

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 3 “Assault at Ironwood”

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The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

Amaya Kenla almost barreled over from exhaustion as she finally reached the wall surrounding her hometown of Everlin. Night had fallen, so the gate had been closed to ward against vagabonds and other unsavory sorts that prowled the night.

It hadn't been her intention to travel by dark, so she only carried with her a simple steel dagger. Then again, she also hadn't expected to find a small unit of orcs.

With barely any energy left, she began pounding on the wooden door inset into the thick ironwood gates. For a moment, no one responded, and she began to wonder if the city soldiers were asleep. Or perhaps she was too weak from running. Her muscles screamed in protest, but she pounded even harder, until finally the wooden slat opened, and a pair of eyes lit by a torch beamed out at her.

"What do you want?" a groggy male voice replied.

"Please," she breathed, leaning heavily against the door. "Let me in."

The eyes glanced around, life entering them again at the sight of her heavy breathing. "Is something after you?" His voice was a bit stronger, clearer, and obviously worried.

"No," she shook her head, looking into the eyes, hoping she recognized the soldier, or at the very least that he recognized her. For a moment, she was about to tell the guard everything, about the orcs she had found at the lumber camp only a few miles into the forest from Everlin. But then she realized it would mean he would take her before the city's Warrior Commander, Din.

She couldn't bear that. "No," she continued, "but it's dark out there, and I'm unarmed."

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The man sighed in relief, and closed the slat. She heard him lift up the metal bar that secured the door, and then it opened before her. With her legs feeling weak, she gingerly stepped over the rim of the entrance and cleared the door so the guard could close it.

“Thank you, sir,” she gulped a breath and nodded.

He turned to face her and started to ask, “What were you doing out there so...” Then he recognized her. “You.”

A worried grimace crossed her face, and she looked him in the eye. She didn’t recognize him yet, but she saw that he wore only a regular soldier’s armor, not a Warrior’s. That was at least a relief.

“Do I know you?” she asked.

“I’m not surprised you don’t remember me, but I do know you,” he replied. “So the rumors are true, then. You were released. You and your team.”

She nodded once, “Yes. Do you know where they are? They came here only a few hours ago.” It was possible they were all at home by now, but it was more likely that they still celebrated together with their families and friends.

“Barrowmen’s Tavern,” he pointed towards the center of the town. “I hear there’s a big celebration going on there.”

Amaya nodded her thanks and turned to head that way, but the guard placed a hand on her shoulder to stop her. “Hey, just so you know...I think what you did was right. If the rumors were true.” She turned to face him, surprised by his words. “You are a true Warrior. The kind of Warrior we all aspired to be.”

That’s when she remembered who he was. She felt her face flush at the memory. He had trained alongside of her when they were teenagers. Only he had washed out of Warrior training.

“Kellan,” she remembered his name as she spoke it. “I...”

He smiled when she said his name. “I’m glad I made some sort of impression.”

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There was no good response to give him. He had a good heart, and that was why she remembered him. But he was not built to be a Warrior. In fact, she was quite surprised he had even made the cut as a town soldier.

So instead, she nodded and smiled sheepishly, "I am glad to see you found your way in life."

"Yes, I did." He nodded towards the center of town, "Be careful. I've also heard Commander Din is looking for you."

With a renewed grimace on her face, she nodded her thanks and started heading for the tavern. Her pulse still raced, but she wondered if that was from running, or from the thought of seeing Din again. *By the gods*, she thought to herself. *Please don't let him be there.*

Everlin was the largest town in the Southwest corner of Tal, but it still did not take her long to traverse the only stone-paved road into the center of town. The streets were mostly empty now, with only a few of its citizens roaming about.

If she didn't know where Barrowmen's Tavern was, it would have been easy to find from the noise. Normally it was relatively quiet this late, but tonight the first floor was alive with laughter and raised, jubilant voices.

She approached the two story structure cautiously, keeping to the shadows of the neighboring buildings. As expected, there were two figures who sat out on one of the tables in front of the tavern. This time of year it was quite warm at night, so it normally wouldn't seem suspicious. Except that they did not converse with each other, and instead surveyed the area around them constantly.

In fact, after only a minute or two of observation, she noticed a pattern. They would sweep the entire area with their eyes, take a sip of their drinks to keep up appearances, and then repeat. *Amateurs*, she thought.

The front door was the official way in, but it was not the *only* way in, and she absolutely did not want Din to know about her presence in Everlin. With that in mind, she retraced her steps down to

another cross street, and as quickly and quietly as she could, she circled around until she could come at the tavern from behind.

There was a small wooden gate in the back that led to a small stable and chicken coop, from which the owner of the tavern pulled fresh eggs every morning. Keeping a wary eye out for anyone else who might be watching the rear, Amaya passed the stable, where she saw a single horse fast asleep, and up to the back door.

"Please be unlocked," she whispered, and tried the latch. It opened without protest, and she eased her way in. Right into the kitchen. Where a large man with a butcher's knife stood ready.

"Can I help you, miss?" he asked with an edge in his voice. Then his face slackened and the knife lowered. "Amaya?"

"Jerec," she smiled, but didn't dare move another inch. "I'm sorry," she added hastily. "I know I shouldn't come in this way, but..."

"No, you shouldn't," he folded his arms, careful not to cut himself with the knife. "What in the name of the Six are you doing back here?"

"Avoiding Din's men," she grimaced. Would he side with her? She didn't actually know him that well, and had no idea if he was loyal to Din or not.

"Those two out front?" he motioned towards the other side of the building.

"Yes," she nodded, and glanced behind her. The longer she stood in the entrance, the more likely someone would see her. "Can I come in?"

For a long moment, Jerec just regarded her with scrutiny. Her heart rate had slowed, but now she felt it beating harder than ever. "Fine. Come on. But don't ever come in this way again."

With a heaving sigh of relief, Amaya quickly closed the door behind her. Jerec reached past her and secured the lock on the latch. "Thank you, sir," she moved past him. Then she realized she didn't know her way around. "Which way...?"

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Jerec pointed down one hallway out of the kitchen, “Straight through there. Tell your guys they need to start quieting down.”

Nodding her thanks once more, she swiftly moved through the kitchen, into the hallway, and out into the main tavern. Off to her left was the bar, where a young, sleepy looking boy tended. And occupying several of the barstools were two of her team members, Gell and Vin, along with some of their friends and family. She surveyed the room further, and found Elic at the largest table next to his wife and two kids, along with Peren and his daughter.

Elic almost instantly spotted her, and was about to stand, but she shook her head and made her way over. Then Peren saw her, and almost shouted in surprise, “Amaya!”

That caught everyone’s attention in the tavern, and all craned their necks around to look at her. Her eyes shot to the front windows, but the two ‘disguised’ Warriors seemed not to have heard. Thankfully, the rest of everyone’s surprised response at seeing her sounded like nothing more than the continued din of conversation and laughter she had heard from the street.

As she took an empty seat at the table, all of her team clamored around to greet her. Nerina was very clearly drunk, and she stumbled and almost spilled her ale on Amaya.

“I’m glad you came back,” Elic said quietly, or as quietly as he could above the noise. When her eyes met his, however, he recognized the urgency in her. “Something happened.”

“Yes,” she replied, and again glanced out the window. She was ready to curse when she noticed the two Warriors had disappeared. They would no doubt report her presence to the Commander. She wasn’t ready to face him. Not now. So she would have to be quick.

“Do you know that lumber mill down the road?” she asked him.

“You mean Ironwood Mill?” Idalia asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I went there to find a place to stay the night.”

Before she could say more, Peren asked, “Why didn’t you just come here with us?”

Her face burned with embarrassment, but she couldn't bring herself to tell him why. "It doesn't matter," she shook her head. "Orcs have overrun it."

Suddenly all background conversation ceased, and the entire tavern became quiet. Somewhere in the back, she swore she heard Jerec sigh in relief. No one replied for a long time, and she gave them that moment to consider what she had just said.

It even sobered Nerina up a little, who was the first to reply, "Orcs? But how? There's no way they could have gotten this far into Tal. They're at Relkin still, all of them, remember?"

"I think this is bigger than anyone thought," Amaya shook her head. "Think about it. Every single Tal Warrior was mobilized last month to hunt for and defend against Kailar. Every single one of them left for Archanon to defend it. Everything has been in chaos ever since." She glanced out the window, half-expecting Din to have somehow already made his way to the tavern.

Elic nodded thoughtfully, "Our patrols probably haven't all returned to our borders. They could have slipped through. How many did you see?"

She closed her eyes, doing a mental count one last time to ensure she hadn't been wrong. "It looked like thirty or so."

"We should tell the Warriors," Gell suggested. "They can overwhelm the orcs with ease."

"No," she said a little too quickly, and once more felt her face flush. Everyone stared at her. Elic's wife Denora stared hard at Amaya, and seemed to understand what she was about to suggest. "We should attack them."

Her heart went out to the woman when a terrible look of sadness and worry overcame her eyes. Denora had long ago accepted that her husband was a Warrior, but she always worried when he left on patrol. Now Amaya was asking him to attack an orc camp with just the seven of them.

"Are you kidding?" Idalia's husband, Perth, burst out. He was a city soldier, but not because he had washed out like Kellan had. He had chosen it because of his desire to stay at home, to not have to

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leave Everlin on regular patrols. “Orcs aren’t your common bandits, Amaya. Thirty will overwhelm you.”

“Not if we attack at night,” Vin Torik spoke for the first time. He rarely spoke, so when he did, it had the effect of ensuring everyone in the team listened. “If we leave now, we will reach them while they sleep. We can defeat them quietly.”

Amaya nodded, grateful for the suggestion. Orcs were monsters, so she had no qualms about killing them in their sleep.

“What about weapons and armor?” Gell asked. “We left Archanon before we were provided with any.”

She thought about that for a moment, not sure how to answer that. She had her dagger, but she was used to fighting with a longsword. And even if they did catch the orcs by surprise, going without even the most basic armor would be suicide.

“I have my own daggers at home,” Vin offered.

“Yeah,” Nerina suddenly smirked. “And I have a mace at home.” It was a weapon Nerina always liked, but the Warriors did not consider them to be normal Warrior weapons. Usually only soldiers carried weapons other than swords, mostly due to Guild tradition.

Each of her team nodded and spoke of weapons they could use. Elic had his own longsword that had been passed down by his father. Idalia’s husband offered to let her use his own duty sword. Peren had a bow and more than enough arrows, though there wouldn’t be much light at Ironwood, and a short sword.

Everyone looked at Gell finally, who had yet to speak up about a hidden stash of weapons. He blushed and looked down. “Yeah. Well, I’ve always had a thing for battleaxes.”

His reaction seemed suspicious, so she pressed him on it, “Gell?”

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“Okay, so I have about a dozen of them,” he flailed his arms about. “I like axes! Leave me alone.”

She smirked, and as everyone around her laughed, she realized how much she missed that sound. Her team, laughing, enjoying each other’s company. A couple months in a dungeon had a way of wearing thin fast.

She sighed and nodded, “Now all we need is armor.”

It was Peren’s daughter Taya who offered to help with that. “I work in a leatherworker’s shop. I have a key, we could go in and...borrow some.”

“Wouldn’t we need chainmail for this?” Idalia asked.

“No, not if we want to attack quietly,” Amaya smiled. “I think leather armor will do nicely.”

She slowly stood up from the table and looked at each of her team. “Well then. I cannot order you all to do this, as this is not one of the King’s orders. If you are with me,” she looked at each of her six companions, “speak now.”

Nerina, Vin, and Gell voiced their support at once. That was easy, they had no families. Elic, Peren, and Idalia, however, did, and they each looked to their family members. Elic’s wife Denora looked ready tell him to stay, but then she sighed and caressed his cheek ever so lightly. “You must go, my dear. This is who you are. The man I married.”

He took her hand in his, squeezing it slightly, before he stood up and nodded. “I’m with you.”

Peren looked to his daughter for her consent. His wife had died of disease several years ago, but his daughter was old enough to take care of herself, plus she had an uncle and aunt that lived in town. They remained quiet, and awaited Peren’s decision.

Taya, shrugged. “I already volunteered to help you get into the leather shop. You know I’m okay with it.”

Peren laughed, stood, and also nodded his assent.

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“I want to go with you,” Perth said to Idalia. But then he sighed and shook his head. “But I’d just get in your way.”

Idalia rolled her eyes, “You’ve never been in my way.”

He nodded, “I know. But I’m not even half as skilled as you are. You go. We can’t both use my sword, after all.”

She smiled, and wrapped her arm around him. Then she looked at Amaya. “Let’s do it.”

Amaya smiled, realizing her entire team was still with her. That left only one last thing. She looked at Nerina with a raised eyebrow. “You sober enough to do this?”

Nerina looked at her drink, and then reached past Amaya to set it down on the table. “I will be by the time we get there.”

“Excellent,” Amaya nodded. She looked out the window, and swore she saw movement. Her heart leapt, and she felt her hands suddenly begin to tingle. She glanced at them, and hoped they didn’t appear to shake as badly to the others as they did to her.

She was a former Warrior, a seasoned veteran, and the prospect of seeing Din again shouldn’t have affected her so badly. What was wrong with her?

When she looked up again, everyone stared at her curiously. She shook her head to dissuade further questioning and said, “We need to get out of here. Taya,” she looked to the young girl, “will you show us the way to your shop?”

With an energetic smile, Taya stood and began to lead the way out. “Yeah, come on.”

Amaya liked her energy, but knew it would be a few more moments before they could leave. She stepped back and allowed those in her party to say their goodbyes. There were no tears, there were no sobs, just the mournful farewell that they were used to making. It was a part of their way of life.

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It took only moments, but they were precious moments. Once the farewells were said, they followed young Taya out into the darkness.

It hadn't taken long to reach the leatherworker's shop and for everyone to find and get into suitable leather armor. None of it was made specifically for them, like their sets of Guild armor had been, but they were adjustable enough that they made it all work.

After that, everyone went their separate ways to find their homes, and their weapons. Amaya, knowing she had nowhere to go to obtain a better weapon, was left with only the dagger she had bought in Archanon. She felt better in armor, but she much preferred a sword for combat. Perhaps she would have to rely more on channeling magic through the long, slender blade to ensure she contributed to the coming battle.

At first she was hesitant to return to the gate right away. She felt a small amount of guilt in regards to Kellan, but at the same time she knew he never would have made an effective Warrior. However, she also didn't want to leave her team waiting if she did not arrive before they did. Without further hesitation, she made her way to the eastern gate.

Knowing that Din was likely prowling the streets for her by now, she kept to the shadows, and avoided anyone who looked like they might be a part of the Guild. Having to skulk about in her own home town left an unpleasant taste in her mouth, which was further exacerbated by the realization that she hadn't had anything to eat since lunch time.

A rumbling, empty stomach would do nothing for her in combat, certainly not if they were going to rely on stealth. She still had her travelling pack, which she had filled with provisions before Draegus Kataar had ambushed her team with the offer to join the King's Guardians.

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Without stopping, she pulled her pack around and took out a piece of bread. It was beginning to get hard, but it was still edible. While still wary of her surroundings, she began to nibble on it as she walked.

Finally, she came to the square in front of the gate, and stopped by a building. Kellan stood by the gate entrance, his arms folded and his head bowed down, as if he were thinking very hard about something. Knowing all too well how boring the night shift was, she decided to keep him company.

Glancing about one last time, she began to walk out into the small square. About halfway across, Kellan heard her footsteps and looked up. Panic crossed his face, panic and regret, and she stopped cold in her tracks. "I'm so sorry," he hastened to speak.

Before she could ask what he was sorry about, she felt it more than anything else. A magic that felt familiar to her, a familiarity that once elated her, but now made her stomach twist into a knot.

From the gatehouse emerged a figure, followed by two more that flanked the first. The only man in the world she hoped to never, ever see again.

Uric Din.

"Hello, Amaya," he spoke, his voice soft and cold.

She said nothing. She couldn't. Her entire body felt numb. She wasn't sure if she should attack him, regardless of his two guards, or run away, or scream, or do anything. Or nothing.

He stepped closer to her, a towering figure that loomed over all. When he stepped further into torch light, she noticed he had cut his light brown hair since her arrest. Where it used to hang down to his shoulders, it now was only a couple of inches long, and was parted on one side to give him a rather charming, even dashing look. And even in the dim light, she could see his bright blue eyes staring at her.

Those eyes used to inspire her. Now she wanted to rip them out of his skull.

"Nothing to say?" he asked. He took another step towards her, but she stepped back, startled. Her heart was racing, and nothing she did to try to control it worked.

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“I...no,” she shook her head, forcing herself to keep her hand away from her dagger. “I have nothing to say to you.”

He looked genuinely saddened by her reaction, which made her frown and tilt her head to one side. Was he actually happy to see her? Did he actually feel saddened by her anger?

“I know we did not part on good terms,” he shook his head. “But you must understand, I had no choice but to arrest you.”

“Arrest me?” she laughed. “You set me up, you son of a whore.”

His face darkened at that statement. She felt herself smile at that, but then immediately felt guilty. Why did she say that?

“I had no idea what to expect at that camp,” he shook his head, raising his hands up defensively. “I never meant to hurt you, dear. I trusted you to accomplish the mission, I gave it to you because I knew if anyone could do it, you could.”

She shook her head, and backed up a few more steps. No, he hadn’t trusted her. He had to have known the bandits had their families there. He wasn’t an idiot, and he never sent his people into a situation without knowing what to expect. Never.

Right?

He took another step towards her, and she backed up. “Please. Don’t come near me.”

He stopped, and let his hands drop to his sides. “As you wish.”

She shook her head, and then looked at the others. Could she say what she wanted to? Should she? She wasn’t a Warrior anymore. But...wouldn’t it still come back to hurt him? Why did she even care if she hurt him? She hated him, but she was afraid of hurting him.

“I’m glad you were released,” he said.

Somehow that made her blood boil. “You lied to me,” she shouted. “About everything.”

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“No,” he shook his head furiously. “Not everything.” He looked behind him, at his two guards, at Kellan. He took in a deep breath, and sighed. For a moment, he started to move towards her again, but then he caught himself and stopped. The contorted look on his face told her he was wrestling with the same question she was – could he admit openly what she wanted to scream at him about?

Din looked at something behind her, and she heard the crunch of boot steps. She looked over her shoulder and saw Elic coming up behind her. He had his hand on the hilt of his longsword, ready to defend her. He must have heard her shout.

She looked again at Din. He shook his head, steeled himself, and then looked at her with an intense gaze. “My feelings for you weren’t a lie.”

Her jaw clenched, but she felt a tingling in her stomach. She wanted to punch him, and she wanted to kiss him. But she knew that she could do neither.

A lot of time had passed in the dungeon. Time to think back on her past. On the mistakes she had made. She wouldn’t back down this time. She couldn’t.

“Uric,” she started, then stopped. It felt strange to say his name out loud again. “Please. We’ve been pardoned. I can show you the papers if I have to, but you cannot detain me. So just leave me alone.”

His head drooped and his shoulders slouched. She felt her heart ache for him, but she stood her ground. Finally, he nodded. “Very well. I will do as you ask. But,” he looked up at her again. “I did bring you a gift. And seeing as how you’re wearing armor, I think you may need it soon.”

He motioned to one of his guards, who presented him with a sheathed longsword. She recognized it immediately. Her former Guild weapon. Din held it in one of his strong hands easily, and then slowly set it down on the ground, knowing she would never come close enough to take it from him.

“This was yours,” he backed away from it. “So it shall be again, my dear.” He heaved in a deep breath, and then smiled at her. “Farewell.”

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Without another word, he motioned to his guards to follow, and walked off into the night, in the opposite direction of where Amaya and Elic stood. She sensed more than saw Elic step up beside her. A part of her wanted to look at him, to see whether he judged her for what he had just learned, or if he sympathized with her. But she couldn't face him.

So she stepped away from him, towards her old weapon, her old friend. When she stood beside it, she almost couldn't bring herself to pick it up. Why had he kept it? Why hadn't it been destroyed? That's what usually happened to a disgraced Warrior's weapon, it was ceremoniously broken, and then melted down.

Finally, she crouched down and wrapped her fingers around the sheath. The weight felt all too familiar as she stood up. She grasped the grip and slowly drew the sky-blue blade from its sheath. Even in the flickering torchlight of the streetlamps, there was no mistaking that color.

She did not pull it completely out, she merely stared at where the base of the blade met the guard. It held so many memories for her. So much happiness.

So much pain.

Could she keep it? Could she use something that hurt just to hold? The void in her chest told her she should just throw it away, and never look upon it again.

However, when she slid the blade back into its sheath, felt the familiar click as it locked into place, there was no turning back. It was as much a part of her as her arm was, and it felt reassuring to have it back in her grasp.

It belonged with her.

Without another thought, she lashed the sheath to the right side of her belt, and gently rested her hand against it. A sense of warm familiarity coursed through her as she felt its weight on her hip again.

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She looked over her shoulder at Elic, and saw the curiosity in his eyes, and the sympathy. When their eyes met, he slowly approached her. “Are you okay?”

A lump formed in her throat, and a part of her wanted to admit to him that, no, she wasn’t okay. Not even remotely close to okay.

But she was his commander. And that kind of vulnerability had no place in their relationship. She was alone.

“Yes,” she lied with a curt nod.

There was no mistaking the doubtful look he gave her, but she ignored it, and turned back to Kellan. He looked terrified of her, but she knew it was not his fault. With a confidence in her step that she did not feel, she walked up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay.” She squeezed his shoulder lightly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I, umm, I didn’t know, that is, I just couldn’t, I mean...” He stammered, so she smiled and shook her head.

“Stop it,” she patted his shoulder and then let her hands fall to her sides again. “Don’t think on it anymore.” She looked down the street where Din and his guards had disappeared. “Just don’t.”

Before Kellan could say any more, she heard new boot steps echoing in the quiet night. Everyone turned, and saw two more figures emerge into the square, Gell and Vin. A moment later, from another direction came Nerina.

Their troupe was gathering. And in just a couple hours time, they would face an enemy that none of them had ever fought before.

Then she could unleash her emotions.

Zerek was used to hard work, used to pushing himself to the breaking point almost every day. Not that he had ever wanted to, but his father had insisted he do so in order to build his strength early

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in his life. Every day, he had worked at the mines, swinging pick axes, chipping away at the walls, hefting dirt and rock and iron and coal into carts, pushing those carts back and forth, into and out of the mines.

Today, and indeed since yesterday, he found he almost missed those days in the mines. The house steward, Madame Kai as she liked to be called, had made him sit and read. Thankfully he had learned how to read from Elina, when he was a kid. Before his life had ended.

The material was boring. Elina had taught him with stories, histories, tales of the Warriors of Tal and their adventures protecting the kingdom. With Kai, he read about how to address people properly, how to sit properly, how to stand properly. "Proper Etiquette" the Madame had called it.

Then she had quizzed him with practical exercises. Exercises he had failed initially, after which she had quite brusquely corrected him, shoving his lower back forward, tilting his chin up, and slapping his hand every time he spoke without 'proper respect.'

Suddenly he no longer wished to stay in the castle. If this was what was required to serve royalty, to act pompous and haughty just to keep up appearances, he would have preferred living his days in the forests, or on the streets, almost anywhere else.

Worse still, he would no longer be allowed to stay in his own room. As a new member of the serfs or servants or whatever they were called, he was required to stay in shared quarters, in a small building detached from the main castle structure.

It wasn't his first time there, most of his lessons had taken place in that building. However, Kai still insisted on leading him around until she was satisfied he would not cause a ruckus or insult a royal. Her long dress swished about her, a dark plum color that was as colorful a dress as he imagined she ever wore. Whites, bright blues and reds, anything bright, and he imagined she would scoff at it and say "servants are never seen, it is not appropriate."

The sun had set long ago, and one of the moons was just cresting above the mountains. He used to enjoy nights like this when he was outdoors, back at the camp. Back home.

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They entered the servant house and passed through a short corridor, until they came upon one of a few open doors from which candlelight poured out. She knocked on the door frame out of courtesy, but did not enter. When he walked in, he realized why – it was for boys, or men, only, not one single girl was in sight. Kai did not even look inside, but everyone looked at Zerek as he stopped just inside of the frame.

There were several bunk beds lined up along two walls, and the far wall had a wash basin and a few stalls surrounded by cloth where they could relieve themselves in privacy. There was no smell from those stalls, as all of Archanon had running water and a sewer system. The only city in the world with such a system, as far as he knew.

There were a couple of windows, both of which were open to let in the cooling night air. He could smell the warm spring air flow through the bedroom, but he grudgingly wondered what the room might smell like in the winter, when no windows could be opened. To the right of the entrance, he saw an unused fireplace, and was at least thankful they would be warm when winter came.

Zerek looked back to Kai, who looked down her nose at him and nodded. “This is where you will be staying for the foreseeable future. There should be a few open beds, just ask one of the boys to tell you which ones.” She was very curt in how she spoke, almost stern, but he could tell she was weary. He could only imagine how busy she was from sunrise to sunset. It was apparent that she was always on the move, never able to stay on one task for too long before having to take care of something else.

Realizing as much, Zerek decided to show her his learned courtesy, and took a moment to bow to her. “Thank you for providing me with training today, Madame Kai.” He stood up straight and gave her his best fake smile. “I very much appreciate your time.”

The weariness and stern look in her eyes softened for just a moment, and she smiled. “That is much better. There is hope for you yet, young man.” The smile disappeared, and the ‘steward face,’ as he was beginning to call it, returned. “Get to bed quickly. You have another full day ahead of you.”

Again he bowed, "Yes, Madame Kai."

With another small grin, the steward turned with precision and marched off towards wherever she slept. That left Zerek by himself amongst a group of men he didn't know.

Most of them nodded or waved at him, a few even said, "Hello," but they all looked completely worn out, and most were in stark white night clothes and were getting into bed.

One young boy, who had to be the youngest of everyone present, including Zerek, walked over to him with a shy grin on his face. "Hi," he squeaked. The boy had short strawberry colored hair and a face full of freckles, and he seemed genuinely excited to meet Zerek.

"Uh, hello," Zerek replied awkwardly, not sure if he should continue to act all proper or not. "I'm...I mean, my name is Zerek. Zerek Betanil." He extended a friendly hand, an act he had learned from his father.

"Endel Marric," the boy smiled, and took the offered hand. He tried to shake it gruffly, and had a fair bit of strength for someone so small. "You don't have to play all proper here," he shrugged, and retrieved his hand quickly. "We're all dirty here."

Zerek couldn't help but laugh at that statement, but then frowned when the boy appeared to be genuine. "I'm sorry," he shrugged. "I guess...I don't know. I'm just not used to all of this."

"Yeah, you're the one from the mines, huh?" Endel asked, almost bouncing with excitement. "I heard you saw orcs, even fought them! Killed a whole bunch all on your own, right?"

Again Zerek found himself laughing, and even felt embarrassed. "No, um. Just the one." He looked around the room nervously. He wanted to find an excuse to stop talking about it, but then Endel surprised him.

"That's so awesome!" he smiled from ear to ear. "I hear they are huge, and strong, and smell bad. Is it true? How did you kill it? Did you get hurt? Is their blood really black?"

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

The assault of questions made Zerek step back, and thankfully, that seemed to be a queue for the boy. He stopped, and the excitement on his face turned to fear, “Oh gods, I’m so sorry, I’m doing it again. It’s just, not much excitement happens around servants, and I just wanted to hear about it all.”

Feeling guilty for the reaction, Zerek rubbed his neck absently and shrugged. “I guess I could tell you about it. But, um, can we find a bed for me first?” He motioned towards the night clothes Endel wore, “And is there a set of those for me?”

“Yes. No. Sorry,” Endel shook his head. “Yeah there’s a bed, no there’s no clothes, not yet.” Endel grabbed Zerek’s sleeve and tugged him along towards one of the bunks. “The bed above me is open, if you want.”

Zerek wasn’t sure if he was flattered or annoyed, but then he also wasn’t sad to be on a top bunk. It would be less confining.

“Madame Kai will probably take you to the tailor tomorrow to get measured,” Endel continued absently. They reached the bed, and Zerek had to pull his sleeve free of the boy’s grip. “But the chest on the left side is yours, the right side is mine.”

Endel sat down on the bottom bunk and beamed a smile up at Zerek. Suddenly he felt sad for the young kid, and when the guys in the neighboring bunks groaned, he realized that the others probably didn’t talk to Endel much. Could he tolerate the kid for long?

Despite the open window, it was still fairly warm in the bedroom, so Zerek decided to take his shirt off and stuff it in the empty chest. He then took the sheath off that held Elina’s dagger. Kai had insisted he not keep the dagger with him, but when Zerek stoutly refused, she gave in and asked the quartermaster to find a ‘decent’ sheath for the weapon. It was a plain black sheath that had its own strap, doubling as a belt for him, and held the dagger almost perfectly.

Jon Wasik

He wouldn't put that in the chest. Never, ever would it leave his possession. He slowly pulled it out just enough to look at a sliver of the steel blade, and for what felt like an eternity, he stared at it and remembered the woman it had once belonged to.

Only eternity was broken early. "Did you kill the orc with that?"

Zerek felt his face flush, and he pushed the blade back in. He was about to snap back at the kid, but the look of amazement and interest on Endel's face stopped him.

Something inside of him made him want to be Endel's friend. Maybe because Endel had no apparent friends. Maybe.

In any case, he sighed and shook his head, "I know you want to know," he started hesitantly, "but I just can't talk about it." He shook his head and tried to force the pressure he felt in his chest back down. He wished he could see that white Wizard again. Maybe he could do that trick with his hand again to help Zerek feel better. "Not yet."

Endel clamped his mouth shut and looked sad. The pressure in Zerek's chest gave way to guilt, and he sighed. Slowly, he sat down beside Endel and said, "No, I didn't use this on an orc. But...it belonged to someone who did."

That night, neither Zerek nor Endel slept much. The last of the candles were blown out, and all of the other guys in the room slept, but he and Endel stayed up and talked quietly. More than once they were shushed when they, or rather Endel grew too loud.

When Zerek did finally crawl up to the top bunk, he felt completely exhausted, but more than that, he felt glad. Glad to have made a new friend.

To no longer be alone.

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

By the time Amaya and the others reached the Ironwood Mill, morning was only a couple of hours away and the full moon was close to setting. That wouldn't leave them much time, but it would leave them enough.

Vin, being the stealthiest of them all, led the group quietly in the night. One of the moons was nearly full, so even with the tree cover, they had enough light to navigate the forest without the aid of torches.

As before, the area around the mill was quiet. Even the crickets had gone silent, and the moons could not penetrate the darkness she felt. One by one, they each drew their weapons as they approached the ridge just before the mill. Though she knew these woods, a fear she had never felt before began to creep into her veins.

Vin came to a sudden stop and raised a hand for everyone else to follow suit. Amaya felt her heartbeat quicken and her skin crawl. There they remained in the dead quiet, her ears and eyes unable to pick up whatever had spooked Vin. She slowly stepped up next to him, but his eyes looked almost straight ahead. When she followed his gaze, she saw only endless dark shadows amongst the trees.

Trusting her companion's instincts, she kept completely quiet, and waited with trained patience.

Finally, he looked at her, and motioned with his hand for her and the others to stay put. She nodded, and crouched down to better hide her profile.

Vin also crouched low, and began to move forward, somehow completely silent as he crossed over the bed of dead pine and ironwood needles from winters long past. His leather armor was a dark brown, so he blended very well into the shadows. At first she was able to track him by his movement, but every time he stopped for a moment, she lost him.

Before she could grow too nervous or curious, she saw a flurry of movement, and there came the sound of a muffled grunt, followed by a gurgling sound. Before long, the gurgling stopped, and Vin reappeared from the shadows.

“Come on,” he whispered, and again led them along. A few dozen feet ahead, they came across a dead orc slouched against a tree. She surmised the orc was meant to be a sentry, but had fallen asleep. Vin had sliced its throat clean open.

This time they stayed on the path, as there was less underbrush and branches for them to step on. No one would see them coming. Not yet, anyway.

When they crested the hill, they saw several small campfires still burning in the orc-occupied encampment. At first she was disheartened by the blazes. They would make it harder for them to sneak up on the orcs.

But then she realized that the ambient, low light would actually aid them when the encampment inevitably woke up from the sounds of battle. She stopped the group on the top of the hill, and they gathered into a small circle.

“Let’s take out as many as we can silently.” She nodded towards the cluster of campfires, “Idalia and I will hit the center. Vin and Nerina take the one to the left, and Gell and Elic take the right.” She looked at Peren for a moment before she asked, “You still an expert shot?”

Even in the low moonlight, Peren grinned, “Always.”

She smiled at him, “Good. Hang back and cover us as best as you can.” Movement caught her eye and she looked down by the mill. An orc slowly walked along the length of the open-air mill platform, in front of the giant vertical saw used for efficiently splitting trees in half. “Starting with the one that’s awake.”

Peren glanced down, and then shrugged. “With that much light, I could shoot a tick off of his shoulder.”

Everyone rolled their eyes at Peren’s remark. She looked at each of her companions, and smiled. “We can do this. I trust each and every one of you.”

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

They returned her confident smile, and everyone gripped their weapons tightly. With nothing more to be said, she nodded, “Let’s go.”

As quietly as they could, everyone crept towards their assigned target, with Peren in the back, an arrow already set. At first her pulse remained fast, and her hands began to shake. Had it really been so long since her last battle?

Knowing how outmatched they would be if they did not strike fast and effectively, she drew upon training from days long past and took long, controlled breaths. The closer they drew, the slower her heart beat became, and the easier she could hear even the smallest sounds, including Idalia’s boot steps. Neither she nor her companion were as silent as Vin, but she hoped they would be able to get close.

A group of five orcs slept around the fire pit they approached, each sleeping in a different position, but all close to the fire. It was late summer and still warm at night, but she recalled that the orcs came from a much warmer climate. The Wastelands were always hot, or so she had read long ago, and the only thing that changed was whether it was humid or dry.

The orcs had stripped out of their varying types of armor, which all lay nearby unceremoniously. She noted that one of the orcs apparently had the darkened metal plate armor.

As they drew closer to the fire, she kept glancing up at the orc on the mill platform. He was leaning against a post and looked ready to nod off. She felt disgusted by the sight of them all, their pale, hairless mottled skin looked creepy in the moonlight and firelight. Worse still, as they drew closer, she began to smell them.

Volumes of books could be written about that stench! Never before had she smelled anything quite like it, except in later days when she was able to attribute it to the smell of the marshes in the Wastelands, only the orcs smelled ten times stronger.

They were close, scary close, and she readied her sword. The moment came when she was in range of the first sleeping orc – somehow they had drawn close enough to not wake a single one. Idalia moved to the left to take out another, while Amaya prepared to plunge her blade deep into the closest orc's back.

Only that was when she hesitated. Slowly its chest rose and fell in its deep slumber. It slept soundly, as did the others around the fire pit. They were alive. Living creatures. And she was about to slaughter them in their sleep.

Why did that bother her? Weren't they monsters?

No sooner had she thought that than she had her answer. Killing defenseless sleeping creatures, regardless of what they were, was something Din would do.

She began to lower her sword, and considered for a moment what to do. Idalia raised her own sword and prepared to strike, but then stopped as well. After a long moment, she looked helplessly at Amaya, who looked back at her with a grim expression.

They would have to wake the orcs first, or leave the camp. No sooner had she thought that than she realized leaving was impossible. There was too great a risk of being heard as they left. They were here, now.

Suddenly there was the snap of a dry twig to her right, from Elic and Gell's direction. A few of the orcs stirred but did not wake. Except for the one on the platform. It jumped, startled, and grunted loudly. Before it could even identify what had made the sound, an arrow whistled through the air and struck the orc directly in its jugular, passing straight through and disappearing into the night.

The orc gurgled and clutched at its throat, then tumbled over the edge of the platform and crashed to the ground. *That* was enough to startle every single orc in the camp awake.

Amaya looked at the orc at her feet, who began to try to get up, picking up its dark-steel mace in the process.

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

It was now or never.

With a nearly automatic summoning of magic, she charged the blade of her sword with an ethereal energy, and swung with all of her might. The orc's head came clean off its shoulders.

The others struck their own targets, and another arrow whistled through the air to strike a target, Amaya did not see which one. The other orcs roared in protest and picked up their weapons at once.

Some of the magic in her blade had been expended, but it took less than a heartbeat to recharge it, and she jabbed it at another orc that began to charge at her. A blast of arcane magic shot out of the tip of her sword and blasted the orc back into his companion. He was instantly dead, but his companion, knocked to the ground, scrambled to get up.

She hopped the distance between them and swung down, hoping to take him fast, but even in his groggy state, he was quick, and used his haphazardly crafted iron longsword to block her strike while he was still on his knees.

Faster than she could have imagined, he pushed her sword back and swung at her legs. Had she not unconsciously put up a magical shield, it would have cut right into her shins and ended her part in the battle right then. Instead, the rusty blade was partly deflected, and she made her killing blow by impaling its chest, right where a human heart was.

It was not human. And her jab only angered it further. It grabbed hold of her blade, tight enough to cut his own hand, and stood up. She tried to pull her sword out, but somehow his grip was far stronger than she could have imagined.

With its free hand, it readied its sword and prepared to take her head off. Another whistle, and suddenly an arrow struck dead center in its temple, burying itself in the monster's skull. His grip loosened, she pulled her sword out, and he crumpled into a heap.

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The orcs awoke and prepared for battle quickly, and combat was fierce and quick. Nevertheless, her companions were well trained, and their archer was still an expert. Within minutes, the battle was won. Several orcs, seeing they were defeated, fled into the woods. Most were picked off by Peren, but Amaya saw at least three had escaped.

Those three would be a problem later on, she had no doubt of that, but three were far less of a threat than thirty. Few battles were ever total victories, she reminded herself. Especially in war.

With the battle swiftly won, she took a moment to take stock. In the low firelight, she saw all of her companions had made it through unharmed, or at least none had any obvious wounds. Peren remained sentry on the hilltop, no doubt keeping an eye on as wide an area as possible to ensure the three did not return unexpectedly. The others rejoined Amaya in a circle, where they all stared at each other in the flickering firelight, their breathing fast, their pulses racing.

What she had felt before crept back into her heart, and she felt almost guilty for the easy victory her team had just won.

Until Gell brandished his two-handed mace and began to laugh. She didn't know what he laughed about, but suddenly the laughter broiled up within her as well. And before long, everyone joined in his jubilation.

It was then that she understood. They were back! Her team, her men and women, joined in battle together again, had won against a truly wicked enemy.

The dungeon was fresh in all of their minds, but on that night, it finally began to fade into mere memory. That night, they had done what no team of Warriors would have dreamt of doing. If they had told Din about the camp, he would have sent the entire battalion from Everlin to Ironwood. They were seven, and they had won!

That night, they had earned their new titles.

They were Guardians.

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

The morning after the battle at Relkin Mine, the battalion of Warriors and Wizards were just finishing rounding up all of the surviving orcs, taking assessment of the losses, and searching for any remaining orcs that hid and awaited a chance to inflict more casualties.

They had learned the hard way that the orcs, at least the ones that brandished the haphazardly-created weapons and wore the poorly-crafted animal-skin armor, had no qualms about preying upon unsuspecting Warriors.

A pair of them had made the mistake of attempting to ambush Cardin and Dalin during the night while they patrolled around the camp. They had tried to take at least one of the orcs alive, but they fought with every ounce of their considerable strength, and slashed at their enemies with their last breath.

Some orcs *had* been captured during and following the battle. About a half-dozen, too wounded to fight on, were being cared for in a cordoned-off section of the camp, but only because they wanted them to live long enough to tell them about the other orcs, the ones who wore the darkened armor. And about the giant orc that had nearly defeated Cardin.

None of those who wore the steel armor survived the battle or remained behind. Nor were they among those who tried to sneak-attack small groups or individuals. In fact, based on what Cardin had seen and heard, they were very unlike their companions. They seemed more intelligent, more calculated in all of their attacks.

Now, only an hour after sunrise, Cardin stood around a makeshift war table in one of the orc buildings, along with Sira, Master Syrn, and General Zilan. General Artula had just arrived at their camp, with news that greatly disturbed them all.

Wearing his gold-dyed plate armor, Geildein Artula was accompanied by a woman close to Cardin's age, one whom he did not recognize, and one whom did not wear Guild armor, but wore what was clearly a Guild-forged light-blue sword on her right hip.

"The orcs clearly had attacked the Ironwood Mill at the same time the mine was attacked," the General spoke in his clear, commanding voice. Even Zilan, pristine, prim and proper as he was, seemed a lesser man next to the General, and he listened intently.

Cardin shook his head, "That hardly makes sense." When all eyes turned on him, he blushed a little. He had yet to become accustomed to being the center of attention. When everyone waited for him to continue, he said, "The mine I can understand, it's close to the Wastelands. But Ironwood? How could they have gotten so far into Tal undetected?"

No one replied. Who could? For so long, the four kingdoms had focused only on each other. On the Lesser Wars, and on the borders between each other. The orcs occasionally pressed the border of the Wastelands, but it was only ever a small clan here and there, looking to expand outward, and they had always been easily defeated.

Now they were organized, and far stronger and more cunning than anyone could have predicted.

"If they could get to Ironwood," Sira spoke with a dire, quiet tone, "who knows where else they could be. In Saran, too," she shook her head.

"I agree," Zilan nodded curtly. "There is more going on here than I initially guessed."

"Than any of us did," Artula agreed. "Someone is organizing the orcs. Someone is controlling them."

Cardin raised his eyebrows. "That giant orc?" He felt his face grow warm again, but this time at the embarrassment he felt from defeat. He was stronger, and far more powerful than any Mage had ever been. How could one orc, even one so large, defeat him so easily?

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

He wouldn't let it happen again. He couldn't.

"I don't believe so," Master Syrn shook her head slowly. Cardin had only heard of Syrn before the battle, as the woman who had searched for, and found, the Star Dragons. She was much older than he had imagined, clearly one of the oldest Wizards in the Guild. She also commanded almost as much respect as Master Valkere did. "Though it is difficult to say based on your short encounter with him, I believe he is nothing more than a captain or general of the orc army." She gripped her blackwood staff and leaned heavily upon it. "I believe there is another entity at play, someone far more intelligent who commands these orcs." She stared evenly at General Artula.

The room remained quiet for a long moment, and Cardin felt the void of dread open up in his stomach. Someone worse than the giant?

"Klaralin is dead," General Artula stated resolutely. "Surely this time he is dead."

"Yes," Master Syrn nodded once. "I believe so. It is not a Wizard that I am thinking of. However, it must be one who wields magic." She then turned her eyes to Cardin, who felt her gaze penetrate into his soul.

His newfound ability to sense specific energies within magic allowed him to see how she focused more than just her eyes on him. She somehow probed him with magic, as if to ascertain what he was thinking through sheer willpower. "He escaped you and Dalin by throwing down a vial, which created a portal. Only a powerful practitioner and alchemist could have crafted such a potion."

The answer came to him almost immediately. "A shaman."

That caused quite a stir of movement in the room, but no one objected to the possibility. Not this time. It was the only thing that made sense.

The silence remained for some time, no one willing to speak. No one knowing what to say. They had heard of shamans, but none had been born in generations. They were known to be dangerous and cunning, far more intelligent than the other orcs.

If a shaman controlled all of the orcs of the Wastelands, with the help of the remnants of Klaralin's army, they could be in for a bigger fight than any of them had expected.

The quiet was finally broken, but not by any of those present. Boot steps outside caught their attention, and they all turned to watch Reis and Dalin step just inside of the uneven door frame. Reis looked only slightly surprised to see General Artula, but otherwise the look on his face was one of defeat.

When Cardin and his friends had first scouted the Relkin camp, Reis had seen battalions of orcs in encampments that stretched far into the forest. When yesterday's battle had occurred, the occupying force was considerably less than reported. It hadn't been long before they found tracks of an army marching northeast, into the mountains.

Reis and Dalin had been sent late yesterday to track the orcs, and try to find out where they were so another attack could be mounted against them. The look on Reis's face, however, told Cardin that they had failed.

"What did you find?" General Zilan asked, his own face already grim.

"The tracks disappear into the mountains," Reis shook his head, folding his arms in front of him. "We tried to pick up their trail, but it almost looks like they scattered everywhere. The trail became indistinct, and we couldn't find a single one of them."

"I was afraid of that," Zilan placed his hands on his hips. "History books state that orcs are much faster than humans, able to travel great distances without rest."

"But the mountains stretch far into the north," Sira frowned at Reis. Cardin felt his stomach clench at her words, at the despair in her voice. "They could strike almost anywhere if we can't track them."

"I know," Reis threw his arms up in defeat, "but there's nothing else I can do. Not alone. We need to send a lot more scouts into those mountains to search for them."

The Orc War Campaigns – Assault at Ironwood

“There’s no guarantee we could ever find them,” Artula shook his head. “The Ilari Mountains are vast, with so many perilous areas. I believe scouting the mountains would be a waste of time and supplies.”

Cardin looked at him in shock and a little bit of anger. A waste of time? A massive army of orcs roamed freely behind their borders. Countless lives were now in danger. How could it be a waste?

“I think I know what you are suggesting,” Syrn nodded, her face emotionless. “With the Wizards, we can send reinforcements to anywhere in a matter of minutes.”

At first Cardin still didn’t understand, but it didn’t take long for him to catch on. Artula smiled, “Exactly. Keep a Wizard or two at every village, every town, every city. With strict orders to send for reinforcements the moment they spot even a single orc.”

“Indeed,” the Master Wizard turned her head up. “Not the greatest task for a Wizard, but far more efficient than blindly searching every valley and mountaintop.”

Cardin wanted to roll his eyes at the old Wizard’s arrogance. He smirked when he noticed Dalin silently scoffed.

Artula nodded. “Then we should report back to the Allied Council, with our recommended course of action. Master Syrn, will you do the honor of creating a portal back to Archanon?”

With barely a nod, Syrn stepped around the table and out of the exit, with everyone following. Cardin stayed back to allow everyone to step outside before him, his thoughts turning to what now lay ahead of them.

The war against Kailar and Klaralin had been short and decisive. But this new war against the orcs? This would be drawn out, and their casualties would no doubt only increase.

However, as Syrn gathered power to open a portal, another thought occurred to him. The four kingdoms of Edilas were already coming together against the threat. This war wouldn’t be Warrior

against Warrior, kingdom against kingdom. For once, the armies of Edilas would stand united, together with the Wizards.

He couldn't help but smile when he thought of that. It was exactly what he had hoped for.

Maybe there was hope after all.

For the first time since Zerek had been found and brought into the First City's castle, he was allowed to leave the castle grounds, and he reveled in that little bit of freedom, even if it was for an assignment.

It wasn't long before Kai could no longer give him much attention for his training, so she had decided to send him on his first errand. However, she also didn't trust him yet to go on his own. When she saw that he and Endel had become friends, she saw the perfect opportunity.

Now he walked down the main market street of Archanon with Endel beside him. Endel led one of the stable horses by a lead rope, while Zerek carried an envelope with an order for supplies.

The street was already overcrowded, despite it still being early morning. His new friend explained to him that everyone tried to get as much business out of the way as they could early in the cool morning during the hot summer months.

Zerek didn't care. His eyes were wide and his jaw stretched open as he gazed around at all of the people, the store shops, the vendor stalls opened in front of many of those shops. It was a hive of activity, full of people he had never seen. It was incredible.

More than once, he had travelled to smaller towns with his father to trade what they had mined for payment and supplies. The Mining Guild had always made the arrangements for them, through a rather efficient system of bartering with the Trader's Guild and Craftsmen's Guild, so time spent in those towns had been short.

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Even then, none of them compared to the vast city that sprawled out all around him. Ahead, in the distance, he could see the main city gates, towering over the city, bracketed by cliffs that formed a partial natural barrier for the city.

The everlasting torches burned even in daylight along the street, providing no light, but their yellow-white color signified their district, as Endel explained.

“Every district has a distinct color,” the young boy continued, his blue eyes darting around excitedly, looking for something new to point out to Zerek. When Endel found out that this was the first time that Zerek had ever been in the First City, he began telling him everything he could with as few breaths in between as possible. Zerek wondered if Kai had counted on that fact.

“Yellow is for the trade district,” he continued. “Green for the farmer’s district, though it isn’t just farms in that part of the city. Plus there are farms outside of the city.” He waved his free hand around and said, “The city is ginormous, but that also means too many people. There’s always a need for more food.” Zerek smiled as the kid continued on. “Blue is...was in the south east. It’s where all of those homes were destroyed in the great Battle for Archanon.”

“What was blue before then?” he asked, looking southeast, even though he knew there wasn’t a chance he could see that district from where they were, or any of the others outside of the trade district.

“It was homes for those who worked in the other districts,” Endel shook his head. “They say it had once served a different purpose, but that changed as the number of people in the city grew and grew and grew. No one knows what its original purpose was, either. Maybe something to do with when the Wizards were still here. Then there’s the red district, where the Warriors’ Guild headquarters is. City guards. Barracks.” He shrugged. “I’ve never actually been there, not yet. We only take care of the castle’s horses, not theirs. They have their own stable boys and girls.”

Zerek almost wanted to tell Endel to slow down, he was speaking too fast, about too much. Thankfully, he didn't have to say anything. A commotion arose ahead, and someone shouted "Make way!"

The crowd began to part before them, and they saw a small column of armed soldiers leading a group of people up from the gate and towards the castle.

"Come on!" Endel grabbed his grey shirt's sleeve and pulled Zerek and the horse to one side of the street. "It must be Warriors returning from the front," his friend about jittered with excitement. He stopped them and said "Let's stay on the street, see if we can catch a glimpse of them!"

Zerek felt his insides twist a little. Warriors from the front. Did that mean that whomever approached had fought orcs? Had they killed orcs? What about the mining camp? Had it been liberated?

He knew he couldn't ask whoever it was. He was just an errand boy, nothing more. No one important. Not a Warrior himself.

A void filled in the pit of his stomach when he realized he would never be anyone of consequence. As the group approached, he began to catch glimpses of them through the line of soldiers surrounding them.

"No one get's such a big escort unless it's the General or the King," Endel hopped up and down to try to get a better look. "No, two generals! By the gods, it's General Artula *and* the general of Erien!"

Zerek craned his own neck to get a better look. A few of the other bystanders in the crowded street got in his way, so he pushed around them to see. Suddenly the crowd surged to try to get a better look at those who passed by. Everyone whispered about whom they saw, wondering what had happened in their first battle against the orcs. Some even began to cheer, a cheer that was taken up by more, and more, until the street was a roar of celebration for the returning heroes.

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He didn't much care for being jostled around by everyone trying to push past one another, but he wanted to see who else was returning. He saw the bright blue of a Wizard's robes, could that white Wizard also be amongst those returning? Had he even gone to the front?

Even a moment of a glimpse would help him feel better, he knew it, so he tried to push farther too. He was as tall as a fully grown man, so he didn't have an advantage, unlike Endel who could duck low and maneuver under arms to get closer.

Then he saw one man wearing nothing but light leather armor, with a giant sword strapped to his back. He recognized that man from when he had stood before the Allied Council. In the days since that meeting, he had learned who that man was.

"It's the Keeper of the Sword," he heard more than a few shout in awe.

"Chosen by the dragons themselves."

"I know, I was there, I saw it happen!"

"He's so handsome..."

Zerek almost gagged at that last exclamation.

Several of those who walked by were Warriors, wearing their battle armor proudly as they marched through the streets. He longed to wear such armor. To have his own longsword, dyed a special color unique to him. To have been trained to fight.

If he was a Warrior, he could avenge the death of everyone he had known and loved. Absently he reached down to where he kept the dagger sheathed on his belt.

It wasn't there!

Feeling a sudden panic, he looked down and saw that the sheath was completely missing, sliced off of the belt. He also noticed that the letter pouch strapped onto his belt had been undone. He opened it, and saw that the sealed orders were gone.

“No!” His voice was lost in the cheering of the crowd. He began to look around, trying to find who could have taken them. He couldn’t have lost it, he just *couldn’t* have.

Suddenly, he saw movement away from the street, away from him and the marching Warriors. Everyone else clambered to get closer, why would someone be walking away?

Feeling his hands shaking, he started to try to push through the crowd towards whoever was retreating. That had to be the thief. They wore a ragged-looking cloak with the hood up, so even when he caught a glimpse of the figure through the sea of people, he couldn’t identify who or what it was.

People pushed and shoved, groaned and cursed at him, wouldn’t let him by. The other person seemed to somehow just flow through the crowd without an effort. How could anyone do that?

He was losing the thief. Sure, there was no way he could know that person had his dagger, not to mention the orders. But who else?

The crowd began to thin out as they approached the edge of the streets and the lines of shops and vendor stalls. The stalls themselves were cleared out of patrons, much to the annoyance of the owners. Most of them waited impatiently for the procession to pass by.

Now he could see the thief easier. They moved along in front of the shops casually, as if he or she didn’t have a care in the world. The vendors tried in vain to get the thief to stop and look at their wares, but the thief ignored them.

Until she came across a stall of fresh fruit. It was a girl. He saw when she turned to look at the varying fruit, barely a glimpse of her face. He saw olive skin and locks of short, brown hair, but that’s all he saw before she turned away and kept going. What nearly made him shout in anger was when he saw his dagger through a hole in her cloak, strapped to her belt.

What the shop keeper hadn’t seen from his perspective was that she had grabbed an apple from his stall while she had pointed to another basket of fruit. He would have missed it himself if he hadn’t been scrutinizing every detail about her. She was a thief, and a good one.

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He moved as fast as he could, but some of the crowd occasionally stepped back and he was jostled about or tripped.

“Hey, watch it!” someone shouted at him.

That must have caught the girl’s attention. Without stopping, she turned around just enough to glimpse him. Their eyes connected for a split second, and he felt something tingle in his chest. She had beautiful almond-brown eyes!

At first she merely frowned at him, and then her features slackened in recognition. She knew he was her latest victim. She had been discovered.

She looked forward again and walked faster. He began to jog after her, and shouted, “Hey!”

Suddenly, she bolted to the left, between two stalls and down an alley between shops. It had been a flash of movement, and had taken him so much by surprise that he didn’t react right away. “Hey, get back here,” he took off after her at a full run, nearly crashing into two more people as he did.

In an instant he was between the buildings as well, and caught a glimpse of her cloak flowing behind her as she turned right and continued down another street headed towards the center of the city. He barreled around the corner, and almost smashed into another vendor’s stall. This street was also crowded, though not nearly as badly as the main avenue had been.

Even at a full run, the girl was somehow able to dart in between people without so much as brushing up against them. He marveled at her skill, but also hated that he was starting to lose her. He was new to the city, and there was no way he was going to be able to keep up with her or find a way to cut her off.

So he did the only thing he could think of. “Stop that girl. Thief!”

Most of the people around just gawked at him, and the running girl, without doing anything. But then a few of the people began trying to grab at her to stop her.

Jon Wasik

She was able to dodge their offending hands every time, but it did slow her down. He continued to call out after her, asking for help, trying desperately to catch up.

“Please, stop,” he finally pleaded.

In that moment, her forward momentum slowed just a little, and he saw her glimpse back at him. Her hood fell down, and he finally had his first unobstructed view of her face. His heart seemed to flutter when he saw her, and his face, already warm from running, grew hotter.

Despite her momentary distraction, she still dodged everyone who tried to stop her. He did, however, notice that she had slowed down even more, and never picked up the pace again. With great effort, he began to close to the distance, if ever so slowly.

Every few seconds, she would glance back at him again. Her cloak flowed behind her and allowed him to see the dagger on her belt, and he tried to focus in on that, determined to get it back. But he also couldn't help but look at her face every chance he could get. She was so beautiful!

The chase continued on, and he stopped shouting for help. After he closed the distance to a dozen feet or so, she increased her pace again, but only just so he could stay that far from her. Was she toying with him?

After several minutes, his heart was pounding in his chest, and his legs began to feel weak. He was used to swinging a pick axe or chiseling away at rocks, using strength to get his job done. Running for long distances was not something he had ever become used to doing, and he began to despair. She showed no signs of being tired, and he knew he was going to lose her.

A part of him wanted to shout in rage. He couldn't lose that dagger, he just couldn't!

Suddenly they ran out between two buildings to find a river before them. It had been channeled into a canal that ran through the northeast quarter of the city. Endel had told him about that river too, last night. The river had once flowed through the valley out where the western gate was, but had been redirected millennia ago by human and Wizard engineering. Now it twisted back around on itself,

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creating a small peninsula backed against the wall in the north east quarter of the city, and entered and exited the city walls at points a few miles from each other.

As they began to run along the canal, Zerek saw that across the river, on the 'island' in the city, was the farm district. It took up the entire north east quarter of the city, and only then did he begin to realize just how huge Archanon was.

They had drawn close to a stone bridge, and he began to wonder if she was going to cross over it into the farm district. Then, quite suddenly, she stopped in her tracks and turned to face him.

He was so stunned by her move that, without even realizing what he was doing, he too stopped. Only a few feet separated them, but it may as well have been a mile, as fast as she was. She was panting a little, but he was clearly much more out of breath than she was. His heart thundered in his chest, and he felt a sharp pain in his sides.

Suddenly a little smirk crossed her face, and she hopped over the low guard wall and down into the canal.

"No," he shouted, and ran to the edge to look down. She had landed on the bank of the river. It wasn't quite as high as it could have been, so there was just a little bit of a muddy bank for her to land on, about six inches.

She looked up at him, smiled and waved, and shouted up to him in a strangely sweet and teasing voice, "Are you coming?"

With that, she turned and began to walk carefully along the muddy bank, disappearing into the shadows of the bridge.

Zerek frowned, and then looked around. There was no one around right now. Across the river, he could see farmers out tending to their fields and livestock, but no one was looking towards them. The sound of the rushing river below had probably drowned out his earlier shout.

The drop down was only about five feet or so, and he could easily land that. Something else stirred inside of him. Something he hadn't really felt before, or at least he didn't remember feeling it. Excitement, and fear, all rolled into one jumbled emotion that caused his hands and feet to tingle.

After another moment of hesitation, he steeled himself, and hopped over the ledge. The mud was surprisingly hard, his feet sank in only a little, but he still very nearly lost his balance and fell into the river. He steadied himself on the stone canal wall, and then began to follow her footsteps under the bridge.

There was an unpleasant smell in the shadows, but he couldn't identify the source. He did, however, see the thief standing right in front of him. She leaned against the canal wall with her arms crossed, and looked at him skeptically.

"You're a stubborn one, aren't you?"

He huffed, his breath still coming fast and ragged. "You have something that belongs to me."

"What, the orders?" she asked, pulling out the letter. She hadn't broken the seal on it. "Why would that matter so much that you would chase after me for so long? Orders can be rewritten."

Part of him wondered why she would even steal such a document, if it was so unimportant, but he ignored that for the moment. He just wanted one thing. "I didn't chase you for the orders."

Then her face slackened into surprise. She stowed the orders, and then unclasped his dagger from her belt. "This thing?"

She looked very carefully at the sheath, and then partially unsheathed the blade. "Hey, careful with that," he raised a hand and took another step towards her. She backed up when he did, so he stayed his ground. He didn't want her to run again.

"It's just a dagger," she shrugged. "I mean, yeah, it's steel, and well crafted, but who cares. Get the castle to assign you another one."

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“It’s not theirs. It’s mine.” He gulped in air, but was thankful that his breathing was beginning to slow. His heart no longer thundered in his ears. “It’s all I have left.”

Her surprise faded, and her lips drew into a thin line. “That’s why you said please.”

So that was it. That was why she had slowed down and allowed him to keep up.

He held out his hand, and looked at her with pleading eyes. “My family. That’s all I have left of them.”

For a long moment, she just looked from the dagger to his hand and back again. Until finally, she re-sheathed the blade and walked closer to him. He held out his hand further, willing her to give it back.

She hesitated for only a moment longer, and then placed it in his hand. The weight felt reassuring, and he pulled it in and clutched it tightly. A wave of relief washed over him, and he sighed and smiled. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Her eyes narrowed and she looked at him with great surprise. “Thank you? I stole it from you. You shouldn’t be thanking me.”

The warmth in his cheeks returned. He gazed into her amazing eyes, still beautiful even down in the shadows. “You didn’t have to give it back.”

“Yeah, well,” she backed away and averted her eyes. “I know what it’s like to lose everything.”

A long silence followed, and then she sighed and looked at him. “There’s a place not far back that way,” she pointed over his shoulder, “where you can climb up easily. I trust you can find your way back to the castle from here.”

He didn’t know how to reply. In fact, he found his brain quite suddenly had stopped working. “Umm,” was all he managed.

At first she stared at him with a frown. Then she smiled awkwardly and stepped back a little more. “Go on, lover-boy,” she motioned again behind him. “Get going before I steal something else.”

Jon Wasik

He glanced behind him to see where she was talking about. About fifty feet back, he saw several stone bricks jutted out of the canal wall, and he realized that would be the easiest place to climb back out.

When he turned again to look at her, she was gone. His heart stopped for just a second, and he looked everywhere he could think. How could she have disappeared like that?

With a short laugh, he turned around and slowly made his way back. When he reached the jutting bricks, he lashed the dagger back onto his belt, and climbed up out of the canal.

He had lost the orders, which meant he had failed his first job for the castle. But he didn't care. He looked back down under the bridge, and wondered about the girl he had just met.

There was nothing else for it, he would have to find her again.

Somehow, he had just fallen in love with a thief.