they had been warned not to wear full plate armor. Leather would be hot enough, and their goal wasn't an all-out attack, but an ambush. Steel armor would only hinder such an attack.

The Allied army was spread throughout the forest, the trees bunched together too closely for them to form ranks. The Warriors and Wizards were gathered in between, conversing quietly and suffering the heat together. No one dared start a fire, for fear not only of creating smoke, but of also starting the dry trees and dead leaves ablaze.

Before long, they reached another small clearing, where a tarp had been strung up between the trees to give some cover from the sun. Beneath it, a small table was setup with a makeshift map drawn out, surrounded by the highest ranking leaders of the Allied forces.

Stopping at the edge of the clearing, the squire bowed, "General Artula. May I present Lieutenant Amaya Kenla of the Tal Guard."

Likewise bowing to show her respect, Amaya waited to be invited under the tarp. General Artula looked up from the map and met Amaya's look with a stoic face. "Lieutenant," he nodded. "I was told to expect your arrival. Please, come in."

She nodded, and then motioned for her team to wait for her outside of the clearing. The squire stepped away, but did not go far, no doubt awaiting further orders. Three other commanders from other Guilds were also in the clearing, and all turned to face her. She did not recognize any of them, but that was not surprising, since their tabards showed them as Warriors from the other kingdoms.

Stepping up to the table as the others moved to make room for her, Amaya took a moment to glance at the map. It was a simple drawing of where the Allies waited, and the orc forces. If it was relatively to scale, they were at least five miles away, not the three that she originally thought.

Jon Wasik

Looking up, she met the General's gaze. He was a man of legend, not just in Tal, but in all of the kingdoms. A veteran of the last Lesser War, and of the Battle for Archanon, all respected him, and none questioned his orders.

Yet even the legend had his limits, and he was not clad in his full steel-plate armor, as he was always rumored to be in. Rather he wore leather armor not unlike Amaya's, his gold-dyed longsword the only hint of steel on him. It was unusual, and yet he still had a presence about him that awed her.

It startled her when she suddenly realized she had now met every person of the highest command in Tal. Her King, Draegus Kataar, and now General Artula. Had her life really changed so much that meeting legends was becoming common place?

The General glanced down at her wrists, and then back up, an unspoken question in his eyes. The Guardians were not entirely secret, but she knew that the King preferred that their existence not be overtly acknowledged. Thankfully, the General did not ask her to show her brand, the mark of the Guardian on the inside of her left wrist. He would simply have to trust that she was, indeed, a member of the King's elite.

"I understand you have specific orders from the His Majesty, the King," the General nodded. "Concerning the enemy General."

"Indeed," she nodded. "General Arkad of the orcs, probably the most infamous of our enemies. The Allied Council fears that his return to the enemy ranks will bolster their spirits." She took in a hesitant breath, looking at each of the Commanders before settling her gaze back on the General. "My team and I are to find a way to isolate the General and either kill or capture him."

"The latter being the most likely," the Saran Commander, a stocky, strong-looking woman, scoffed.

"Even the Keeper of the Sword could not defeat him," the Erien Commander looked at Amaya skeptically. "How do you propose you and your team can succeed where he has failed?"

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Amaya knew of Cardin Kataar's encounter with the giant orc. It was said Arkad had managed to actually disarm Cardin, before a Wizard had stepped in and forced the orc to flee.

Wondering how much she was required to justify and defend her position and her orders, she simply looked at the General and said, "A frontal assault obviously won't work. Thankfully my team has experience in other methods of attack."

"I see," the General raised a curious eyebrow. "Well in any case, the mission is upon you, not us. However, several minutes before you arrived, we received word from our scouts." Looking to the map, General Artula pointed to the eastern side of the orc encampment. "Arkad was spotted leaving the camp with several of his darksteel soldiers. We do not know where he was going, but a team is tracking him as we speak. That team will be returning via a Wizard's portal to report their position within a few hours."

"That's a good thing," she smiled, thankful for the turn of events. "He'll be much easier to isolate if he isn't in the main camp."

The General nodded, and then narrowed his eyes. "We were due to attack their main camp tomorrow morning, but they have repositioned their forces, apparently at Arkad's command, and no longer have a vulnerable flank. We must re-assess our situation. However, what I can tell you is that I will not be able to spare my Warriors to help you."

She nodded, having expected that. "So the moment we take over tracking Arkad's position, we'll be on our own."

"As was specified in the orders I received," Artula patted a folded-up note in his belt. "We're to leave you to your mission."

Looking at each of the Commanders present, she nodded. "Very well. Where can we expect your scouts to report back?"

He pointed to the squire, "Gorman will take you to the correct location."

Backing away and bowing, she smiled, "Thank you, General. It has been a great honor to meet you."

Smiling warmly, he actually returned the bow, though he did not bow nearly as deeply. "Good luck, Lieutenant. I do not envy the task before you."

The sudden change from business to warmth was a bit startling, but she was glad for his honesty, and his personal touch. Her cheeks grew warm, or rather warmer than the heat had already made them.

Turning around, she retreated back out into the forest, where her team and the squire awaited. She quickly filled them in on what she had learned, and then looked to the squire to lead them.

As they walked, Elic was the first to speak of the impossibility of their task. "How can we keep up with them? They travel faster than any human, and even if we had horses, they would not do well in this heat."

She looked at her second in command, knowing he only spoke out about their missions if he felt it was of the utmost importance. Amaya also knew that he was right. But she had given it a lot of thought, and an idea finally struck her.

Feeling her stomach flutter in excitement, she looked at Nia, and then back at Elic. "Well, you know how the scouts tracking Arkad are going to use a Wizard to report back to us?"

Elic also glanced at Nia, who seemed almost oblivious to this fact. "Yes," Elic nodded. Then it dawned on him as well.

"Nia," Amaya smiled, "How frequently can you create portals?"

Finally, the young Wizard reacted and looked at her. "I have never tested my limits," she spoke cautiously. "It does take considerable concentration and energy to create one."

She then looked at Vin. "If we used portals to cover large distances, how hard would it be to pick up their trail again after each jump?"

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Vin raised a curious eyebrow, then shrugged. “I guess it would depend, but I doubt they are taking special care to cover their tracks. Not to mention the terrain itself.”

“It would certainly cut down on our pursuit time,” Elic nodded. “We could actually catch up.”

“But there is a risk,” Nia pointed out, ducking under a low branch of one of the dead trees.

“Portals are bright. They might notice us pursuing them.”

“Well,” Amaya shrugged, “We’ll have to cross that bridge when we get there. Although I already have an idea about that.”

The look of confusion that crossed Nia’s face was almost comical. Her brow scrunched up along with her nose, and she tilted her head to one side. “Well,” Amaya began to explain, “by the time we catch up, we’ll have an idea what direction they are heading. If they catch us coming, create a portal several miles ahead of their destination, and then-“

“No, that is not what I am confused about,” Nia interrupted.

Stopping short, Amaya asked, “Then what confuses you?”

Looking to Elic for a moment, she asked Amaya, “Have we found evidence that orcs have built bridges in the Wastelands?”

At first, Amaya’s mind went blank. Why was she asking about bridges? But then she realized where the Wizard’s question came from, and it took all of her self control to stop herself from laughing outright. Several chuckles passed through her team, including one that escaped the squire.

“I’m sorry, it’s just an expression,” she shook her head. “It means we will have to deal with the situation if and when it happens.”

Nia did not visibly look embarrassed, but she wondered just how much emotion she felt. Wondered if she just hid it from them. That moment of friendliness earlier made her suspect that there was much more to her than even Amaya suspected.

“I see,” Nia looked ahead and nodded. “Thank you for clarifying.”

Several more minutes passed by as Amaya and her team discussed possible strategies. Before too long, she noticed that she could see further than a few dozen feet, and realized that the forest was thinning out. She also noticed that there were fewer Warriors and Wizards, too. This was definitely the eastern flank.

However, just when she thought they were out of the woods, a figure stepped out in front of their group, bringing them to a halt, and causing Amaya's heart to leap into her throat.

Flanked by his two usual flunkies, Uric Din stood before them, his sword sheathed, but he obviously intentionally blocked their path.

"Please excuse us, Commander," the squire bowed, and tried to walk around the trio.

But Din did not move. He stared directly at Amaya, and he didn't look happy. She imagined her own face looked as angry as his.

The squire stopped when he realized Amaya no longer followed him, and he looked back at her. Amaya and Din's eyes never parted from each other, and she felt the anger boiling up within her. He was the last person she needed to see right now.

When neither spoke, it was Elic who tried to come to the rescue. "May we help you with something, Commander?" Even he couldn't hide the anger from his voice.

"I understand you didn't take too well to my little joke," Din spoke, his jaw tense.

At first she frowned, confused that he would bother her about their last encounter, that he could be angry about it. He had thoroughly humiliated her, in front of Elic, in front of the King and her Commander. He had won.

Or had he?

The anger inside of her stomach turned to something else, something unexpected but not unwelcome. Satisfaction. "You didn't expect it to come back onto you, did you?"

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Din narrowed his eyes and clenched his hands into tight fists. She watched for him to reach for his sword, almost wishing he would do it. It would give her an excuse to do to him what she had so far only imagined.

“Apparently, you have somehow become the King’s new favorite pet,” he scowled. “As if I needed more reason to lose faith in the throne.”

That almost incensed her to attack him, and she took a step towards him. Thankfully, Elic’s hand stopped her from advancing. She glared at the offending hand, and then at Elic, but he did not let go. He looked at her with an unspoken warning, even through the anger in his eyes.

Realizing that it had been bait for her to attack, she looked again at Din. He had his hand on his sword, but had not drawn it. His two guards likewise were prepared to draw.

On the eve of an all-out assault against the bulk of the orc army, she knew they could not afford infighting in the camp. So she stopped pulling against Elic’s hand and forced herself to calm down. It was a battle she wasn’t sure she could win, a war against her own inner anger. Anger that had built up with alarming force in the past few weeks. But she had to.

“You’re in our way,” she growled.

Smirking, Din shrugged, “Am I supposed to care?”

A small grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. “We are on an official mission from the crown. If you wish to incur further punishment from King Beredis, by all means, continue to impede us.”

That wiped the smirk off of his face, and she felt her chest ready to burst in the joy she felt from her victory. For a moment, he continued to glare at her, and she was ready to order his arrest.

Finally, he stepped aside, motioning for his guards to do the same. When the path was cleared, she smiled, and marched past him. A great look of relief overcame the squire’s face, and she wondered what their standoff must have looked like to him.

Jon Wasik

She wanted to hurt Din, and she had genuinely hoped he would have stepped out of line further. As it was, his insult to the throne could have been enough to warrant arrest, if not for the war and their need for every sword available. Plus it would have forced her to abandon her mission while bringing charges against the wayward Commander.

It wasn't worth it. They had to stop Arkad, hopefully before he could rejoin his forces. Whatever had taken him away from the front, it wouldn't likely last long, so they had to act fast.

She would just have to take care of Din another time.

Zerek didn't cry, not again. When he had left Endel in the training yard, he had gone straight to his bunk, not so much sad as angry. No, not angry, furious! They had lied to him, both of them! Had Endel and Laira worked together? Made him meet her like he did, pushed him to fall for her?

When he reached the servants' quarters, he felt ready to explode.

Until he entered the room and saw Torick impatiently waiting for him by his bunk. That was when he remembered that he had disobeyed orders.

"You were supposed to come straight here from the throne room," Torick folded his arms and stared harshly down at Zerek. "I was about ready to send out a party to look for you. Where have you been?"

"I'm...I'm sorry," Zerek felt embarrassed, his face turning red. He had meant only to tell Laira the good news and then come straight back to the servants' quarters. How long had he actually been away? How long had he hidden in the stables? "I went to tell my friends the good news, and I was distracted."

He didn't quite meet Torick's gaze when he spoke, but if the castle guard noticed, he said nothing of it. Was Zerek successfully hiding his anger? Or did his face reveal all? He felt like Torick could see right through his wall.

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After what felt like ages, Torick slowly stepped up to him and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. Zerek looked up at him in surprise. “Look, I know you’re used to a certain amount of freedom. But at least for the next few weeks, that freedom will mostly be lost. So whatever is bothering you now, you need to let it go. Understood?”

Could he? Was it possible for him to completely forget everything that had happened today, and just move on with his new life? Or would it haunt him for months or years to come? How could anyone ever get over the kind of pain he felt right now?

Knowing that Torick would not let him go without an answer, he nodded, “I understand.”

Patting his shoulder, Torick motioned his head back towards Zerek’s bunk. “Good. Now gather your things, and do it quick. We need to get you to your new bunk. Your training starts in the morning.”

Without another word, Zerek moved to his bunk and used a sack someone had left on his bed to pack up the few clothes he had been given since his arrival in the castle. Other than his dagger, he had no other belongings.

As they left the room, Zerek took one moment to look back at his bunk, and the bed beneath where Endel slept. His stomach twisted into a knot at the thought that he would probably never see the small boy again. Somehow, realizing that made his anger ease, if only a little.

Enough that he had to hold back a tear.

This was goodbye to one new life. And the start of another.

Drawing in a deep sigh, he nodded his head, and followed Torick out. They marched through the Castle District with purpose, Zerek taking every chance he could to look around one last time. Would he be assigned to the castle after he finished training? The city wall? Somewhere in the streets? Out in the farms to the west?

Jon Wasik

Suddenly there were a million new possibilities ahead of him, and his excitement began to build. He had never been so close to realizing his dreams before, never thought he could get so close! This was what he had always wanted. This was the life he needed.

Their journey through the city was quick, a path to the Red District that he had become all too familiar with. His excitement only grew as he thought more and more about his future.

Until he saw the Warrior's Tower. They did not go into the Guild complex, they merely walked past it, but as they did so, memories flashed through his mind. He could see Laira standing atop the tower, looking down at him and pointing out where he needed to go. He saw where he had tried to leap the wall into the courtyard, only to slam into the invisible shield surrounding the entire complex. He saw where Laira had grabbed his sleeve and told him to run.

The excitement faded. The elation turned into a deep sense of loss. Everything that had happened to him since the orcs attacked the mining camp, was it all for nothing? The feelings he felt for Laira...

Not far past the Warriors' Guild complex, they came upon the training grounds, a walled complex in itself, but much colder and less elaborate than the mansion-style Guild complex. Simple brick and mortar walls, much like the outer city wall. Were they protected by a shield as well? He doubted it.

They passed through an open pair of wooden doors into the training courtyard, and that was when he caught a glimpse of the kind of training he would endure. Ten men and women, clad in simple training tunics and trousers and wielding wooden swords, were lined up in formation. They all looked to be about his age, maybe a little older.

At the command of a Lieutenant, they stepped forward, jabbing their fake weapons forward, and then pulling the sword up, shouting as they did. Another command, and they stepped to the side,

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swiping their swords in the same direction, and another shout. With each command, there came another move and another shout in response.

Basic sword combat, the kind Torick had already taught him. As he watched and they walked around the edge of the field, Torick explained to him, “There are set start and end dates for training for each set of new trainees, and normally you would be required to wait for the next class. However, since I have been training you already, Lieutenant Oban has agreed to take you in with this class. She’ll assess your skills tomorrow, so be prepared. And for the sake of the gods, don’t embarrass me.”

Zerek smirked, “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

The Lieutenant commanding the soldiers, whom Zerek assumed was Oban, paid them no attention, and focused only on her charges. A moment later, they passed through another open set of doors and into a dank, stone and brick corridor. Zerek noted that, even though the castle was made mostly of stone, it was decorated such that it felt far warmer. Here at the training complex, the walls were sparsely decorated, and the lighting much lower. It felt cold and dark.

They passed one room that appeared to be an armory, and on the opposite side of the corridor from it was a lecture room. At the end of the corridor, they passed into what was clearly the barracks, with bunk beds stacked three high. There were two small windows, one to the left and one to the right, at the end of the rows of beds, but they let in very little light.

“This is where you’ll be staying,” Torick explained. “Find a bunk without blankets, that’s a sign of an empty bunk.” He pointed over to one side where there were several large chests against the wall, “Grab a blanket or two from one of the chests when you find your bed.”

Stopping them in the center, he looked at Zerek and smiled. “For what it’s worth, you’ve impressed me in training.”

Feeling his face grow slightly warm, Zerek frowned, “I thought I did pretty badly.”

“For a kid with absolutely no prior training?” Torick shook his head, “There’s a reason you’re here. Don’t expect a lot of positive feedback, though. Training isn’t about making you feel good, it’s about getting you into shape and giving you the most basic combat skills. Your mornings and evenings will involve physical training, like what you just saw. Mid morning and after lunch will be classroom lecture for things like tactics.”

Zerek nodded, “Sounds fun.”

He’d meant it seriously, but Torick laughed as if he’d joked. “Yeah, loads of fun. Someone will come get you for evening meal. Stay here until then. And whatever you do, get a good night’s rest.”

In reality, Zerek knew that wasn’t going to happen. Not with how he felt. Not after what happened today. His heart felt heavy, like his chest now weighed an extra fifty pounds.

But he couldn’t tell Torick that.

Much to his surprise, the soldier extended his hand to Zerek. Taking the offered hand gingerly, Torick gripped it and gave it two good pumps. “Welcome to the city guard, Zerek.” A grin stretched across his face, and he added, “You belong here.”

That compliment momentarily spurred his spirits higher, and he smiled. “Thank you. Uh, sir.”

Nodding his approval, Torick left Zerek to his own devices. The elation was already fading, so he quickly chose a bunk, found a set of blankets, and made his bed. It was the bottom bed of a set that looked completely empty, exactly what he needed. As much space and alone time as could be afforded in the barracks. The chest next to the bed was even smaller than his old one, but it was just large enough to fit his few clothes in.

With that, he laid down on the bed, unable to sit up due to the lower height of the middle bed. Staring up into the darkness, he let out a great sigh.

Almost immediately, he felt like the darkness began to surround him, began to press in. Him, a miner by birth, suddenly feeling closed in. That was certainly not normal.

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Something was eating at him, terribly. And it took him several minutes to realize it wasn't the darkness closing in around him, the strange sensation that he almost couldn't breathe. That even began to fade the moment his mind began to wander.

Back to Laira. Back to the first woman his heart had throbbed for.

The first woman he had loved.

The first to love him.

Suddenly his heart stopped, his body froze, and his fingers went numb, when he remembered Laira's words to him. *"I really did fall for you,"* she had said. *"I really...I really do love you."*

Right before he'd run away from her, away from the disbelief, the pain, the heartache.

"Oh gods," he whispered. "She loves me!" He tried to sit up, but only banged his head on the bunk above him, and lay back down, rubbing at what would no doubt become another bruise.

It startled him to realize that, to realize she had admitted to him what he had been afraid to say for so long. What he had wanted to say before she had revealed to him her true purpose.

Or rather, her mission. A mission she had just risked by telling him everything.

A mission she had risked for him.

Had he made a mistake? Was he wrong to be so angry with her? No, no he wasn't wrong to be mad. He wasn't wrong to have felt betrayed. Yet every time her words played through his head, every time he saw her face as she pleaded with him and told him she loved him, it softened his heart, and somehow, even if only a little, it eased the pain.

Was her declaration of love another lie? Another attempt to lure him back into her games? Or was it genuine?

Zerek closed his eyes and tried to remember the exact look on her face, but it was blurry, incomplete. Like trying to remember a dream.

Jon Wasik

Try as he might, he just couldn't tell, and his frustration began to build. His hands clenched into fists, and he wanted desperately to know. He *had* to know.

Voices from out in the corridor caught his attention, and he realized that it was probably close to dinner time. He had missed lunch, so his stomach growled viciously at him.

As the first of the soldiers ambled into the barracks, he sat up, keeping his head low to avoid banging his head again. In that moment, he vowed that he would find out. He would seek out Laira, look her in the face, and ask her for the truth. He would look into her eyes, and he would see either honest love, or the empty eyes of deceit.

One way or another, he was going to find out.

Arkad huffed in relief when their destination finally came into sight. Night had fallen hours ago, and he and his troops were still exhausted from months of running. Even orcs had limits.

The second moon was gloriously full, casting a dim light upon the Wastelands. For all of the features of this new world that he hated, Arkad loved the moons, especially the slight orange tint to the larger one.

Small insects called lightning bugs were out in force, and they cast an eerie yellow-green glow upon everything. Never before had he seen such a sight, thousands of the glowing insects inhabited the swamps! They were harmless to most creatures, but once the sun set and they came out, anything dead or dying was consumed by them.

It was also a double-edged sword. While their ambient glow made it easier to run across the uneven, sometimes dangerous terrain, someone inevitably swallowed one every few minutes, and their coughing fits would slow them all down. Between the bugs and the orcs' fatigue, what should have taken only a couple of hours of running took them until nearly midnight to reach their destination.

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The To'kar tribe's abandoned camp. He hadn't realized just how big their tribe was, until he saw the ruins. Dozens upon dozens of huts, each large enough to hold a small family, were shredded or burned to the ground. Charred remains of bones and gnarled wood was all that remained of them, and the scorch marks upon the ground silhouetting where tribe members once lived out their days.

But no bodies. Not a single To'kar corpse. Clearly the original orcs sent to investigate had taken out their frustrations on everything else, but he was surprised that no To'kars had remained behind to defend the camp. No orc tribe would leave behind perfectly good materials for building their tents. They would have to hunt and scavenge for new building materials when they finally settled down. It made no sense...

He and his forces came to a stop just inside of the borders of the ruins, and stared absently at the carnage. Above the heavy breathing and the hacking of one orc still trying to clear out a bug, he could hear murmurs of surprise and confusion.

Kilack was beside him, his breathing a little lighter than the others. "What should we do now, General?" he asked quietly.

Shaking his head to clear away his own awe, Arkad waved his arm out ahead of himself, "Spread out. Look for tracks leading away from the camp. Look within the ruins for clues."

His orcs rumbled in response. In their darksteel armor, they looked like ghosts or shadows moving through a dead village. It actually sent chills down his spine, especially when he thought of where the armor had originally come from.

Latching onto Kilack's shoulder with one hand, Arkad shook his head, "No. You stay by me."

His lieutenant and most trusted friend gave him a quizzical look, but did not object. Arkad saw how nervous his friend was, his fist clenched over the base of his mace, ready to pull it and fight in a heartbeat.

Jon Wasik

When the rest of his unit was out of earshot, Arkad began to walk through the dead fields, Kilack at his side. It was then that Arkad finally, and quite reluctantly, told Kilack about his experiences with their Shaman.

It was shocking enough news to make Kilack stop jumping at every noise, no longer disturbed by the carnage around them.

“Is it not our duty to remove the Shaman from her position if she is unfit to lead us?” Kilack asked.

“She still has power,” Arkad shook his head. His stomach sank for a moment when he thought that the Shaman could possibly see them even now. On instinct, his hand reached back for his axe. “I do not know how or why, but she has either become weaker, or something is blocking her power.”

“I have never heard of such an occurrence,” Kilack shook his head, looking around as if to search for a spy in their midst. “Shamans are so rare, their power remains absolute until the day they die.” He once more looked at Arkad, his golden eyes staring intensely at him. “General, you know our laws. Weakness is not tolerated.”

He almost retorted that it was the laws of a dead world, but he refrained. His lieutenant did not need to be reminded. Arkad also knew that if they had any hope of rebuilding their civilization someday, they needed to hold on to the values that had guided their people for centuries.

They needed to remain true to themselves.

Arkad and Kilack reached another edge of the camp, and remained there, staring out into the darkness of the night, watching the lightning bug clusters float about in lazy circles. The stench of a nearby swamp caressed his nostrils, and he breathed deep, thinking of home. Of a little tent outside of the city, where his father had taught him to wield an axe. Arkad could have chosen any life, any orc can. But he had chosen since his youth to become a solider.

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They were memories of a home he would probably never see again, no matter how much he wanted to.

“This isn’t so bad, is it?” he asked, trying to mask his own sorrow. “This land. It’s no wonder our brothers and sisters here have been content to remain in the Wastelands.”

“It could be better,” Kilack snorted. A moment later, he then nodded once, “but truly, for an alien world, it is agreeable.”

Their numbers were down, their kind slaughtered in war. Maybe there was enough land and drinkable water left in the Wastelands that they no longer needed to invade the human lands. If only that had been the case earlier...

Suddenly Arkad caught a strange scent that made his skin crawl, and his other senses perked up. He heard a twig snap in the distance. Sudden movement in the moonlight. Kilack caught it to, and in an instant, they readied their weapons. They looked around for the rest of their unit, but they were spread out and nowhere near them. Whatever it was, it wasn’t one of his men.

Focusing on his enchanted axe, Arkad prepared to attack anything that appeared from the shadows.

But he never saw it coming. All he remembered was a bright flash that sent Kilack flying back into the village, and then a sharp blow to Arkad’s head. He was on the ground then, his head already pounding, and the vague sense of rapid movement around him.

Then he saw her. A small, petite orc female emerged from the shadows as if passing through a curtain. She did not wear the normal skins that their Wastelands kin wore, nor did she wear anything resembling their darksteel armor. Rather she wore leather reminiscent of what the humans wore, and a set of un-dyed steel pauldrons.

She looked at him, tilting her head to one side, before she pointed a finger at him. There was another bright flash, but this time, when the flash subsided, there was only a cold darkness.

Jon Wasik

When Zerek awoke that night, he cursed himself for having fallen asleep. He had intended to sneak out as soon as he was sure everyone was asleep. But thankfully, many of the exhausted trainees snored very loudly, and sneaking out was not difficult.

It had to be around or even past midnight now. The doors into the courtyard were sealed, and guards patrolled along the top of the wall, so it took him even longer to find a way out. Thankfully the brick and mortar walls of the complex were old, and climbing up and down using juttred bricks was not difficult. He only needed to ensure he was not caught by the patrols, which was not an easy task with a full moon.

Once he was out upon the city, he snuck away as quickly as he could, until he was far enough away that he felt comfortable climbing onto the roofs and running along them at full speed. With the wind whistling in his ears, he raced through the cold night air and felt a renewed sense of freedom. And for all of the darkness he had felt that day, his heart was once again filled with hope.

Zerek had thought about where he would go for a long time that afternoon. Realizing he had no idea where Laura slept, if she even slept at all, there was only one common place they shared, one place he knew she might go.

When he arrived at the edge of the canal that snaked through the southeastern quarter of the city, he second-guessed himself. Zerek had forgotten about the increased patrols to guard the small opening in the wall at the river. They had long ago repaired the breach in the grating with reinforced steel, and Wizard enchantments supposedly made it impenetrable. However, the frequency of patrols had still been increased along the river road.

The river. It was where she constantly went. Where he had chased her to when they first met, and where she had somehow mysteriously disappeared. The key was the river, he realized. Since he

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could not get to the landing by the wall, now permanently guarded, he knew there was only one other place he could go.

Looking to his left, he found their bridge further up-river. A stone bridge that crossed over into the Green District, simple in its design. They had never gone there together again, the landing had always been their spot. Why would she lead him there once, and never again?

Without any other leads, he began to make his way towards the bridge, until a wide avenue was before him. He could backtrack further into the city to find a place to cross the avenue, but he wasn't willing to wait that long. He was too close.

Climbing down from the rooftops, Zerek felt more exposed than ever. He wasn't just an errant castle servant anymore, he was officially a trainee of the city soldiers, and he realized he would be scrutinized heavily for being out of his barracks. Would they think he was abandoning his post?

So he moved very carefully and quietly, sticking to the shadows where he could, and avoiding the patrols at all costs. He was almost caught once, when he came around a corner, only to find a Warrior leaning against a wall, her arms folded and her head tilted down. He froze, his heart skipping a beat, until he realized her breathing was slow and deep. She had somehow fallen asleep on her feet!

Careful to be as quiet as he could, he passed by the Warrior until he was in the middle of the street, and then he walked faster to get to the other side of the avenue and into the shadows again.

After another few close encounters, he finally was able to cross over to the river, where he hopped the wall without hesitation and landed on the dry river bank. The river was a little higher than when the orcs had invaded, the first snowfalls in the mountains melting just enough to raise the river's level.

The sound of the rolling river was enough to conceal his movements, so he no longer feared being caught. As long as he stayed in the shadow of the retaining wall, he was safe. He was up river

now, not far from where Laira had first led him down to the river. He looked into the shadows under the bridge, only a couple hundred feet away now, and felt a chill run down his spine.

This was where it had begun.

He looked down to see if there were other footprints in the river bank, but the angle of the moon cast the bank in shadow, and he could not see. Taking in a deep breath, and reminding himself that he had faced orcs twice and survived, he began moving for the shadows of the bridge.

Each step closer made his heart beat faster, not sure if he would find Laira under there, or danger, or...or something else entirely. In fact, he wasn't sure what he would find under the bridge. Step after step, heartbeat after heartbeat, he drew closer, until the shadows engulfed him.

It took a long time for his eyes to adjust, so he remained as still as he could, waiting, listening. Then he noticed it, an almost imperceptible flicker of light coming from a little further ahead. With a frown, he walked closer, his eyes fixed on the low, flickering blue light. Until he came to the center underneath the bridge, and found a long tunnel that ran under the city.

"By the gods," he whispered. What appeared to be an everlasting torch was a couple hundred feet inside of the tunnel, not enough to cast illumination out onto the river, but enough that he could begin to navigate the tunnel.

That was how Laira had disappeared that first day! In the shadow under the bridge, with his eyes still adjusting from the bright sun, he hadn't seen the tunnel, and she must have ducked in there after she gave him his dagger back. It also explained where the smell had come from. This was an old sewer tunnel!

So what was down there? Thieves? Beggars? Murderers? Who was she involved with, exactly? And what would they think of him sneaking his way in? Would they simply kill him for knowing too much, or would they...

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A sudden shadow appeared, and he yelped and fell back, splashing his butt into the ice cold waters. The shadow rushed forward, eclipsing the everlasting torch's light. Fearing the worst, he brought his hand up to draw his dagger. His hands were covered in mud, and he could only imagine what his trousers looked like.

"Zerek!" a sharp whisper called to him.

His heart leapt into his throat and his insides tingled in excitement. "Laira," he whispered back. He hadn't quite drawn his dagger, but his muddy hand was on its hilt.

Laira stepped closer to him, though all he could see was her silhouette. She reached down, grabbed him by the arm, and helped him stand up.

Pulling him up into the tunnel, she shoved him against the wall, and then stuck her head back out under the bridge.

"Hey, I-"

"Quiet," she whispered angrily.

He clamped up, feeling his face grow warm. Then he realized that a patrol might have heard him splashing around on the edge of the river. After several tense, silent moments, Laira sighed in relief and ducked back into the tunnel.

He couldn't see her eyes in the darkness, but she looked at him, and he heard the annoyance in her voice, "What are you doing down here?"

Feeling his heart beat continuing to speed up, he stammered around his words. "I, uh, I mean, I came looking for you. I, umm, had to find you."

When she didn't reply, he tried to stammer out additional details, but managed only to embarrass himself further. So he shut up, and he waited for her to say something.

The moments passed in silence, until she sighed and shook her head. "You weren't supposed to find this tunnel. But I guess I'm not surprised that you did."

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“Laira,” he finally said, feeling butterflies in his stomach. “I...I’m sorry. I screwed up.”

“No,” she quickly replied. “No, don’t you dare blame yourself for this. I lied to you. I manipulated you.” Her voice shook a little bit as she spoke those words. “You are right to hate me.”

He reached out, blindly searching for her hands. Instead he found her waist, and he kept his hands there. Until he remembered that his hands were muddy, and began to pull away, but she stopped him and held his hands against her.

“But you came forward and told me the truth.” His vision had adjusted more to the darkness, and he could just barely see her eyes, so he stared into them intensely. “And more than that...you said you love me.”

He couldn’t see the color of her face, but he still knew she blushed because of how she turned her head down and away.

“I was wondering if you caught that or not,” she spoke just loud enough to be heard over the river.

The butterflies in his stomach fluttered even more, and he felt his face grow warm. His palms were sweaty, and his heart was ready to burst from his chest. There was only one thing he could say now. The only thing that mattered in his heart.

Taking in a deep breath, he reached his hands up and gently nudged her chin up, looking into her eyes and willing her to feel what he felt for her. Finally, he said it. “I love you too.”

He wished he could see her face, see how she responded to what he’d just said. The moment lasted forever, his heart suddenly going from beating insanely fast to stopping altogether, and he waited. And waited. Until he couldn’t stand it anymore, and he almost said something.

Before he knew what was happening, she threw her arms around him, and she kissed him fiercely, holding him tighter than ever before. The world exploded in giddy happiness, and he wrapped his arms around her, kissing her with every bit of love he felt, until he couldn’t stand it anymore.

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When they finally came up for breath, he suddenly started giggling, and couldn't stop himself. She held him in her arms, and she in his, and that was all that mattered.

"But...wait," she pulled back enough to look into his eyes again. "What about everything I told you? You aren't just going to forgive me, are you?"

His spirits dampened a bit when she asked that, as well as just a hint of anger. She was right of course, and he knew he had to be completely honest with her. So he replied, "We need to talk more about it. But I can't ignore the fact that you love me, and...Laura, so much of my life has been lost this year. I can't lose you, too."

She remained quiet for a long moment, but she didn't let go of him, nor did he let go of her. He gazed into her eyes, wishing he could see their color, wishing they had met somewhere with more light.

When she did talk again, her voice was barely above a whisper. "So what do we do now? Where do we go from here?"

He drew her closer and touched his forehead to hers, sighing deeply. "We talk," he replied simply. Then he added, "You tell me more about what's going on, why you and the thieves are trying to infiltrate the castle." He had closed his eyes, but now he opened them again and looked at her intently. "And then...I help you get what you need."

She pulled away just enough to look at him with skepticism he could see even in the low light. "But we already failed. You're no longer in the castle."

Grinning a little, Zerek shrugged. "That's okay. Sneaking in and out of the Castle District was one of the things I learned just so I could find you." He hesitated, thinking back to his last conversation with Endel. "And...I think I know someone on the inside who will help us."

Realizing what he was committing himself to, he thought about whether or not he was doing the right thing. But after only a few minutes of thinking about it, he realized that he didn't care. He had to

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see this through. Either to show Laira that there was nothing wrong in the castle, or to find out if she was right.

No matter what, he couldn't lose her.

He didn't want to lose anyone ever again.