

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 10 “The Storm, Part 2”

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The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

Amaya shivered, wrapping her arms tightly around her torso. She really wished that her armor would dry faster.

The mood in the orc hut was mostly somber, although at one point, Tana had begun to hum a tune to the children that carried soft, sweet melodies, gently moving from note to note. The shaman's surprisingly melodic voice soothed her and the children. But nothing could stop them from jumping in their skins every time a lightning bolt struck, the deafening boom rattling Amaya's teeth.

It was going to be a long night, one which she didn't think she could sleep through. Every time she felt like dozing off and wanted to lie down, another bolt of lightning startled her awake.

Her backside was starting to hurt, and she tried to adjust her posture to alleviate the pain. She considered just lying down, even if she knew sleep would not come.

Until Tana suddenly stopped humming and her head jerked to the right. Amaya frowned at her, and asked, "What is it?"

Tana's eyes searched the walls of the hut, as if looking for some clue to something, but nothing revealed itself. She looked at Amaya and frowned, "Did you not hear that?"

Turning her head to look in the same direction, Amaya listened carefully, but all she could hear was the endless pelting of the rain on the hut's walls, and the distant rumble of thunder. "I don't hear anything..."

Except she did, when it happened again. A far-off sounding wail that made her ears perk and her skin crawl. No, not a wail. It was something else...

"That's the lookouts," Tana breathed.

Jon Wasik

Amaya's head snapped around and she looked at Tana in shock. The shaman was already trying to extricate herself from the children, who must have sensed the sudden fear that both the shaman and Amaya felt, and began to fuss and cry. The woman that had been caring for the children helped Tana pull the children off.

Both Tana and Amaya stood when the horn sounded again, but it was still so difficult to hear over the roar of the storm. Amaya knew what the horns must have meant, but it made no sense. If the lookouts were sounding the alarm, they had to be under attack. But by whom? And during the storm? Who would be crazy enough to attack now?

"Come," Tana ordered, making her way through the flap of the hut. Amaya followed quickly, and while she had not really dried off much, she instantly became soaked from giant droplets of rain.

The horn sounded yet again, and was much easier to hear out in the open. Only this time, the horn was cut off mid-blow.

Several other orcs must have heard it, as many of the soldiers emerged from their tents, brandishing their weapons.

"Shaman," one approached them, "what is it?"

Tana motioned for silence and listened, but no more horns sounded, and they could hear nothing else above the wind and the rain. Amaya couldn't tell if the sun was still up or not, but she thought it must be, as there was still a bit of ambient light, despite the fact that they were now completely surrounded by black clouds.

A flash of lightning arched across the sky and struck the ground less than a mile away, the instant boom of thunder making her jump, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up on end. It was definitely not a good idea to be outside in this storm, lightning could strike anywhere!

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

“I don’t know which direction the horn came from,” Tana shook her head, “but we must find out. You,” she pointed to the orc that had just spoken to her, “Go to my hut and retrieve this woman’s sword, immediately!”

Amaya looked at her in shock, but Tana simply stared back at her confidently. “Whatever the threat, I trust you.”

What if it’s my people, coming to find and rescue me, she thought to herself. Would she be forced to choose sides? Or would she be able to get her people to stop attacking? Would Tana be able to stop her orcs?

Her mind suddenly felt a little more at ease when Tana rested her hand on her shoulder, and looked intently into her eyes, a flash of lightning giving them greater intensity. “I trust you,” she repeated. “Whatever the situation, we will handle it together.”

Amaya stared back for a moment, not sure what to make of the orc’s soothing powers, but grateful for the moment. She nodded at Tana, and replied, “And I will trust you, as well.”

Before long, the other orc came running back, holding Amaya’s sheathed sword in his hand. He handed it to the shaman, who then looked to Amaya and handed it over to her. The other orcs surrounding them looked at each other in bewilderment.

As Amaya began strapping the sheath to her right hip, Tana looked to the other orcs and raised her voice above the storm to say, “This woman is under my protection, and you are not to harm her under any circumstances. Do I make myself clear?”

It was a giant leap of faith on Tana’s part, and Amaya suddenly felt overwhelmed.

But before anyone else could react, several of the darksteel orcs that had been a part of Arkad’s group came rushing forth from the south. “My Shaman,” one of them said. “We’re under attack!”

They rushed to meet with the darksteel orcs, all of whom eyed Amaya suspiciously. She ignored their stares and stayed close to the Shaman.

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“Tezarik,” Tana spoke to the leader. “What’s going on?”

“We did not see the actual attack,” he replied, his eyes darting between Tana and Amaya. “But one survivor reported a large group of humans had appeared through a portal, and attacked without warning or hesitation.”

Amaya’s face drained of color, though no one could probably tell in the low light. So it *was* her people. Which put her in a rather precarious situation, and her mind raced. Was it just her team, or had they gone back for reinforcements? “How many,” she asked.

Tezarik looked at her curiously, and then back at Tana. Tana simply nodded and said, “Answer her question. She is here to help us.”

Still hesitant, the orc replied, “I do not know. Six or seven, plus a Wizard.”

Then it could still be just her team, if the numbers were right and her entire team had survived yesterday’s battle.

“We don’t know where they are now,” Tezarik shook his head. “It’s impossible to see or hear anything in this storm.”

“And this camp is huge,” Amaya sighed, looking around for any clue to follow.

“Let us start with where they were last seen,” Tana nodded south. Without hesitation, every orc present followed her. Amaya stayed as close as she could to the shaman, fearful that she could not actually stop her orcs from attacking Amaya.

She looked nervously at the small army forming around them, but the dying light was making that difficult. Before long, only the flashes of lightning could guide them. The sun had definitely set by now.

Amaya brushed her soaked hair back out of her eyes and looked at Tana, and said as quietly as she could, “I can talk to them, once we find them. They’ll follow my orders.”

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

“Assuming the chaos allows for them to listen,” Tana nodded. “I would prefer to stop the bloodshed before it gets any worse.”

Grateful that the shaman agreed, she looked around and kept her eyes and ears open. If it was her team, they would follow her order without question, except perhaps for Vin, who’s hatred of orcs seemed to have grown tenfold during the course of the war.

But if her team had been so devastated that they had been forced to seek reinforcements, then there was no telling who would be in charge of the attackers, and whether or not they would listen to her. If they were Warriors from another country, they might not care that she was a Guardian.

Their search took them to the south end of the camp, where they found a handful of slain orcs, and one that was being carried to one of the huts further into the village. Four of the huts on the outer edge had been completely destroyed.

She was not a tracker, but even if she had been, it would have been virtually impossible to see tracks on the ground in the dark with the torrential downpour of rain.

Until there was a flash of light to the east. A flash that was definitely not a bolt of lightning.

She looked at the orcs around her, but they had all begun to spread out to search for clues. Apparently they had paid no heed to the subdued flash, perhaps brushing it off as just another bolt of lightning, further in the distance and so less bright. But she knew what she saw.

At first she was going to tell the others what she had seen, but then she realized that she couldn’t. No, this was her chance to stop whoever it was without the orcs becoming casualties. After all, if she was accompanied by orcs, something similar to what happened in the other camp could occur, and one stray arrow or magic attack could start a conflict that could not be stopped.

No, she couldn’t let that happen again. Who knew if her team had survived that encounter, and if she could help it, she would prevent it from happening again.

Jon Wasik

Knowing that time was short, she pretended to also be searching the ground for clues, as impossible as it was to find anything. She slowly edged towards the eastern edge of the search area, until she came upon an orc hut, which she began to walk around, to place it between herself and the Shaman.

She glanced one last time at Tana, before she disappeared into the darkness, moments after a flash of lightning no doubt blinded the orcs to her escape.

Knowing that the sound of the rain and wind would cover her, she took off into a run towards the east, following the edge of the camp as her supposed rescuers had likely done. There was another flash of light ahead, one which she recognized as a Mage releasing a magic attack.

And then she felt her spirits sink when another orc horn sounded, alerting her, and everyone else, to where the attackers were.

She was out of time, and tried to push herself to run harder, but the mud made that impossible. When she finally made it to the source of the horn and the flashes, she found a bloody mess.

Her rescuers had just defeated several more orcs, and stood over their corpses, weapons in hand. This she saw all from the glow of the staff of the only Wizard present, and her spirits soared when she saw that it was Nia. She even noticed a shadow of a woman hunched over a corpse and thought that she looked like Idalia.

However, as Amaya looked to the others present, she realized those were the only two from her team. The glow from Nia's staff did little to illuminate in the rain, but it was enough that she recognized the other men and women present as members of the Everlin Warriors' Guild.

Each turned to her as she stood at the edge, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword, but she had not yet drawn it. She looked to each of them, searching their faces, afraid of who was present, but was glad when she realized Din was not among them.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

“Amaya!” one of them called out to her, the voice she recognized belonging to one named Merrick. The rescuers gathered around her, but she knew time was short. She glanced over her shoulder, expecting orcs to come barreling after her at any moment.

“Stop what you’re doing,” she ordered. “Do not attack any more orcs!”

Merrick and the others exchanged confused glances. “What?” Merrick asked, taken aback. “Are you kidding me? We have the perfect opportunity to finish off this camp while the storm rages on!”

She glared at him, “Is that why you came here? To kill orcs? Or to rescue me?”

He looked confused for a moment, and then shrugged. “Both.”

His response made her stomach twist into a knot. Who were the real monsters?

“Wait,” she stopped, looking around to see if there were any other humans nearby.

“Where...where’s Elic? And Peren? Where’s everyone else?”

“They are fine,” Nia spoke, standing behind the others so that her staff light was not so blinding.

“Wounded, but alive.”

She heaved a sigh of relief, glad to hear that there had been no casualties. However, she then felt surprise when another of the Everlin Warriors asked, “Where’s Din?”

Amaya’s stomach sank, a great void opening up within her. Everyone looked around, but the Commander was nowhere to be found. “Maybe he went looking for you,” Merrick nodded to Amaya.

It was the last thing she needed, to have to deal with him. She knew he wouldn’t follow her orders, not this time.

“Orcs!” Idalia shouted, pointing behind Amaya.

She turned to see several shadows moving towards them, obviously the orcs wearing darksteel armor. Tana was right behind them.

“Wait!” she stepped out in front of her rescuers, standing between them and the charging orcs.

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The orcs didn't seem inclined to stop, and Amaya very nearly drew her sword, but then Tana added her own order, "Do not attack!"

Only a dozen feet away, the orcs slid to a stop in the mud. With their weapons drawn, they looked very menacing in the low light. The flashes of lightning only added to their terrifying appearance.

Tana stepped forward to also stand between the orcs and Amaya's rescuers. "Amaya," she breathed heavily. "You made it here fast."

"I'm sorry for breaking off," she shook her head. "I wanted to stop them if I could."

"You wanted to stop us from killing orcs?" Merrick asked, incredulous.

She glared back at him. "Yes! These orcs are not our enemy."

"All orcs are our enemies," a voice suddenly shouted from further inside the orc camp.

All eyes turned towards the source, and standing upon a hill was a shadow of a figure, his sword held out to the side. A flash of lightning confirmed who she thought it was.

Pressure began to boil up within her, the anger she had felt over the past several months surfacing once again. She turned to face him, and felt her hand reaching for her sword.

"It wouldn't surprise me to learn that you do not know friend from foe," she shouted back up to Din, her last word almost lost in another crack of thunder. "I'm ordering all of you to stand down, and to leave here immediately."

"Hold your ground," Din shouted. "We're not going anywhere."

She looked to her rescuers, but they did not seem to know what to do. The Everlin Warriors looked at her, knowing all too well that she was a Guardian and therefore could countermand any of Din's orders. Yet he had been their commander for many years, and loyalty was instilled into Warriors from childhood.

Idalia narrowed her eyes at her leader, but she did not appear to take sides, and gripped her sword, ready to take action if necessary. Amaya had no idea what Nia would do, but then was surprised

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

that the Wizard seemed to be entirely too interested in the brewing conflict between Din and Amaya, her eyes darting back in forth in fascination that was readily apparent from the glow of her staff.

When Nia's eyes met Amaya's, the fascination faded, turning to one of grave concern and sympathy. The look on Amaya's face must have made the Wizard realize just how much pain and anger Amaya felt.

When Amaya looked back to Din, he still stood atop the hill, unmoving. She had a very bad feeling about what he was about to do. About the fight that was about to happen. And yet, a part of her was looking forward to finally unleashing her wrath upon him.

“Don't do it, Din. I'm a Guardian. You *will* follow my orders.”

She then looked over towards Tana, who met her gaze. Din wasn't going to follow her command, she knew it. In fact, she knew exactly what he was about to do. She wished she could tell Tana that without giving away her hand, but a flash of lightning illuminated the shaman's eyes, and she saw the look of understanding.

Then she looked to her rescuers. In a voice she knew was too quiet for Din to hear, she said to them, “If you hold any loyalty to the throne, you will not interfere or attack the orcs, no matter what happens next.”

When she looked back at Din, he still hadn't moved or changed posture. Yet she could already feel the slow draw of power into his body and sword. He was trying to do it subtly, so that no one could detect it. Like always, he underestimated her. *Please let Tana be ready for him*, she thought.

And then it happened. He raised his sword and pointed it right at the orcs, firing off a blast of arcane magic. It impacted a green-white shield several feet away from the orcs, and they roared in response, but Tana shouted for them to stay their ground.

Jon Wasik

Amaya, on the other hand, was free to do what she should have done a long time ago. With an enraged shout, she pulled her sword from its sheath, instantly charging it with anger-fueled magic, and fired a blast right at Din.

His own personal shield deflected the blast, but it still knocked him off balance. In his moment of distraction, she charged up the hill towards him, the difficulties she had with the mud fueling her anger further.

Din recovered quickly, and brought his sword down on top of her. She deflected with both magic and her sword, but he literally had the high ground, and when her feet slipped out from beneath her, he pressed the advantage, trying to cleave off her dominant hand.

She spun down the hill, but the spin turned into a slide, the rain-soaked hill unable to hold their weight and the dead grass giving way. Realizing it was her chance, she pointed her sword towards Din, but instead of shooting magic right at him, she released it towards his feet, causing the ground to explode and shower them with mud. Din lost his footing, and he tumbled down the hill after her.

When she finally stopped sliding, she managed to stand up, and both the orcs and her rescuers backed off to give them room.

Din came sliding down faster than she had, and within moments was at the bottom of the hill. She swung down on him with all of her might, hoping to overpower him, but his sword met hers, and he thrust his open palm at her, blasting her with unfocused magic and making her stumble backwards.

Slipping and sliding as he went, he stood up and faced her. The mud was going to make this battle impossible for either to fight, she was already feeling exhausted from constantly battling the ground. But was there anywhere they could go to get away from it?

Looking behind her, she saw the trees of the forest in a flash of lightning, and wondered if it would be better or worse. Much to her surprise, what had once been a dead forest was now very much

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

alive. Leaves had grown out in the hours of rain that had already fallen, ready to receive the rays of sunlight the moment the storm clouds passed. Could life really grow that fast?

Realizing that anything was possible, she hoped that the leaves were enough to keep the ground from becoming too rain-soaked, and began to back up towards the forest.

Din saw her movement, and seemed to think this meant he had the advantage, so he pressed in on her, covering the distance as quickly as the mud would allow, until their swords met in an arm-rattling clash.

She summoned forth the energy of the world around her and pressed it into her sword, charging it in the hopes that if she were lucky enough to get a swing in past his shield, it would cut through his steel armor and wound him.

Another swing from Din, and another, and another, until she nearly lost her footing. But then they made it to the cover of the trees, and while the ground was still wet, her footing felt a little more secure, whether by roots of the underbrush and trees or some other force.

Except that she had not thought about the tree roots, and tripped backwards over one, crashing down hard on her back. It was the second time he had her on her back, and her anger grew tenfold. He brought his sword overhead and was prepared to bring it down on her, but she had already charged her sword, and with every bit of rage buried inside of her, she released it on him.

It struck him dead in the chest, crumpling his armor and throwing him back against one of the outermost trees of the forest. He collapsed with a grunt and cursed at her.

She slowly rose up, letting the pain from falling back fuel her anger further. He looked up at her, and in a flash of lightning, she saw fear on his face. Good. Fear was what he should feel.

Din scrambled to his feet, and that was when she attacked. She started with a jab, which he deflected, but she was inside his defenses with that, and threw her shoulder into him, shoving him along

the edge of the forest. She twisted her entire body to swing her weapon, using all of her strength, and their swords met in a jarring crash.

Again, she swung, charging her sword with more magic, forcing him back. She swung again, meeting sword for sword. And again. The world became dim around her, and she realized that she had a very hard time seeing him, but her eyes had adjusted well enough, and she didn't care.

Each swing was harder than before, more brutal than before. Flashes of memories began to pass through her mind. Flashes of being with him, cuddled up in his arms, and she struck at him again. Flashes of patrols together, and she struck again. Their first night making love, and she struck again. The day he had sent her on her mission to kill the bandits, and she struck at him even harder.

The weeks in prison. She yelled out in rage, and struck for every single day in prison, again and again and again, never letting up, never giving him a moment of rest. He tried to change the tide of the battle by kicking low at her, but all she did was back-step away, and then press in on him again.

"Not again!" she found herself shouting. "You think you can tear apart my life and never suffer the consequences?" She struck again. "You think you can screw with me, with my team, with all of us and get away with it?"

He swung at her again, but she batted his sword away, and then swung her own, releasing magic she hadn't even realized she had allowed to build up within it. The blast slammed into him, ripping through his hastily-erected magic shield, and sent him sprawling to the forest floor.

She rushed over to where he had landed, and he tried to attack her with a magic blast of his own, but she used magic and her sword to deflect the blast. She then swung her sword against his, knocked his sword arm to the ground, and then she crushed his sword hand with her boot, forcing him to release his weapon.

Flipping the sky-blue blade around to point down, she raised it up, and prepared to plunge it straight into his chest.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

She glared at him, right into his eyes. A soft green glow lit up the area around them, allowing her to see the fear in his eyes. Amaya reveled in that fear, glad to have made him so afraid, to make him cower. He feared her.

...He feared her.

Her heart suddenly skipped a beat when she realized what that meant. He feared her, and she stood over him, holding his life in the balance. He could no longer hurt her.

Or could he? What if she killed him now? She would never have to fear him again. He could never hurt her if he was dead. He could never hurt anyone again. The world would be a better place without him.

But would she be better? Would killing him take away the pain she had felt in her heart for so long? Or would it only fester?

What would she become if she killed him now?

His life wouldn't be the first she would have taken. It wouldn't be the last. But then she remembered the conversation she had once had with Trebor Tem, deep below ground in the Valaras dungeon, surrounded by raging, roaring orcs.

He had recognized the rage building within her. The same rage that he felt. So strong that it had changed him, turned him into something terrible, a monster of his former self.

She breathed heavily, her sword still held high, ready to plunge it deep into her former lover's chest. Looking to the source of a green glow she hadn't noticed until now, she saw that everyone had followed them into the forest, and Nia's staff illuminated the area. They all stared at the scene solemnly, even the orcs.

Tana especially looked at her with concern, her jaw clenched tight, as if she wanted to say something, but the words unable to come forth.

Amaya remembered what she felt after that conversation with Trebor. She remembered asking herself, who were the real monsters? The orcs? Or her?

If she did this...she would have her answer.

She looked again upon Din. Saw the fear in his eyes.

He was a coward. That realization was so staggering that she almost lost her balance. He was a *coward*. And that was why he tormented her. And if she gave into her urge...

No.

Amaya lowered her sword, and shook her head. "No," she said to him. She backed away, releasing his sword hand from her boot. Knowing he could not be trusted, she bent over and picked up his weapon, taking away his only means of actually hurting her. "No," she repeated, shaking her head and backing away further. "No..."

He looked at her in confusion, but there was an obvious look of relief in his eyes. "I will not kill you, Uric. As much as you deserve it, I will not kill you." She looked at Tana, and smiled. "I'm better than that."

After a moment of silence, he suddenly laughed at her. "Better than me? I think not. I've caught you consorting with orcs, you pathetic wench." She looked at him stoically, and waited for him to finish. "I will tell the King that you have betrayed your own kind. You traitor..."

His threat to ruin her life should have angered her, and it would have before. Instead, she just laughed. "Oh, Uric. You don't get it yet, do you?" He looked at her quizzically, so she explained. "You've lost. You have no power over me. You never will again, either."

She looked at his sword, a finely-crafted, grey-white blade, with a beautiful black and silver hilt. It was his pride and joy, and a symbol of his command. Smiling, she jabbed it into the ground and stepped back. Sudden exhaustion overcame her, so the effort of charging her sword with magic was greater than normal.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

And just as she swung, Din yelled out, “No!” But too late. With the magic giving her sword an unnatural sharpness, she cleaved through his blade, snapping it in two.

“You are no longer a member of the Warriors’ Guild,” she looked at him. “By order of the King, I am hear-by stripping you of your rank, and banishing you from Tal.” He was too stunned to react, he simply stared at his broken blade, unable to stand, unable to do anything but sit in the mud. She stepped closer to him, forcing him to look up at her. “Today I spare you, but if you ever show your face in Tal again...” She shook her head. “You will be executed.”

Incredulously, he said, “You cannot simply banish me because you wish to. You must have just cause!”

She wanted to give him a satisfied smile, but even that was too great of an effort. “You disobeyed my orders, which is akin to disobeying the King’s orders. You are no longer a citizen of Tal, Uric Din. Make sure I never find you again.”

As the fatigue continued to pull her down, she sheathed her sword and turned away, walking past the gathered crowd. She wasn’t ready to return to the orc village, or to talk to anyone else. All she wanted was to be alone.

She wasn’t sure how far she walked, but somehow she had managed to turn further into the forest, into the darkness, away from any and all sources of light, until she started to stumble over exposed roots and plants.

Realizing she could go no further, and that she in fact had no idea where she was or how to get back, she collapsed to her knees, letting the blackness that surrounded her seep into her. She wrapped her arms around herself, a sudden surge of relief, sadness, loneliness, happiness, and fear all exploding within her stomach and spreading out into her body.

Jon Wasik

The tears came easily, streaming across her rain- and sweat-soaked face. The emotions grew stronger and stronger, and she couldn't hold them back, no matter how hard she clutched at her stomach.

It was over, wasn't it? She would never have to deal with him again, never have to look at him again. She should be happy! And she was. But the sadness was greater, and everything hitting her all at once just made her cry harder, and she felt ready to collapse inside of herself, and explode, all at the same time.

Time became an endless stream in the blackness, and after what felt like hours of crying, the emotions finally began to subside, and the tears slowed. Her thoughts wandered, to the past few years, to the time she had spent with Uric, the time she had wasted with him, letting him make her think she was just barely worthy of love...

A soft, green glow surrounded her, and she spun around, ready to draw her sword. Only to see Nia, approaching her very carefully. "Lieutenant," she whispered. "I did not mean to startle you."

Amaya could only imagine how she looked, her eyes red and puffy, and who knew what streaming from her nostrils...

But Nia did not seem to notice, and somehow it was a comfort to Amaya that the young Wizard did not care about such things. Then, much to her surprise, Nia jabbed her staff into the soft ground, leaving it to illuminate the area, and then she knelt down in the mud next to Amaya.

Too stunned to react, Amaya allowed Nia, the same Wizard who never appeared to understand social norms or feel any emotions, to pull her into a warm embrace. Before Amaya could think to control her emotions, they broke free, and she wept into her friend's arms.

By the time the sun had set, Arkad had found and rallied over two dozen of his darksteel brothers. They had encountered a few straggling enemy Warriors, but beyond that they had been

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

fortunate enough not to run into further opposition. The wall of fire he had created was keeping the enemy away.

However, panic had begun to set in when he could not find Kilack. He asked his troops if they had seen his lieutenant, but none had seen him since they had burst into the clearing together and rushed the Keeper of the Sword.

Had Kilack not made it through the enemy line, as small as it was? Had he been trapped by the fires that Arkad had set?

With his soldiers in tow, he began to backtrack, knowing it was a mistake even as he began to lead them towards the flames.

The forest was ablaze, smoke filling the air and threatening to choke them out. He also noticed that the same storm he had seen approaching the To'kar camp was fast approaching from the south, bright flashes in the sky an eerie reminder of the chaos that surrounded them. The fire, smoke, and the storm would make it all but impossible to find any additional darksteel orcs.

There should have been well over one hundred darksteel orcs still present! So many were lost to him now, and he feared that any left behind, including Kilack, would not survive the rest of the war. The To'kar tribe was their only hope for survival.

His mistake at turning back became apparent almost immediately, when they reached the quickly-spreading fire. Arkad gripped his axe tightly, trying not to let his fears cloud his mind. Yet he could not help it, and he shouted into the approaching wall of fire, "Kilack!"

No response came, and the dry underbrush allowed the flames to spread like a stampeding herd of qrishags. "Kilack," he shouted again, almost tempted to rush into the flames, confident that his armor would protect him long enough to find his friend.

But no. His loyalty to the greater whole overrode his sense of panic and his impending loss. His forces here, and back at the camp, needed him. He was still their General.

Jon Wasik

The heat grew ever more intense, blasting his face with warmth that he had not felt since he had been home. It was comforting, but very quickly became too hot.

His spirits sank to a new low, and he turned back to the rest of his troops waiting behind him. They stared at him with mixed looks of sadness and fear. He knew better than to let his emotions show in front of his troops, but too much had been lost. Too much...

Arkad wanted to find more darksteel orcs, to find Kilack, to make this tragedy somehow seem less wretched, but that was impossible. The fire would either overtake them as it spread faster, or the storm would force them to scatter, lost in the darkness of the woods once the rains suffocated the fires.

Less than thirty of his brothers. It would have to do.

He walked through the center of the troops, each of them looking to him for guidance. All he could do was pull out the portal vial, examining the tiny potion as he moved. When he was on the other side of his soldiers, he looked back at them.

“I am your General,” he shouted above the roar of the approaching fire, resisting the urge to cough. He held up the vial for all to see and continued, “And I could order you all to follow me through this portal. However, you should know that this will not take us back to the fortress. It will take us somewhere else, somewhere far away, where another shaman waits to welcome us into her tribe.”

The stir of shock ran through the gathered troops like a bolt of lightning, and he waited for someone to object. When no one did, he said what he felt everyone thought, “Our shaman has acted without honor, sending us into a war that we could not win.” He did not and would never admit to his troops that he felt the war could have been won, if only he had led them all better. “Now she demands that we stand our ground to be slaughtered by the humans, while sending my unit off to find other orcs to murder. I will no longer serve her. You may choose to remain here and find your way back to the Fortress, or you may follow me. Together with our new shaman, we may yet have a chance at rebuilding our society. At surviving.”

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

Turning on the spot, he found the nearest rock and threw the vial at it with all of his might, shattering it. A flash of light nearly blinded him, and in an instant, a wall of lilac-colored light appeared before them, the lighter and darker colors swirling around each other.

He turned back to them all, and opened his arms. “If you will follow me, pass through now and await me on the other side.”

Feeling his stomach twist into a knot, he waited with genuine fear. There was no time for him to explain further, not with the wall of flames behind them growing dangerously close. He could not explain to them how their shaman’s powers had waned in the brightness of Tana’s light. Could not explain Tana’s vision. Could not explain why this was their best hope. All he could do was wait and hope.

The soldiers all looked at each other, uncertainty in their eyes at first. However, as each one looked to the other, something changed in their eyes, and they looked at him. Then, without a word, they all surged forward, and to his greatest relief, they began to stream around him and into the portal.

Every single one of them.

His heart soared, elation filling him with an energy he had not felt in such a long time. He clasped the shoulders of the some of the orcs as they passed by, and they each in turn nodded to him, saying respectfully, “General.”

After so long of enduring defeats, at the hands of not one but two enemy forces, it was his first true victory. He still felt guilty about leaving behind so many, but the ones he had found still thought of him as their leader, and that meant everything to him.

The last one passed through, the fire now close enough that his armor began to feel like an oven. He watched as the flames grew closer, felt the heat growing to an almost unbearable intensity.

Jon Wasik

A fleeting thought crossed his mind, the hope that some of the enemy soldiers were caught in those flames and burned. Tana would not have approved, but it was the least they deserved for how they had treated his kin for the last three thousand years.

Now...now Tana wanted to make peace with them. Asked him to fight side by side with them in the future. He knew it was the only hope they had, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

Turning to the glowing, shimmering lilac portal, he took in a deep breath, but then immediately regretted it when the smoke began to make him hack and cough.

He covered his mouth with his left hand, his battle axe gripped tightly in the right, and began to jog towards the portal.

A flash of motion distracted him, and before he knew what was happening, a tiny blur of mottled grey-white and black flew at him. Twin daggers flashed in the firelight, and it was reflex alone that saved him as he batted the figure away. The attacker still managed to gash a deep gouge into his left cheek, gushing thick, black-red blood from his face.

Roaring a curse, he turned to where he had flung the tiny figure, only to be shocked by whom he saw. A woman he had hoped to never see again.

“Orinda?”

She had tucked into a roll when she had landed, and now crouched several feet away from him, twin daggers he had never seen before clutched in both of her hands. Then she leapt at him, displaying a nimbleness he had never expected from her.

Arkad tried to bring his axe up to deflect her assault, but even with his strength, he was too slow with the heavy weapon, and she latched onto his arm with one of her arms, trying to slash at him with her free hand.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

The first slash missed his nose by a hair, the second barely cut into his chin, and he had to flick her off of his arm. Rage flared up in him, and he let loose that anger with a barrage of fire from his axe right at where he had flung her, but she was too fast and dodged out of the way.

When she leapt at him again, he punched with his left hand as hard as he could, connecting at the base of her rib cage, sending her flying backwards again. The points on his armor should have cut into her, but her leather armor, burnt long ago in an attempt to make it look like the darksteel armor Arkad wore, protected her.

In a wild craze, she screamed at him and attacked again, and again, and again. Each time he would bat her away, and it was all he could do to keep her from cutting him again.

What he didn't realize until the heat was unbearable was that she drew him away from the portal and closer to the fires, the ones he had just started closing together with the incoming blaze and creating another wall.

The creaking, cracking of a tree coming down distracted him, and he had to leap away as the flame-engulfed top of the tree nearly landed on him, embers pelting at him. He shielded his face, but that momentary distraction was all Orinda needed. She darted away from him, and towards the portal.

Seeing her run, he very nearly sent a stream of fire at her, but then realized it would have cut him completely off from the portal. In a snap-decision, he arched back, and then lobbed his axe at her, spinning it through the air in a lazy loop.

Without even waiting to see what happened, he charged after her, watching, waiting, hoping as the axe seemed to move in slow motion. She could not be allowed through the portal!

The axe missed, sailing over her head, but it made her stop short in surprise. His axe planted itself into the ground not two feet in front of her. Just as she looked back towards him, he was on top of her, tackling her to the ground and, he hoped, crushing her with his weight.

Jon Wasik

The impact made her drop one of her daggers, but the other was still in her hand, and flashed in front of his face, barley missing his mouth. She scrambled under him, somehow squirming out, but he grabbed at her ankle before she could get any further.

Arkad reached forward with another hand to grab her torso, but she instead lashed back at him. The blade went right between two of his fingers, finding one of the few weaknesses in his arm, and sank a good inch into the flesh between his middle and ring finger.

Roaring in pain, he reeled back, her grip tight enough that the blade slid out, cutting further through the thin glove beneath his gauntlets. He was on his knees, but she jumped up, now having the obvious advantage, and tried to jab at him. He batted her jab away, but she just used that opportunity to come in closer, and tried to stab into his neck above his armor.

Not knowing what else to do with such a little fury, he opened his arms wide, and then closed them around her, trying to restrict her movement by clenching off her arms. She kicked at him, and even tried to bite at him, so he reflexively released his grip just a little.

Too much.

The dagger flashed before him, and pain exploded around his right eye, the firelight suddenly going dark on one side. He released her and clutched at his eye, roaring in pain, wiping at the fresh black-red blood streaming forth. Had she pierced his eye, or was he simply blinded by blood?

Arkad opened his left eye just in time to see her jabbing for him again, intent on taking his sight from him completely. He was just quick enough to deflect up, but just barely, the dagger scraping his eyebrow and skated up along his flesh, opening up yet another wound on his forehead.

More blood streamed forth into his only good eye, and now he was completely blinded! He wiped at the blood, the salty liquid burning his left eye, but there was little he could do to clear it up, and he realized he was at her mercy...

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

Until he felt a sudden burst of cold right in front of him, and he heard Orinda cry out in pain and surprise.

He panicked, and tore his left gauntlet off so that he could wipe the blood away, or as best as he could, and then held his hand above his left eye to keep more blood from streaming in. His vision was still blurred, but a figure clad in darkened armor stood before him, holding a mace. Could...could it be?

“General,” Kilack’s voice came to him, relief washing over his entire body.

But Orinda was not out of the fight yet. She launched herself at Kilack, intent on doing to him what she had done to Arkad. However, her battle with Arkad had fatigued her. Kilack threw her off, and then just as she leapt at him again, he swung his mace and caught her in mid-air, the hard, pointed, enchanted weapon slamming into her body with a sickening thud.

She fell to the ground next to Arkad and did not move again.

He stared at her, and she at him, blood already trickling from her mouth. She no longer breathed, and moments later, she stopped bleeding.

Arkad was too stunned at first to do anything, but the heat from the flames very soon reminded him that he had no time to gawk. Another tree fell very close to them, and the flames were spreading out behind him. The fire he had started only moments ago was inches from the portal, and their time was up.

Looking to his trusted lieutenant, he saw Kilack staring back stoically, the barest hint of horror on his face as he looked upon his wounded, deformed General. Grunting as he went, Arkad pushed himself up off of the ground with his free hand and stared.

His vision still blurred, Arkad shook his head, and looked to the glowing portal. There was no time left, the fire had reached it, and was beginning to surround it. The larger fire behind them was only a few feet away.

Without another word, Arkad took two steps forward and reached down to pull his axe out of the ground. It did not come as easily as he'd hoped, and he cursed his sudden weakness. He cursed his failure.

When he looked again at Kilack, his lieutenant did his best to give a smile, and nodded. "You fought well, General. I will tell the men as much."

Relief filled his chest, and he nodded. Without another word, Kilack turned to the portal. They could not simply walk through it now. So he got a running start, and leapt in, the flames licking at his boots as he did.

As fatigued as he was, Arkad managed to get his own running start, but his muscles gave out just before he should have leapt, and he stumbled, stomping through the fire. He started to fall forward, but he just barely kept himself upright long enough to fall through the portal, and to safety.

Like every portal he had ever been through, it was like passing through a door, and in one instant, the unbearable heat gave way to shocking cold, taking his breath away as a torrential downpour instantly cooled his armor and flesh. He lay face-down in the mud, and could feel embarrassment overtake him.

Embarrassment because he knew the men that he had just rescued, the ones that had pledged their loyalty to him, now saw him broken and bleeding.

The mud had sloshed up into his wounds, and his left eye was once again completely blinded by the mix of blood, rain, and mud. He pushed up slowly and wiped away as much of it as he could, but his vision would not completely clear.

Stand up, you weak fool, he thought to himself. *Don't let them see how broken you really are...*

He pushed, as hard as he could, his muscles protesting every inch of the way. His head spun, and he knew he was dehydrated and beyond fatigued. But he wouldn't give up. He couldn't.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

After what felt like an eternity, he finally managed to stand up. It was almost pitch black, and he only caught glimpses of his men from the flashes of lightning arching across the sky every two or three seconds. Thunder boomed, setting his teeth chattering.

His men...they stared at him every moment of his struggle to stand. But once he was upright, his knees locked to prevent them from giving out, and they cheered.

It was then that he knew it was okay. They closed in around him, and he feared they would knock him over in their triumphant roars, but instead, they only wanted to help him. They held him up, and as he motioned in the direction he knew the camp to be, they pulled him along.

They would not let their general fall again.

Never again.

Zerek's heart thundered in his ears, the cold night air whipping by as he leapt across the small gap between buildings, landing on the low-pitched roof of yet another shop, taking them one building closer to the Castle District.

It was a section of the city he was very familiar with, having used the same location every time he snuck out of and back into the Castle District before, and he almost could have done it in his sleep. And to think, only a few months ago, he was terrified to make that first leap from the wall onto the rooftops...

Only this time, he wasn't alone. This time, he was accompanied by Sorin and Laira, and he knew they had to be careful. If anyone saw or heard them, their mission into the castle would be over before it could begin.

His heart wasn't beating as fast as it was because he was running. In fact, he had grown quite fit in the past few months, and he was barely working up a sweat. No, his heart was pounding against his rib cage because he was terrified, and completely uncertain.

No matter what he seemed to decide, he kept going back and forth on whether or not he was doing the right thing. He was convinced that it was the Prince hiding the kingdom's situation from the King, and this was their chance to make things right. But he still felt like he was betraying his oath to defend the city and the castle, to defend the throne.

However, before long, his time of indecision was up. They had just leapt onto the last rooftop, and the wall separating the Castle District was before them. He crouched at the top of the roof, setting his hands on the top and resting his knees just below. Sorin came up on his left, Laira on his right, and they stared over the pitch at the wall.

Things had changed after the orcs had invaded the city by the river. Guard patrols had increased, and that included a more regular patrol of the battlements on the wall. In fact, as he peered over the pitched rooftop, he saw a guard had only recently passed by, and was slowly meandering away to their left.

"So that's why you took us around the long way," Laira whispered to him, reaching beneath his cloak to gently caress his back. "You knew there were more guards out."

He felt his skin tingle in excitement at her touch, but he had to keep his mind off of her for the moment, difficult as that was. They looked along the wall to their right, looking for another patrol, but none was visible in the low light. There were everlasting torches at regular intervals, and so they should have been able to see if there were any guards.

"Looks clear," Sorin whispered.

Zerek nodded and said, "Yeah. Hopefully it stays that way. The stairs we'll go down are a few hundred feet to the right." He looked at Sorin with a frown, "Are you sure Endel got the message? It wasn't intercepted?"

Sorin frowned at him, as if offended that a kid was questioning him. "I trust my people. And even if it was intercepted, it wouldn't mean anything to anyone else."

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

He didn't feel particularly inspired with confidence by Sorin's response, but it was the best they could hope for. They needed Endel for his plan to work.

Drawing in a deep breath, Zerek held it for a moment and stared at the wall before he released it. "Okay, then. Follow me."

Without any further hesitation, he stood up again, positioned himself on the other side of the pitch, and then took a running start before leaping across the distance. It was second nature to him by now, and he barely felt his stomach turn from the act, until he was solidly on the other side, where he ducked down. Laira came next, followed by Sorin.

There was no turning back now.

Knowing they would not have much time on the wall, he crouch-walked past Laira and led them towards the stairs. Thankfully it was still unguarded, and they climbed down into the courtyard without incident. Before them was a stretch of darkness over what he knew as a flat grassy area, leading up to where the gardens of a three story wealthy house began.

He wasn't particularly keen on taking his party through that garden, even though it was the path he was most familiar with. Though it provided cover, there was hardly a sliver of one of the moons out tonight, and he felt safer traversing the darkness of the open grassy area. It would also be easier to get behind the castle and into the stables, where they would meet Endel.

About halfway to the stables, they were stopped by an unexpected guard patrolling the grassy area with a torch. Zerek instantly dropped to his belly and lay as flat as he could, thankful for the black cloak Sorin had provided him, and hoping they wouldn't be noticed. The guard passed within a couple dozen feet of them, but he never looked down at them, and seemed instead to be intent on looking up at the wall. *Thank the gods he didn't see us leap up onto the wall,* Zerek thought.

Once the guard had passed and they could no longer hear footsteps, Zerek cautiously pushed up and looked towards where the guard had gone, waiting until he disappeared into the garden of the very house Zerek often passed by in the nights that he had snuck in and out.

Sighing in relief, they started moving again, keeping low and as far away from any torches on the wall or near the castle as they could.

When they finally reached the stables, Zerek told the others to remain outside, and he snuck in. Endel wasn't the only stable boy, and there was every possibility that someone else might have come out to tend to the horses late at night. You never knew when a messenger had to leave for another city, even in the middle of the night.

There wasn't a single source of light inside of the stables, and he didn't even get three steps inside before he realized he would quickly get lost. The last thing he needed to do was to spook the horses and draw the attention of the guards. So where was Endel?

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a sudden tug on his right sleeve. A small squeak escaped his throat, and he turned to find Endel, barely visible from the little light coming in through the stable entrance.

The young boy nearly doubled over trying to hold back his laughter, and it took every ounce of control Zerek had not to shove Endel away. Instead, after giving himself a moment to allow his heart rate to slow, he motioned angrily for Endel to follow him out, where they joined the others.

There was only a few torches lit outside of the stables, but they were still exposed, and he didn't much like the idea of holding a meeting where a guard could stumble across them. So they retreated back outside of the training grounds, and knelt in the grass.

The night was getting colder, and clouds were building up in the south. Would tonight be the first snowfall? *It was* that time of year...

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

Once they were sure no one was nearby, Endel turned to Sorin and Laira, and even though Zerek couldn't see his friend's face, he knew the boy blushed. "Uh, hello," he whispered.

Sorin said nothing, but Laira reached out a hand and touched his shoulder. "It's good to see you again, Endel. We've missed you."

No doubt Endel's face grew warmer, and Zerek couldn't help but smile at Laira's encouraging welcome. "Thanks," Endel said, shifting nervously. "I'm, umm...I'm sorry." He looked to Sorin, his eyes difficult to see in the low light. "For failing before."

Sorin didn't reply at first, but then he nodded once, a little too coldly for Zerek's comfort. "It's okay, kid. What's important is that you're here, now. You could have easily turned away and not helped us tonight."

Endel's head popped up, and he asked, "Tonight? So we're going into the treasury tonight after all?" Though still whispering, his voice grew a little louder and they had to wave downwards to make him stop. He was practically bouncing up and down in excitement, "I thought that was the case, that's why I found my kit again." He produced from a pouch a rolled up cloth that appeared to have several metal implements inside of it.

It took Zerek a moment to realize what it was, but when he did, he smiled. "A lock picking kit?"

"Yeah," Endel beamed. "It was right where I hid it back when I first came to the castle. I'm pretty good at hiding things."

"Good job," Laira grinned and reached out to scruff up Endel's hair. "I'm glad you came prepared."

"Indeed," Sorin replied, a little less critical. "We can get started right away. What's the best way into the castle?"

“There’s six small entrances all around, almost all of them guarded,” Endel shrugged. “But the guards are spread pretty thin right now, so they don’t keep guards standing at a single door at all times, they rotate.”

“So we should be able to get into one of them when it’s unguarded,” Laira nodded.

“What about the one by the gardens?” Zerek suggested. “Even with their leaves falling, the bushes should provide us with more cover, as long as we don’t step on the leaves.”

“Yeah,” Endel nodded in agreement. “And they actually sweep the leaves every day. We should go in there.”

Zerek looked around for any nearby guards, and then was about to stand up and lead the way, but then he stopped himself and looked again at Endel. “The guard rotation has changed since I left. Are you more familiar with it?”

With a confident smirk, Endel didn’t even answer, he just rose up and led them towards the gardens. They did not take a direct route, and in fact it took them twice as long to get to the gardens than he expected, but he trusted in his young friend’s knowledge and abilities.

When they finally reached the gardens, Zerek was actually surprised that almost all of the leaves on the bushes and trees were gone. When he had left, they were still all vibrant oranges and reds and golds, and had only just started falling off regularly. But now, everything was barren, ready for the first snowfall. He’d heard that winter came earlier for Archanon than much of the rest of the kingdom, because of how it was nuzzled up against the mountains, but he still wasn’t prepared for just how fast everything changed.

A single guard stood at the entrance, an entrance that Zerek had only used a couple of times. They stood at the outer edge of the garden, a peaceful sanctuary laden with stones surrounding flower beds, bushes, and trees in grassy patches. Warm, yellow-white everlasting torches lit up the entire

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

garden, making it beautiful even at night. It was idyllic and serene, and he suddenly realized how much he was going to miss them, now that he no longer worked at the castle.

Then again, I might find myself in the dungeon after tonight, he suddenly thought. His heartbeat doubled again, and his palms became sweaty despite the cold breeze that swept through the grounds. He saw the castle guard wrap his arms around himself and visibly shiver in the torchlight.

After another few minutes of waiting and watching, they heard the guard curse the gods. He looked around, and then marched away from the door, cursing just loud enough for them to hear, but not so loud that they could understand what he said.

At first Zerek panicked, since the guard was heading in their direction. However, only a few dozen feet to their left was an entrance and a path that led towards the guard shack in the back, and that was the path the guard took.

Once the guard was out of earshot, he noticed Sorin relax. “We’re in luck,” Sorin whispered. “I think tonight’s going to be the first snowfall. This wretched cold may have just saved us a longer wait.”

Shivering even under his black cloak, Zerek wasn’t sure about the use of the word luck, but never-the-less, he was tired of waiting, and of imagining what would happen if they were caught.

Endel slowly edged up a bit to look over the bushes for any other approaching guards. When none were apparent, he motioned for them to follow, and led them to the same path the guard had just used. Once inside of the gardens, they stuck to the outer edges, hiding in as much of the shadows as they could, until they finally reached the door.

When Endel tried to pull the latch, it quietly clicked against the lock. He immediately pulled out his kit and unrolled it on the ground, finding the appropriate tools with practiced ease, and began working on the door.

“Hurry,” Sorin suddenly whispered urgently. The door was in a recess in the wall and they were covered by the bushes nearby, but a quick glance through the bushes revealed movement against the backdrop of a torch in the opposite direction of the guard shack. Another guard was coming.

Endel seemed to ignore Sorin’s urgency, slowly and methodically working his craft, his tongue sticking out just a little. Suddenly there was another quiet click, and a broad smile washed over Endel’s face. He pulled the tools out of the keyhole and pulled the latch, and the door quietly and gracefully opened inward.

As Sorin and Laira rushed in past him, Endel rushed to put away his tools and roll up his kit, with Zerek resting a hand on his shoulder to remind him of the urgency. He could hear the new guard’s boots clicking on the stone, and knew they were moments away from being discovered.

Finally Endel had collected his kit, and they rushed in, Sorin closing the door quietly behind them. They all exhaled in relief, and remained a moment to allow their heartbeats to slow.

When his heart no longer thundered in his ears, Zerek looked around to get his bearings. He had a general idea of where they were in the castle, but there had been so many additions over the centuries, so many rebuilds, that it was a maze, and the only path he knew was to the Allied Council Chambers and the throne room. They definitely didn’t want to go there, even if it was empty.

It was up to Endel. The boy stowed his kit in his belt, and then started to lead them down the corridor, Sorin right behind him.

Fearing that someone would see and recognize him, Zerek began to pull up the hood of his cloak as he followed, but Laira stopped him with a firm hand. She leaned over and whispered, “It’ll block your peripheral, and you might miss something. Leave it until you really need it.”

Feeling himself blush a little at his mistake, he nodded to her and let the hood fall back down. She stayed beside him for a little ways, but as they had to line up at the first intersection with a planned

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

and practiced routine, they had to go single-file and one at a time, each person checking around the corner before proceeding across the intersection.

They passed further into the castle before they came to a turn, and that's when Zerek realized they were headed for a set of stairs. Was the treasury up or down? He had never asked Endel. *Don't be down*, he thought anxiously, thinking that if they had to climb to a higher floor, there was a potential to find a window to escape if they were spotted. Below ground, they might be trapped easier...

And of course, Endel led them downwards, the steel, spiral staircase creaking a little in its age.

He heard Sorin whisper a complaint about Endel not finding a stone staircase to go down, but Zerek wasn't aware of any stone staircases, except for those at the main entrance. Any staircase that led up or down were either made of wood or metal, either of which would make noise.

Laira nudged Zerek forward to follow behind Sorin, her alert eyes darting back down the corridor and up the stairwell to ensure they would not be caught unawares from behind. Thankfully they made it down to the bottom, which was surprisingly only one level, and began to enter into a part of the castle Zerek didn't even know about.

The ceiling was much lower down there, the walls closer, and they were forced to continue single-file. How were they supposed to evade guards? Thankfully, they never encountered one. As they slowly moved further along, pausing at each intersection and corner to carefully peak around, Zerek felt more and more relaxed.

Maybe, just maybe, they would make it through this. Maybe they could do this.

They came to a stop in front of an old wooden door with a metal handle, Endel raising his hand up for them to be quiet. Slowly, he tried the latch, and it opened with ease. It was in that moment that Zerek saw the taut, worried looks on Sorin and Laira's faces. Whereas Zerek was feeling better about their intrusion into the castle, the others looked far worse, to the point that Laira's hands even shook a little.

They followed Endel into what appeared to be an unlit, unoccupied office, with a desk at the opposite end and several unlit candles.

After they were all inside, Endel only partly closed the door, leaving just enough of a crack to let in torchlight from the corridor. Zerek felt his tension returning now, the shadows in the room giving the worry on Laira's face a sharper voice.

"This doesn't feel right," Sorin suddenly whispered.

Endel turned to face them, but with the only light source at his back, Zerek could not make out his expression. "What doesn't feel right?" he asked quietly.

"Where are all of the guards?" Laira asked. "Even this close to midnight, there should be more patrolling the castle."

Endel glanced over his shoulder, and then back at them. "Huh...you're right," he nodded. "Every time I've ever come down here..." His voice suddenly fell silent, and he looked out into the hallway. A moment later, Zerek heard them too, distant voices.

Zerek felt as if he were terrified to move even an inch, while Endel closed the door to just a sliver. They waited, listening intently, but the voices never grew closer, and after a few minutes, they stopped.

When his lungs began to burn, Zerek realized he was holding his breath in, so he let it out as quietly as he could, and gulped in another breath. Endel opened the door just a little bit more, peering out into the hallway, before he shook his head.

"I think that was the guards down by the treasury," he whispered without looking at them.

When he turned back to them, Zerek looked at Laira, a sliver of light from the door piercing over her right eye. Her expression was very dark, and the foreboding sense he felt inside twisted his stomach into a knot.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

When she noticed Zerek staring at her, she shook her head, the column of light dancing across her facial features. “This doesn’t feel right,” she whispered.

“Agreed,” Sorin replied, edging closer to the door to peer out over Endel’s head. “But what can we do? We’re so close, Laira.” He looked at her, tilting his head to one side. “Closer than we’ll probably ever get again. We have to do this.”

“And if it’s a trap?” she asked.

The idea of that induced a small panic in Zerek, his heart racing yet again, and sweat starting to bead on his forehead. He’d lost everything once, and if he was caught, he would lose it all again. He imagined being imprisoned in a dungeon, the close walls, the low ceiling, and the stale, cold air. It would be like being in the mines again, only this time with no escape.

Yet even as he thought that, he realized something else, and voiced it in a whisper. “Then it’s too late already, and we may as well try.”

Everyone paused and stared at him, Laira’s face visibly incredulous even with only a sliver of light shining upon it. He nodded to her, hating himself for saying this, dreading the reality that it meant. “If they know we are coming, then it’s too late. We’ve broken into the castle, they can already send us to jail for that. If they know we’re here, then they’ll be guarding the exits anyway.” He shrugged, forcing the welling lump in his throat back down into his stomach. “So why not go for it?”

Even in the shadows, he could see the smile draw across Sorin’s face. “Huh...sounds like something I would have said years ago.”

Laira smirked, “Or something I’d say now.” She looked at him and reached a hand out for his. Her hand was cold and clammy, just like his, and he realized just how terrified she was. He could feel the quick, hard pulse through the palm of her hand, almost matching his.

The fear began to fall away, and he felt exhilarated for what came next. The moment he had dreaded was upon them, and as he looked at Endel, waiting for the young boy to say whether or not he was in, Zerek felt something he had not felt in such a long time.

Freedom.

Whatever happened next, it was because of his choice.

After a moment, Endel nodded. "Okay, I'm in. Let's do it." Looking to Laira and Sorin, he asked, "Do you think you can find your way out?"

Sorin shrugged, and replied, "It won't be easy, this place is a maze. But I'll figure it out."

"We'll be fine," Laira smiled at Endel, but squeezed Zerek's hand.

Sorin gently nudged Endel aside and opened the door a little more, listening. "We should go now, then."

Suddenly the excitement was replaced with fear, but a different kind of fear. Not for his own well being or his own future, but for the woman who stood beside him. Without thinking about what he was doing, he suddenly threw his arms around her, and held on as tight as he could. She returned the embrace, her arms under his, clutching at his lower back, grabbing his shirt and trying to pull him closer.

"I love you," she whispered into his ear. "And I *will* see you again."

"I love you too," he replied back, his heart ready to burst from his chest with the sudden well of emotions.

After lingering a moment longer, Sorin cleared his throat, and Laira released his tunic and stepped out of his embrace. She did not look at him again, despite how desperately he wanted to look into her eyes one last time, even if it was through the blanket of darkness.

She lined up behind Sorin and tapped his shoulder. He nodded once, and then opened the door wide enough to peak out. After a moment of looking both ways, he walked left, with Laira following.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

When they were out of sight, Endel closed the door almost completely behind them, once again only letting a sliver of light in.

The seconds passed by painfully, and Zerek had to remind himself to breathe. Breathe in, breathe out, counting four seconds for each action, trying not to think about what might happen...

And then the shouts echoed down the corridor. “Hey!”

“Who’s that?”

“Get them!”

There was the sound of boots running across the stone floor, and two shadows passed by the door, nearly making Zerek jump out of his skin. Two more shadows passed by a moment later, the sound of boots echoing into silence.

After several agonizing seconds, or minutes, or hours, Zerek wasn’t quite sure, Endel exhaled slowly. “Okay. Let’s go!”

He swung the door open and peeked his head out, looking both ways, and then looking back at Zerek with a smile. “Clear,” he whispered, waving for Zerek to follow.

Swallowing the lump in his throat once again, as Endel disappeared around the corner, Zerek followed, trying not to let his friend get too far away.

It was only a couple hundred feet to the T-intersection, which Endel stopped just short of, leaning up against the left wall. Zerek stopped just beside him, trying desperately to become a part of the wall as they waited a moment and listened. Endel then looked down, and whispered, “Whoops.” Zerek also looked down, and suddenly realized that the shadows from a torch behind them cast their shadows into the intersection.

He looked at Zerek, shrugged, and then peeked around the corner. Zerek held his breath a moment, but Endel sighed in relief. “No one stayed behind. We’re good.”

Without hesitation, Endel hurried around the corner, Zerek almost forgetting to follow. They finally reached the door, which was about two hundred feet down an otherwise dead end, and sprawled out his lock pick kit in front of the door. He began to examine the lock, a frown on his face. "Woh, I've not seen a lot of locks like this."

Zerek panicked a moment, glancing over his shoulder. "Can you pick it?"

When he looked at Endel, the kid was looking at him with a frown, scoffing. "Are you kidding? I can pick anything!" He retrieved two tools from his kit, and immediately set to work. "This one just might take me a minute..."

But he never had a chance to finish. Suddenly the lock clicked, and the door was pulled in away from him, wrenching the tools out of his hand. Before them stood three guards, all of whom were armed. In fact, one had a longsword, which Zerek instantly realized meant a Mage.

The others held their shortswords and shields ready, and in a normal combat situation, they would be better suited to fighting in the small corridors than the Mage. But the Mage had his own advantage, and simply lowered his sword tip to point at them.

"You know what I am," she spoke quietly, as if afraid that if she shouted, she would panic them into a run. She wasn't wrong. "If you run, you won't get two steps away."

"It's over, Zerek," another voice spoke from behind. He turned around slowly, and felt his stomach sink into an endless, black pit. It was Torick Alixton. His once-trainer and friend shook his head. "We know what you were planning. If your friends haven't been caught yet, they soon will be."

He heard Endel whimper beside him, and almost felt like doing the same. He wanted to bolt, but he knew he couldn't make it past Torick, even if he didn't have to worry about the Mage.

They were dead.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

There was nothing for them to do but to surrender. The Mage and Torick kept them covered while the other guards came forward and searched Zerek and Endel. They found nothing on Endel, but they did pick up his lock-picking kit from the floor and stored it.

For Zerek, however, there was his dagger, and he tried to stop the guard from unslashing it from his belt. The guard, who neither knew Zerek nor appeared to care, shoved him back against the wall and pressed his forearm against his neck.

“Try it, thief, I beg you,” the guard growled in his face.

That took the fight right out of Zerek. The guard called him a thief, and it was at that moment when he realized that was exactly what he was now. He was caught, and would forever be branded a thief. His life was over.

After the guard secured his dagger, Zerek and Endel were bound by enchanted shackles and marched through the belly of the castle. He was deathly afraid of what was coming, because he knew that dungeons were almost always underground, and he thought they were being taken straight there. Once in, he imagined there would be no possible escape.

But then something unexpected happened. The guards brought them to a wider spiral staircase and marched them back up to the ground floor. At first Zerek was disoriented, the underground level having a completely different layout from the ground floor, but then he realized where they were.

The guards had brought them up near the front of the castle. Near the throne room. Moments later, as they continued their shameful march through the castle, Zerek realized that the throne was their destination.

Was the King still awake at this hour?

They were marched in through one of the many side doors to the throne room, but aside from a handful of guards standing between the statues, it was empty. The King was not yet present.

They were brought before the throne, and forced to their knees by two very rough blows to the backs of their legs, but aside from that, nothing happened. No other doors opened, no one else came or went, they were simply left there, the guards that had caught them standing all around them, ready to pounce.

“What’s going on?” Zerek finally asked.

One of the guards bearing shields moved as if to backhand Zerek, and he flinched, ready for the blow. “Silence, whelp,” the guard spat at him.

“Hey,” Torick stepped between Zerek and the guard. “There’s no need for that!”

When Zerek glanced up at the two, the guard looked ready to retort, but clearly Torick outranked him to at least some degree, and he backed down. He felt relieved at Torick’s support, but when his former friend turned to look down at him, the disappointment on his face made Zerek’s spirits sink right back down into the depths of despair.

“You were followed,” he sighed, shaking his head. “When you came back here to talk to Endel, you were followed by Chessick, and he overheard your conversation.”

A giant frown crossed over Zerek’s face, and he had to look at Endel questioningly. It was the look of recognition on Endel’s face that somehow sparked his own memory, and he looked back up at Torick. “Wait, the other messenger that you trained?” he asked, incredulous.

Torick nodded curtly, “Yes. He came and reported it directly to me.” Torick shook his head slowly, looking down at the ground with a look of barely contained anger. “I didn’t believe him. I defended you. But I also knew I had to report his claim to the Captain, who then brought it up to the King.”

Torick shook his head, “He didn’t believe it either, until he remembered that there had been a woman that had helped you fight off the orcs. What were you doing out after dark? What were you doing by the wall? Why didn’t you tell anyone? The pieces started to click into place.”

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

As Torick spoke, the pit in Zerek's stomach grew, and he bowed his head slowly. He realized then that from the very start of his time in the castle, he had been breaking the rules. Going off to look for Laira during his delivery runs, sneaking out of the castle at night, running across roof tops...

He didn't belong in the castle. Maybe he never had. He was just as discontent in the castle as he had been in the mines.

Not knowing what else to say, he started to utter out an apology, knowing how insignificant it would be. But at that moment, the doors behind the raised throne clicked and groaned open, and King Beredis strode in, wearing only the bare minimum of regality, obviously having been awoken.

He did not look happy.

In fact, as he walked around the steps that led up to the throne, he glared down at Zerek and Endel, both of whom could do nothing more but stare down at the ground, avoiding his eyes. When he stopped before them, Zerek stared at the King's fur slippers, examining every detail, trying not to think of what he had just done, nor of the punishment ahead of him.

For what felt like ages, and a thousand pounding heartbeats, the King simply stared down at them, his arms folded in front of him. Zerek risked glancing up towards him once, but immediately looked down, feeling his shame weigh his head down.

When King Beredis finally spoke, it was in his booming court voice, echoing in the largely empty throne room. "Is this how you repay the kindness I have shown you?" Zerek didn't know how to reply, and simply kept his head down, waiting for more.

However, more lecture did not come, and that somehow was worse. The disappointment and betrayal in his voice was more than enough. Enough to make him wish he was a bug that could fly out the window, far away from Archanon.

"Sire," Endel squeaked. "We, umm..."

The King glared down at Endel, and that silenced him after an audible gulp. He once more looked down upon Zerek, and asked, "Why?"

Zerek stuttered for a moment, trying to find the words to answer, but having difficulty even forming coherent thoughts. "We had to find proof, my Lord," he shook his head. "I knew the Prince was hiding the kingdom's crisis from you, and wanted you to know. Wanted everyone to know, he's a..." He stopped short of directly insulting the Prince, realizing that he was already on shaky ground.

After a long pause, the King shook his head slowly. "Do you truly think there is anything that goes on in my castle that I do not know about?"

Feeling his stomach suddenly drop, he looked up at the King, meeting his eyes for the first time. "Sire? You...you knew about the treasury?"

Sighing, the king unfolded his arms and nodded once. "Yes. I knew that my son had emptied our treasury, and that was why he had created so many new taxes."

Ones which the King had subsequently repealed upon his recovery, Zerek realized. Which only hurt the situation more. But then why had he pushed so hard to rebuild the city, and send aid and support to Daruun?

The answer was self evident, he suddenly realized. To restore faith in the throne. To restore hope. To give people something, *someone* to believe in again.

Could he keep the kingdom from falling into complete financial ruin? Wouldn't the people lose confidence in the throne if they found out it was completely broke?

He no longer could decide if trying to expose the throne's lies was right or wrong. Part of him detested that the King was flat-out hiding it from the kingdom, flat out lying to everyone. Yet he also couldn't help but wonder if there really was a correct solution.

Was that even possible? For a situation not to have a right answer, a solution that was morally true but also served the people?

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

Unfortunately, he would have a very long time to think about it. The King stepped away, climbing up two steps towards the throne, before he turned around and looked down upon them. “Regardless of your intention, you both have betrayed my trust, and broken multiple laws. I have no choice but to imprison you, until such time that I deem your sentence adequate.” A sense of complete emptiness overcame Zerek, and he nearly fell over as the reality suddenly set in. “They are not to be released unless I order it,” he added, speaking to his guards. “Where are their friends?”

No one spoke at first, and no other guards had joined them. “I assume the rest of our guards are still attempting to capture them,” Torick volunteered.

King Beredis sighed and nodded. “Very well. Take these two to the city dungeon immediately. Once their friends are captured, do the same with them.” He shook his head, looking down again at Zerek, before he turned his head to the side. “I do not wish to see them ever again.”

The two guards with shields stepped up to them and gruffly lifted them up off of their knees, and began to shove them towards the side entrance they had come in. Zerek felt the dread and emptiness overcome him, and realized that he had done the very thing that so many others had done to him in recent days.

It was because of that realization that he tried to stop, and called out, “Your Majesty!”

King Beredis turned his head towards him, but did not actually look at him. The guard behind him stopped shoving just long enough for Zerek to say what he had to say. “I truly am sorry. You took me in when I had nowhere else to go, and for that, I am forever in your debt.” He bowed his head and closed his eyes, the burning of tears suddenly blurring his vision. “Thank you...”

While the King still didn’t look at him, he did nod his head slightly forward, an acknowledgement of what Zerek had said. After that, the guard began to shove him forward again, and they were through the door.

Jon Wasik

Zerek clenched his fists, trying desperately to hold back the sudden flood of anguish that he felt inside, the tears threatening to overtake him. The reality was setting in like a stone slab, etching forever a mark in his heart.

He walked in a daze, Endel beside him sniffing and moaning, unable to hold his tears back. It very nearly broke Zerek, as further guilt loomed over his heart. Endel, his first and only real friend after the war began, had lost his home and his life, all because Zerek had used his friendship to convince him to help them.

His friend deserved better. Even though he had felt truly alive tonight for the first time since...well, ever, it hadn't been worth it to hurt his friend. To betray his King.

While he hadn't paid much attention to where they were going, he suddenly realized that they weren't going to the tiny castle dungeon he had heard about. They were going out one of the side entrances of the castle, no doubt headed for the much larger city dungeon he knew to be in the Red District.

Where the worst criminals were taken for long-term imprisonment.

Once outside, the chill of the winter air nipped at him, and a front of clouds were just moving overhead, throwing up a strong gust of wind. Sorin had been right, the first snowfall was coming tonight, perhaps at any minute.

Would it be cold in the dungeon? Did they light fires to keep the prisoners warm, or did they have to huddle together for warmth? Did the city dungeon even have a communal cell, or were they all tiny, individual cells? What if one of the other prisoners decided to attack him for his clothes, or just for fun?

His mind raced with terrible possibilities as they walked down the avenue, down the hill, and finally through the gate into the rest of the city. It was quiet in the dead of night, well past midnight by now, he wagered. How long had they stood before the throne, waiting for the King to be awoken?

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

For that matter, why had the King ordered to be personally awoken? Was it because of the personal interest he had taken in Zerek? Had the King just given Zerek a chance to redeem himself, but he had failed? He realized he could have betrayed the thieves, told the King exactly where to find them. Did the King or the city guard even know about what was essentially a guild of thieves?

It hadn't even crossed his mind when he was there. Even if it had, he never would have done so. He knew there were criminals that were horrible people and deserved the punishments they received. But the ones he had seen, down in the sanctuary, they weren't horrible people, intent on killing, maiming, or otherwise hurting others.

However, there were plenty of bad ones out there. Many bandits had attacked the mining camps throughout his life, and they never hesitated to hurt others, even kill others when it suited their purpose. They only cared about themselves.

So how could he tell the good ones from the bad?

Not like it'll ever matter, he thought. I'll never be released from prison...

No sooner had that thought crossed his mind, than did he see a brief flash of movement. He looked up at the rooftop where the movement had come from, certain he had seen something. His heart fluttered for a moment, realizing that, at this time of night, there was only one thing that was likely up there.

Unless it had just been a bat flying overhead. That was entirely possible.

But...what if Laira and Sorin had gotten out? What if they were following them, ready to spree them at any moment?

Endel looked around, at the two shielded guards, at Torick, and at the Mage. One Mage, three soldiers. Could just Sorin and Laira manage to go up against such experienced soldiers?

If it hadn't been for the breeze, it would have been completely silent. The only illumination was the everlasting torches that lined the street, all of the windows in the buildings were dark. Was that breeze enough to conceal their movements?

He looked at the guards again. Most of them didn't pay attention, but Torick noticed him looking, and frowned down at him. Zerek looked away, feeling his face grow warm. *Please don't look up, please don't look up, please don't look up.*

However, if Torick had become suspicious, he didn't have time to figure out what Zerek was hiding. All of a sudden, every single torch in their immediate area went out. How, he didn't know, they weren't supposed to be able to be put out without the proper enchanted tool.

He came to a sudden stop and reached out to grab onto Endel, whose cries had long ago silenced to an occasional snuffle. "What's going on?" one of the guards asked in a panic. What sounded like a small wooden box falling and breaking to pieces caught his attention, and he imagined all of the guards looked in the direction of the noise, as did he.

And then the brightest flash he had ever seen suddenly lit up the street, leaving a bright afterimage in his vision. The sound of rushing feet, and of multiple thuds, echoed in the empty avenue, and suddenly hands grabbed him and began leading him...somewhere. He had lost all sense of direction, and he still couldn't see what was going on.

Panic was quickly setting in, but then a sweet, beautiful voice spoke to him. "It's okay," Laura said, "Just hold my hand and don't let go!"

The familiar shape of her hand was suddenly in his, and he grasped for dear life, trying to blink away the flash. The afterimage was quickly fading to orange, and then to brown. Laura tugged him along until they ran together.

Just like they used to do.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

He stumbled a few times, until the brown spot in his vision faded enough to where he could see Laira ahead of him as she pulled him through the streets. He became more confident in his steps, the rest of the city's everlasting torches still lit up outside of where they had been rescued. When Laira no longer had to pull him along, she looked back at him, smiled, and then picked up the pace.

Looking behind him, he saw Sorin running after them, with little Endel in his arms.

And not a single guard in pursuit.

He turned ahead again, realizing he had better pay attention to where they were going. "Please tell me you guys didn't kill..."

A lump formed in his throat when he thought of Torick, a guard just doing his job, dead on the side of the street. But Laira looked at him with an incredulous look. "Are you kidding? Of course not! We don't murder, Zerek. That's one rule we won't break for anything."

Feeling relieved, he squeezed her hand, unsure if she could feel it as they raced through the streets.

Torick was alive, and they were safe now.

At least, as safe as fugitives could be.

When morning dawned on the To'kar encampment, Arkad's wounds had long since been bound, but the pain remained just as strong. Tana and the human, Amaya, had done their best to patch him up, but his right eye was forever blinded. His entire face was a mess from the battle against Orinda, but that was not uncommon for orc soldiers. They were not meant to look pretty.

They only knew that the sun had risen because the pitch black of night had given way to a dull, gray haze. The rain continued to pour down upon the camp, and small rivers had formed and washed away some of the huts. Lightning still thundered all around them, but its frequency had decreased considerably.

Jon Wasik

The camp was already being disassembled, a difficult task in the weather, but orcs were industrious when they needed to be. It would only take a couple of hours, and then they would begin their journey southeast.

Now, however, there was a different matter to attend to. At the southern end of the camp, in the clearing near the forest, the humans that had found their encampment last night had gathered, along with Tana and Amaya.

It was an unusual sight for him, to see so many humans standing across from him, but not as enemies.

Nor were they allies, he realized. He wasn't sure what to consider them.

While the newcomers were gathered in a cluster, Amaya stood apart from them, facing Tana and Arkad.

She looked at them awkwardly, the rain plastering her black hair to her head, her leather armor drenched. He regarded her curiously with his one good eye, ignoring the pain that he felt as the rain drenched the bandages on his wounds. Never had he considered hair on another species to be attractive, but then orcs rarely interacted with outsiders.

Knowing that this human had saved Tana, had saved his camp, from another human...suddenly she didn't look so hideous.

Amaya caught him staring, and raised an eyebrow. He simply continued to stare, not willing to avert his eyes, not willing to say anything. He had nothing to say to her at the moment.

The human's raised eyebrow slowly lowered, and she shifted uncomfortably at the awkward silence. Finally, she looked to Tana and nodded, before turning to face her people.

She began by stating, "The orcs of the To'kar tribe are not our enemies. Their shaman does not wish to harm humans, but instead wishes to coexist peacefully. Therefore my orders stand, unless rescinded by the King himself. No one is to reveal the existence of this tribe to anyone, nor where their

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

camp is.” He noted, with a slight smile on his face, that she did not mention where the To’kar would be going. In fact, she was the one who had suggested that. It was the best thing they could do to ensure their safety and their future.

Amaya then nodded to the female Wizard. “Take us home, Nia.”

Without a word, the Wizard turned west and planted her staff in the ground, a flash of bright light illuminating the area. A moment later, a blue-white wall stood a dozen feet in front of her. Arkad didn’t know where the Wizard would take them, but he didn’t care, as long as it was far away from his people.

As the other humans began to file one by one through the portal, Amaya turned back to them. “Thankfully all but the Wizard are subjects of my Kingdom and are honor bound to follow my orders. I do not think there will be any trouble keeping your existence a secret.”

Tana bowed to her, a smile stretched across her face. “Thank you, Amaya. I am glad to have trusted you.”

Amaya smiled, a look that Arkad found unusual. He had never seen humans smile before. Not like that, anyway.

“I wish for you a fair journey,” she nodded. “Or, at least as fair as can be in this weather.”

Tana laughed a little, “Indeed. Same to you.”

Amaya turned to Arkad and nodded. “General. It...” She hesitated as she searched his face, as if looking for an answer. “Well, it has been an honor.”

Surprise welled up within him, and he found himself not knowing what to say or do. Falling back on old tradition, he raised his fist to his chest and nodded to her. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

Without another word, she turned and walked away. All of the other humans had gone through the portal, which left only Amaya and the Wizard. Amaya stopped by the Wizard and looked at her,

pausing just long enough for the Wizard to give her a warm smile. Amaya then preceded the Wizard in, and moments later, the Wizard followed, the portal closing behind her.

Arkad and Tana looked to each other, and then began to walk back into the camp together. They observed the ongoing work as Wastelands and darksteel orcs worked together to bring down the surviving huts and pack the materials for transport. There were no qrishags in the camp, so transporting the materials would mean each and every orc would have to carry materials on their back.

“How are the ones you brought back handling their new situation?” Tana asked.

He felt a sense of pride grow within him, and he smiled down at her, thankful that she walked on his left side so that he did not have to crane his neck around to see her. “They are my soldiers, and they follow my orders. Furthermore, your speech following our arrival has inspired them. I believe they will follow the two of us without question.”

“I am glad to hear that,” she nodded. “Though I know that some of our future, and how we get there, is uncertain. There may be very dull times ahead in which soldiers will feel less than useful, but I will be relying upon you to keep them well trained and prepared for the war to come.”

Arkad felt a surge of energy inside of him, a hint of the blood rage that he felt. If Tana was right, there would come a day when he would be able to avenge his people against the ones who drove them out of their home and slaughtered his people.

But there was more to what he wanted than revenge. He wanted answers. Where did Klaralin get the darkened steel armor that his soldiers wore? He could not imagine even the most powerful Wizard being capable of summoning such weapons and armor in the numbers he did, so he believed someone else must have crafted them for Klaralin.

As useful as the armor was, it also reminded him a little too much of the armor that the enemy invaders had worn. He hadn't cared at the time that Klaralin had given it to his people, and he should

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

have. Perhaps it was the old Shaman's power over him that had made him ignore the obvious similarities.

Suddenly he was aware that Tana was staring up at him. He looked down at her, realizing that he had gone completely silent in his introspection. She reached out a hand and grabbed his forearm, bringing them to a stop.

"Will you be okay?" she asked, her brow creased in concern. She reached up to gently touch his cheek just below his bandaged right eye.

He felt uncomfortable and uncertain at first by her sudden show of affection, but the touch felt too soothing to ignore, and he let her hand linger. After a moment of staring into her eyes, he nodded. "I will be." He shrugged and added, "I may not be as effective on the battlefield in the future, but I can still lead my soldiers, and I will train around my new weakness. I will not fail you."

Tana chuckled, shaking her head as she withdrew her hand. "You are definitely very much a soldier, Arkad."

"No," he shook his head. When she frowned up at him, he smirked a little, "I am a General. And no wound will ever take that from me." He realized that if he had ever doubted that before, the way his soldiers had reacted to his broken form stumbling through the portal last night told him that was so. They still looked up to him, even knowing that a scrawny, powerless whelp had wounded him so gravely.

He was still their leader. And he always would be.

She nodded, and began walking again, with him joining her seconds later. "What do you think will happen now that you've killed Orinda?" she asked.

Arkad scratched at his chin, just beneath the small cut that Orinda had sliced open on it. "I gave that a great deal of thought last night." He didn't say what he thought next, *when I wasn't focused on the pain*. "I believe Orinda influenced the old Shaman. Whispering poison into her ear. That may be why the Shaman took us down such terrible paths."

Jon Wasik

Tana looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "You feel sympathy for the old Shaman?"

Arkad shook his head vigorously, "No. No, she betrayed our people. She deserves the death that will come to her at the hands of the humans. However, I do believe that without Orinda there to poison her mind anymore, she may face that death with greater honor than she otherwise might have."

After a moment of silence, Tana once again looked at him curiously. "Is an honorable death really so important?"

He brought them to a stop and looked out over the camp around them. "When one has not led an honorable life, then yes, it is important. But," he said, pausing to look down at her. Somehow, through all of the pain, he managed to smile at her. "An honorable life is far more important."

She stared back at him for a moment, before a broad smile drew across her face.

He looked again out at his people...at *his* people, and nodded. "It's what they deserve..."

Amaya fidgeted anxiously, absently rubbing at the metal pommel of her sword. She stood inside of the throne room, the ancient statues staring down upon her. The King was in session with the Allied Council, along with Draegus Kataar, as they were being briefed on the final outcome of the battle against the orc army. The battle she had missed.

What was she going to tell him? Would she tell him the truth, that she had actually allowed Arkad to live, and that there was a tribe of orcs friendly to them that she wanted them to protect? Would he allow that secret to be kept? Or should she not tell him at all, say that she failed to find the General?

No, she couldn't lie, not to her King.

So she would tell him the truth. And hope that he was the honorable king she believed him to be.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

When the doors behind the throne opened and the King and Draegus stepped in, the look on the King's face was decidedly sour, and she wondered about that. Certainly it couldn't be from the battle report.

She and Nia had first reported back to the battle camp, so that she could see her team and make sure they were okay. However, she was happy to hear that they had already been evacuated, to Everlin no less, so she would have to go see them later. She was happy to hear that every single member of her team had survived, though almost all of them had been wounded.

It was at the camp that she had met up with General Artula and learned that the battle was considered a complete success. The majority of the orc army had been destroyed, with very few prisoners. However, several hundred orcs had escaped, including many of the ones wearing darkened steel armor, and the General suspected they would be ordered by the council to hunt down the last of the orcs.

He had been understandably curious about the result of her mission to eliminate Arkad, but all she told him was, "He will no longer be a problem."

King Beredis wasted no time in crossing the distance between them, and he looked directly at her, anger edging at the corners of his eyes. "I am going to preface my first question with a direct statement to you, Lieutenant," he began, catching her off guard with his harsh tone of voice. "I have dealt with enough betrayal for one day. Do not lie to me."

She almost stepped back, feeling shocked at his opening salvo. After a moment's pause, she bowed to him, "Of course, my King. I would never lie to you." Of course, she wouldn't tell him that she had considered it not two minutes ago.

"Did you or did you not kill General Arkad?"

That was it, then. There must have been a report in the briefing about Arkad's presence in that final battle last night.

Jon Wasik

So she looked at the King with even, emotionless eyes and said, "I did not, Sire."

The King looked surprised at her blunt honesty, and exchanged a curious glance with Draegus. "Then why did the updated report I read only moments ago include you telling General Artula that Arkad was dead?"

"I never told the General that, Sire," she shook her head. The King was about to say something in response, so she added, "I merely told him that the orc General would no longer be a problem. Which was the truth."

After a moment of stunned silence, Draegus ordered, "Explain yourself, Lieutenant."

Though she felt a small amount of fear at how they would respond, she launched into her report, trying to be as brief and succinct as she could without leaving anything important out. She told them about tracking the orcs to the destroyed camp, about finding Kilack and communicating with him, about the meeting with Tana, and Amaya's subsequent abduction, and the deal she worked out with Tana. Finally, she told him of her battle against Commander Din, and her decision to banish him.

The King and her Captain let her finish her entire story without interruption, listening attentively. When she finished, they remained silent for a moment, and she felt herself sweating, despite the cold of the castle.

After what felt like hours of the King staring down at her feet, his arms crossed, his face scrunched in thought, he nodded and looked up at her, unfolding his arms and letting them fall to his sides. "This is all quite unexpected news, Lieutenant. Some might even say you have taken the liberty of your Guardian status far beyond what you should have." She felt her face turn bright red, and fear gripped her heart. Could she lose her status as a Guardian, despite the King's assurances only a few weeks ago? What did that entail? Would they burn the brand off of her wrist? Cut her hand and wrist entirely off? Or worse?

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

However, when the King continued, it was not at all what she expected. “However, what you have done is save lives. Possibly more than any of us can imagine. I do not know if this Tana’s supposed visions can be trusted, but whether or not we ever fight side by side with orcs, we already have endured enough casualties, and we cannot afford to pay Sal’fe to resurrect our fallen Warriors indefinitely. This war needs to end soon, so that our kingdom may recover.”

There was something in how the King’s voice broke a little when he mentioned paying Sal’fe that made her wonder if something else was wrong. She knew that the Wizard King Sal’fe was charging a fee for every single foreign Warrior that he brought back from death with the Staff of Aliz, but was it so much that it was breaking the treasury for Tal? If that was the case for Tal...what of Erien and Saran? Were they in equally dire circumstances?

“Your orders will stand,” the King nodded. He looked over at Draegus and nodded, “Have every Warrior involved brought here so that I can reinforce her orders. This situation will remain an absolute secret for the time being.”

Draegus nodded, but then paused and asked, “What of the Wizard, Nia?”

They looked at Amaya, and she smiled reassuringly. “She promises to keep it secret. She sees the value in finding peaceful ends to conflict.”

The King nodded, satisfied. Then he did something unexpected and stepped forward, reaching out and resting a warm hand on her shoulder. “I also wish you to know that I fully support your actions against Commander Din.” He hesitated and drew in a deep breath, glancing at Draegus. “Although I am certain that General Artula will not be happy about it, Commander Din’s banishment will remain in effect.” He nodded and squeezed her shoulder. “You did well, Lieutenant. Including in your decision not to kill him.”

“Although he is a risk, now,” Draegus piped in. “He knows about the orcs, and could tell the other kingdoms about them.”

“I will inform the Allied Council of his betrayal and subsequent banishment,” the King stepped back, releasing her shoulder. “He will have no credibility with them if he should survive the Wastelands long enough to reach another kingdom.”

She smiled, feeling her cheeks turn a little red at the compliment the King had given her, and at his support of her. “Thank you, my King.”

“Now,” he sighed, shaking his head, “Unfortunately I must return to the Allied Council.” He grimaced and added, “On an empty stomach, no less. You may consider yourself on leave until your next assignment. I know you must desire to see your team in Everlin.”

A broad smile opened up across her face, and she nodded excitedly. “Indeed!”

Without another word, the King turned and left, leaving her and Draegus alone. Once the King was gone, she looked to her Captain and said, “I know it’s none of my business, but what other betrayal was he talking about?”

Draegus grimaced and closed the distance with her, looking around. “Remember that kid that helped you fight off the orcs at the wall? Zerek?”

She frowned and nodded. “Of course.”

“He broke into the castle last night to steal something.”

Feeling her stomach drop, along with her jaw, she almost stepped back in shock. “What? But, why?”

He shook his head, “It’s not my place to say. However, he is now a wanted fugitive.”

“My gods,” she shook her head. “I can hardly believe it...”

For a moment, they stood in silence as the news sank in. However, a smile suddenly came across Draegus’s face, and he looked at her curiously. “So how does it feel?”

She frowned at him. “Sir?”

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

“You faced your demons and won, right?” He folded his arms and leaned back a little. “How does it feel?”

“Oh,” she felt her face grow a little warm. She thought back to last night, to that moment when she stood over Din, ready to plunge her sword into his chest. Absently, she reached for her sword, somehow feeling reassured by its presence. A reminder of a past that had once consumed her, but now...

“I feel free,” she said at length. “And it feels like a great weight has been taken off of my heart.”

Draegus’s smile broadened, and he clasped her on the shoulder. “I thought so. Listen, I knew Din, knew his skills with a sword. If you defeated him as readily as you say you did...” He shook his head, and finished, “I’m glad you’re on our side.”

Without another word, he turned and followed the King out, back towards the Allied Council. She stared after him, her heart feeling lighter than it had in such a long time. The darkness was gone, and she felt like her old self.

She was free!

After Zerek and the others had returned to the Thieves’ Sanctuary, Sorin took out an enchanted key he had stolen from one of the guards and unshackled Endel and Zerek.

Once they were free and their heart rates had begun to settle down, he and Endel told Sorin and Laira what had happened in the throne room, about what the King had told them.

At first, Sorin scoffed and shook his head. “He’s heading us towards a crisis that can only end in rebellion or civil war.”

Zerek frowned, shaking his head. “Yeah, but getting that book out and making the public aware of just how bad things are could just as easily incite such a civil war.”

Sorin started to retort, but then stopped. He was silent for a long time, but it was Laira who spoke next. "He's right, Sorin. We can't save the kingdom by destroying what hope people have left."

He slouched then, and nodded in agreement. "I guess that's true. I just..." He paused and shook his head slowly. "I believed in the throne once upon a time." Sorin smirked at his own word choice. "But I guess that was a fairy tale."

Shaking his head, the master thief had slunk away to find his bed and get some rest. Zerek then tried awkwardly to apologize to Endel, but the kid wouldn't hear of it. "Even though it turned out to be the wrong thing to do, we still had to try. And...I'll miss the castle, I won't lie." He shook his head, and added, "But this is where I belong. This is the only family I've ever known." He smiled at Laira and then launched himself at her, embracing her in a tight hug. "You're like my big sister."

Then, much to Zerek's surprise, Endel turned to him and launched at him, wrapping his arms so tight around him that he could scarcely breathe. How could such a small kid be so strong?

"And you're my big brother."

A giant well of emotion grew in his chest, and he even felt a little wetness in his eyes after Endel said that. Zerek had never had a brother before, never had any siblings. Just his Father, and Elina.

Elina... He suddenly realized he hadn't thought about her in such a long time.

When Endel left to go find a bed for himself, he and Laira were left alone together. She took him to where she always slept, a small alcove hidden away from everyone else with several blankets laid out on the cold stone floor to act as a mattress. They were torn and shredded, and didn't smell very good, but he didn't care.

They snuggled up under several blankets, clutching to one another as if they hadn't seen each other in years. He wanted to focus on her, but his thoughts kept straying back to Elina, to his Father, to everyone he had known at the camp.

The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 2

He didn't know when he had fallen asleep, or how long he slumbered, but now he lay awake, Laira still in his arms, breathing slowly.

As he lay there, feeling her warmth, gently caressing her back, his mind wandered again. He began to draw parallels from life at the camp to his life at the castle.

Under the rule of the Steward, he had been a virtual prisoner, just as he had been at the camp. He also realized that being a soldier would have been no different. He would have been forced to follow orders, living his life at the beck and call of others. Doing what he wanted was rebellious.

And rebel was what he had done ever since he had come to the city. Sneaking off constantly, meeting up with Laira, and now breaking into the castle.

There was one thing and one thing alone that he missed from the mining camp. Family. Not so much his father, for as much as he missed him, it was beyond just that. It was the fact that everyone at the camp took care of each other. Just like Elina had taken care of him.

He looked out of the alcove they were in, out at the random camps of people spread throughout the underground, abandoned aqueduct. Most everyone was awake and moving about, and he figured it was well past midday, given how late it was when they had returned to the Thieves' Sanctuary

They were like a family to him. Just like the mining camp had been.

Sorin and Laira had no obligation to him or Endel, and yet they had come back to save them. Not just them, but they had gone back and recruited over a dozen other thieves to help in the ambush, to snuff out the everlasting torches, and to take down the guards without killing them.

This was where he belonged, he realized, looking at Laira. This was who he belonged with. Laira, the thieves...they were his family.

She stirred a little at his movement, and he was afraid he had drawn her out of the dream world. But then she clutched at him tighter, clearly awake, but not wanting to leave his arms.

"Can we just stay like this forever?" she whispered.

Jon Wasik

He smiled and wrapped his arms around her tighter. "Why not?" he whispered back. She shifted just enough so that she could look up at him, keeping her cheek on his shoulder. He looked down at her, their noses practically touching. "I'm not going anywhere," he said to her.

The biggest smile he had ever seen drew across Laira's face, and before he knew what was happening, she closed the distance and kissed him.

When she pulled away, she buried her face on his chest, not saying anything, but not having to after that.

But he had to say it. He had told her before, but somehow, today, it felt more important, more real.

"I love you, Laira."

The End

Thanks for reading!