

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 8 “The Lost Tribe”

By Jon Wasik

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The Orc War Campaigns – The Lost Tribe

So cold.

Would Arkad ever grow accustomed to the cold of Halarite? Or would he forever long for the warm, humid days of his home? Was he doomed to be miserable for eternity?

So very cold.

He felt his entire body shiver, right down to his very core. Nausea overcame him for a moment, and it took every ounce of strength he had not to turn onto his side and empty his stomach onto...onto what? Where was he?

A dull ache overcame every muscle in his body, so he knew that he was alive. Considering the last thing he remembered, that was a good thing. Wasn't it?

The ache turned into a sharp pain in his head. Drums banged in his ears, but it was several long moments before he realized that the drumming was his own heart beat. What had happened to him?

Tana, he thought. The To'kar tribe leader, and if his blurry memories were right, she was a shaman. One whose power obviously rivaled his own shaman.

He opened his eyes, but they felt dry and itchy, and the world was a blurry mess at first. His chest vibrated when he groaned, and he felt every muscle that pulled and pushed as he brought his hand up to rub his throbbing temple. He felt *everything*.

Blinking his eyes to try to get moisture into them, his vision cleared a little. The world coalesced enough that he realized he was in a tent or hut made from the skins of animals. A Wastelands orc tent. Arkad gingerly turned his head to the right, where he saw the entrance, and four orcs. So, no, not a

tent, much larger than any tent. His mind was so foggy that he couldn't think of the word. He couldn't think of much of anything.

Until everything came into sharp clarity with one thought – he was a prisoner. The guards were Wastelands orcs, but their clothes were of much nicer quality than the usual rabble. There was actual craftsmanship and tailoring in their design, and they fit the four orcs such that he could see their muscles were well defined, even for orcs.

The pain was finally beginning to diminish, and the banging drums in his ears had faded to a dull thump, but he knew he could not battle these four, not unarmed. He was a prisoner, and there was nothing he could do about it.

His groans must have alerted them, since all four now stared at him curiously. When he met each of their eyes, they snuffed at him, and then finally turned back to look at each other. The one closest to the entrance ducked out.

Though every muscle in his body protested, Arkad slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position. That was when he realized that not only had he been stripped of all of his armor, but he in fact had been given a pair of...what did the humans call them? Trousers? That was what they looked like, leather trousers. Why had these orcs begun to emulate their human oppressors?

His head spun, and nausea overcame him again, but he wouldn't let himself fall back down. Then the worst thing yet happened to him – the scent of cooking meat wafted into the structure, and despite the nausea, his stomach growled fiercely.

After several moments of allowing his stomach and his head to feel better, the flap on the entrance was pulled open, and a petite female orc walked in. Despite her small size, the three remaining guards stood at complete attention and moved aside to give her a clear path to Arkad. She covered half the distance of the structure, about twenty feet, and stopped. Plenty of room that her guards could react if he tried to hurt her.

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Then again, if she was as powerful as he suspected, she really didn't need guards.

"General Arkad," she spoke to him. He was surprised at how clearly she spoke. She was supposed to be a Wastelands orc, and they were not known for their intelligence or clarity of speech.

"Welcome to the To'kar."

It was at that moment when another thought occurred to him, and he reached up for his neck. His necklace was gone, the necklace that held the enchanted translator stone on it. He looked at her neckline, ignoring her perfectly-formed cleavage, and saw that she was not wearing a translation stone, either.

"You speak our native language," he frowned at her.

Tana studied him carefully before she nodded. "Yes. It was my first language."

His head was still foggy, and so he brought his hands up to rub his temples. No Wastelands orc had ever heard their native tongue, they all spoke the human language. So he asked the obvious question, "Where did you learn our language?"

She raised one eyebrow, her mottled gray skin flushing a little darker. "From my mother, who else?"

His mind raced with possibilities. Had a single line of Wastelands orcs passed down the traditional language over the millennia? Kept the spirit alive, while the rest of the orcs adopted the human language? That seemed highly unlikely, based on the history of the orc presence on Halarite. The humans had hunted them down, treated them like animals. Culture was lost, education was lost, until there was nothing left but the animals he now had to call his last hope.

Yet, the To'kar were obviously different. The posture of the guards, their backs erect, their chests puffed out, their heads held high. Their tailored leather clothing.

Still studying his face closely, Tana took two steps closer. Arkad tensed, ready to take an opportunity to grab her and hold her hostage. He quickly abandoned that thought, her powers giving

her an advantage he could never overcome without his enchanted weapons and armor. Even then, he probably wouldn't stand a chance.

She looked at him intently, and nodded, "I was born in Akaida."

Color drained from Arkad's face, and he stared at her dumbly. "But...how is that possible?" He shook his head, "No, I helped evacuate the city, I fought to the last portal. You weren't there, you couldn't have been! You've been here, a part of the To'kar tribe since long before I arrived."

Tana nodded, "That is true. However, I did not evacuate the city when it was invaded, I came here over a year ago."

"What?!" He shook his head, and then regretted it when his head spun a little. "How is that possible? Why?"

Once more, Tana did not reply right away, and instead studied his face for a moment. Finally, she raised her right hand, palm up, and said, "Because of this." In a sudden flash, there was a ball of blue fire hovering above her palm. "I am a shaman. More than that, my power comes to me with little effort."

Arkad stared at the flame, mesmerized as a moth would be. The tiny blue flames flickered and danced before him, and a sense of wonder filled his chest. She had conjured the flames with no effort what so ever, as if they had always existed, and she merely opened his eyes to them.

"My powers grew faster than anyone could have imagined," she explained. "And our Queen, sensing my powers," she snapped her hand closed, snuffing the flames out, "ordered my execution."

His head snapped up in shock. "Why would she have done that? You were obviously to be our next Queen."

Once again, Tana stepped closer, close enough that she could have reached out to touch him if she wanted. "Exactly."

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His mind quickly connected the dots, and his shock quickly turned into understanding. Even through his fog, everything made sense. The Queen had barricaded herself in her bunker the moment the invasion had begun, and had committed half of their military to guarding that bunker, despite Arkad stating that they needed to engage the enemy on the outer defenses.

He knew now that no matter what, their city would have fallen. The enemy's numbers had been too great. But it would have given everyone more time to evacuate. More of their kind might have survived. His Queen had cared more for her own well being than that of her people.

In the end, her fear and selfishness had been her undoing. She refused to leave her seat of power, even when Klaralin had arrived and offered to take them under his wing. One lesser shaman, the same woman who now led them now, had taken him up on the offer. Even when they had all fallen back to the Queen's bunker, and all hope was lost, the Queen refused to follow Klaralin to Halarite. Instead, she created a portal to who knew where else on their own world, and left Arkad and his remaining men behind to die.

The only reason they had survived was because their new shaman had given a portal potion to Kilack before she had left with Klaralin, and when the Queen had abandoned them, he used it to evacuate to the Wastelands of Halarite.

Now that very same shaman he had sworn allegiance to was failing their kind. Her powers were weakened, no doubt by Tana's influence, and she had ordered him to kill his own brothers and sisters. In another time, he would have done so without question for their betrayal of their Shaman. Now, however...there were too few of them left to waste their lives on killing as punishment.

A wave of fatigue suddenly washing over Arkad as the monumental reality set in. Here stood what should have become the new Queen, having been forced to abandon her people long before the invasion because of a selfish old woman. Perhaps it was for the best.

Perhaps Tana was their chance to save the future of the orcs.

Another orc suddenly entered the tent, drawing everyone's attention. He did not approach Tana, but instead dropped to one knee and bowed his head. "My Shaman."

"What is it, Vertek?" she turned just enough so that Arkad could see her profile. She wouldn't turn her back on Arkad.

"If I may approach?" Vertek asked.

Tana nodded, so the orc drew closer to her and whispered in her ear. Arkad strained to hear, but there was no way that he could hear the other orc's words. When he finished, he pulled away, and Tana remained silent for a long time. Finally, she turned to Arkad and nodded.

"I must attend to other matters." She reached out a hand and rested it lightly on his shoulder. There was a momentary green glow, and suddenly the pain that remained in his muscles vanished, as if taken away by her hand. "Please rest here. You and your men are safe, and will be our guests for the time being."

The healing effect of her touch surprised him, so when she did finally turn and show him her back, he did not even think to attack. He simply remained seated on the bed, only now realizing that it *was* an actual bed and not just skins piled up on the floor. That was also when he realized all of the fog in his head had lifted.

What did she just do to me?

In moments, Tana was gone, along with Vertek. The other three remained inside to continue to watch over Arkad, joined by their former fourth companion moments after Tana had left.

Arkad slowly swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up straight, grateful that all of his pain was gone.

Looking at the entrance, willing himself to see through the flap, he sighed deeply.

It seemed that he had much to think about.

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Another curse escaped Amaya's lips as a sharp piece of needlegrass managed to poke in-between her bracers and her gloves. That was what they called it now, needlegrass. Long, dry, sharp-edged grass that somehow found every weakness in her leather armor better than any orc blade ever could.

She was down on her belly, creeping forward up a hill with Vin and Elic on either side of her. Vin had spotted smoke while tracking ahead of them and had told them all to stay down. Ordering the rest of the team to stay behind, they crawled up the hill, battling gravity and grass, to get a better look.

Slowly they crested over the hill, keeping their heads low while trying not to let the needlegrass tear their faces apart. Her view was too obstructed, so she risked raising her head just a little more above the grass, and felt her jaw drop.

What had obviously once been a large village was now burned to the ground. Some of the fires still smoldered enough to puff smoke into the air, but otherwise there were absolutely no signs of life, and all structures were mere shambles of whatever they had once been.

"What in the name of the Six happened here," Elic whispered. "Our troops aren't this far into the Wastelands, are they?"

Amaya shook her head, "Not that I know of."

"Well it isn't a human settlement, that's for sure," Elic whispered. "Look over there, they used bones for the framing of that building."

He was right, which meant it was clearly an orc village. She looked over to Vin, who had so far been his usual silent self. "What do you think?"

At first, he didn't respond to her or even acknowledge her. When he did, it was by pushing up onto his knees. Her heart suddenly skipped a beat, but when nothing happened, she sighed in relief, and the three of them climbed onto their feet.

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“I don’t see anything moving down there,” Vin finally spoke. “But over there, on the western side, are the only bodies in this mess.” Amaya followed his pointed finger, and saw the corpses. They were too far away to see any details, but close enough that she could identify they belonged to Wastelands orcs, not the ones armored in blackened steel.

Looking back behind them, she waved for the others to join them. Then she looked to Vin and asked, “What about our quarry?”

Pointing to their right, he nodded, “Their tracks go directly into the village.”

Looking out beyond the village and around them, she noted that her team stood on a rather lonely hill. The terrain was relatively flat all around, but the village was nestled in a cove in a rather thick and gnarly-looking forest. If Arkad and his troops went into that forest, traversing through there at any great speed would be difficult at best. She also didn’t know how well Nia could create portals when she had no idea if there was a tree at their destination or not.

When the others had joined them, Amaya quickly explained their observations while leading them down into the village. She drew her weapon, a signal that the others should draw their weapons as well. Her sky-blue sword gleamed in the early dawn light, a reminder of her past that she tried to ignore.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, she ordered her team to spread out, and to cover Vin as he tracked their prey’s footsteps. It became a little harder for her to see the tracks, since once they reached the clearly worn paths in the village, the tracks blended in with the normal foot traffic. However, this didn’t seem to slow Vin down at all.

After a moment, he paused and looked ahead. Right at where all of the bodies were. “Looks like they went towards them,” he frowned. “Or else...”

Amaya’s eyebrows peaked upwards. “Or else what?”

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Once again, Vin didn't reply, and simply continued on forward. Amaya kept up with him, staying only ten feet away, but started to take a closer look at the village around them. It had been a large community, housing easily over a hundred orcs. No, probably closer to a hundred families, if the orcs lived together as families. She realized she didn't know anything about their culture.

She stepped on something hard and paused, lifting her boot up to look. It looked like a child's doll, made out of dry twigs and lashed together by a type of grass that was clearly more bendable than the dreaded needlegrass. Its eyes were drawn onto the twigs with coal from a fire, as was its mouth. Either a very poor craftsman, or a very determined child made this little humanoid creature...

Amaya bent over to pick up the toy, almost afraid to. Something in her stomach twisted, wondering if the child whom this had belonged to was still alive, or...

Her boot had crushed the arm, but otherwise it was relatively intact. It had to have been a child that created it. She didn't know how she knew that, she just knew. She held the doll around the torso, wishing, hoping that the creator still lived somewhere.

Their mission since the war had begun was to hunt down every last orc and end the threat once and for all. But orcs weren't the mindless, monstrous creatures she thought they were. And she only now realized that hunting down every one of them meant taking the lives of innocent children.

The image of Arkad refusing to attack her and the two kids in Archanon flashed through her mind again, and she clutched the doll tightly. They weren't mindless beasts.

Not sure why she did it, Amaya stuffed the doll into a nearly empty pouch on her belt. It barely fit, but she didn't care. She needed to keep it. If only to remind herself of whom their enemy actually was.

Suddenly realizing Vin and the others were very far ahead of her, she gripped her sword tighter and rushed to catch up to him. She reached him just as they made it to where the corpses were. The rest of the team had fanned out quite a distance from them, and Idalia even approached the forest,

looking into it for signs of activity. Peren, their archer, had stayed far behind to cover them, his bow at the ready, an arrow already nocked.

Vin took several minutes, going from corpse to corpse, staring at the ground, occasionally crouching to get a closer look. The frown on his face grew greater and greater, but he still said nothing.

Finally, Amaya's patience wore thin, and she grabbed him by the arm to stop him from moving around. "What are you seeing?"

He looked shocked to have been stopped, but she gave him a stern look and gripped his arm tight. Finally, he shook his head, as if bringing himself back to the real world. "Uh, well the orcs we're after were a part of this battle," he waved his free hand around at the bodies. "But they weren't part of the burning of the village. That happened before they arrived."

She frowned, "So, what...they came to investigate what happened to the village?"

Vin shrugged, and then tugged his arm free from her grip. "I don't know, but I do know that our targets engaged these orcs," once more he waved at the bodies around them. "But that's not the strangest thing. Some of the tracks of our targets don't show any sign of actually fighting. As if they were defeated from a distance."

Amaya shrugged easily, "Well we know they have enchanted weapons." Then she caught herself, "Well, no. The ones in darkened steel do. The Wastelands orcs do not." She placed her free hand on her hip and looked around at the bodies. "Huh, that *is* weird."

"Best I can tell," Vin continued, "All of the darkened steel orcs were dragged away, except for one," he pointed to Amaya's right. She followed his finger and saw one of the corpses was not like the others.

They slowly approached the body, its armor obviously darkened steel and not the leather skins the other orcs wore.

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“Wait,” she paused, looking again at the other orc bodies. “Wait a second, look at their clothes, their weapons.”

“Yeah, I caught that too,” Vin nodded. Elic approached them now, his family longsword gripped in one hand, ready for anything. He looked at the bodies as well. Vin continued, “Better craftsmanship than any other Wastelands orc we’ve encountered.”

Elic stopped by the darkened steel orc’s body, Vin and Amaya joining him a moment later. “Why is he the only one left?” Elic asked. “Where are the bodies of the other dark steel orcs? Or signs of a greater battle? I count a dozen Wastelands orcs.”

Vin nodded, “But tracks indicate there were many more.”

He looked around some more, and then started following something on the ground towards the tree line. “All of the tracks converge in that direction. Including signs of dragging bodies, or deeper footprints indicating they carried heavier loads, likely armored bodies.”

Amaya’s head spun a little at all the details he was able to get from just tracks, but she knew to trust his judgment. They drew closer to the forest, until Vin stopped only a dozen feet from the tree line. She looked into the shadows of the forest, almost expecting to see a dozen orcs suddenly appear and attack them.

But Vin wasn’t looking into the forest. He stared at his feet. She approached him and looked down, and even she couldn’t mistake what she saw. All of the footprints and drag marks seemed to just end. As if the orcs ceased to exist. Or...

Amaya looked around, saw their Wizard companion, and called, “Nia, over here.”

“It was a portal,” Elic frowned. “They created a portal?”

“And most likely came through one, too,” Vin nodded.

“How is that possible?” Amaya asked. “I mean, the reports from the first battle said Arkad had a vial he used to create a portal, but...”

“There are no glass shards around here,” Vin shook his head. “Nothing to indicate it was a shattered vial containing a potion.”

When Nia approached, Amaya pointed to the ground where the footprints disappeared. “We think they created a portal to escape. What do you think?”

The Wizard’s usually emotionless face crinkled into a deep frown. She lifted her staff up, and then slowly lowered the focusing gem to the ground, until it touched right where the footprints ended. Amaya felt a wave of energy emanate from the Wizard’s staff, giving her goose bumps, and the jade-colored gem flashed.

A moment later, she brought her staff back up and nodded. “Yes, there was an outgoing portal in this location. From the energy left in the ground, it was sometime last night. We barely missed them. I...”

Suddenly Nia’s head snapped towards the forest, and a moment later Amaya felt the surge of energy too. From behind a tree came a shard of ice, headed right towards Elic. Nia reacted fast, and a shield surrounded Elic, shattering the ice shard into harmless slivers and pellets.

From behind that same tree emerged a darkened steel orc.

“Orcs!” Elic shouted.

But something was wrong. The orc didn’t charge. He didn’t try to send another shard of ice. Instead, he slowly emerged from the tree line, a giant mace clutched in both of his hands. The orc was huffing. Then she saw a black substance dripping from his elbows onto the forest floor.

Orc blood.

Vin started to charge at the orc, but Amaya shouted, “No!”

The orc roared, and swung his mace at Vin. He ducked under the swing, and then tried to use one of his daggers to cut the orc’s throat, but the beast actually managed to bat him away instead, sending him sprawling to the ground along the border of the forest.

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Knowing that Peren was an expert shot, Amaya looked back at him and waved her free hand, “Don’t attack him!”

Peren, Elic, everyone looked at her in shock, but they followed her orders. She looked at Vin, worried he had been hurt badly, but he was already on his feet, and looked ready to disobey her order.

“Vin!” she shouted. He looked at her, the anger and murderous intent in his eyes. “Stand down, that’s an order!”

At first she wasn’t sure he heard her, but then he sighed and lowered his daggers ever so slightly. Amaya turned back to the orc, only to find that it stared at her in confusion. Then his eyes seemed to roll into the back of his head, and he fell flat on his face, the thump vibrating the ground.

For a long time, everyone simply stood there, too stunned at what had just happened for it to really register. When it did, it was Elic who asked, “What just happened?”

“He’s wounded,” Amaya lowered her sword. “I saw the blood dripping from his armor.”

“You noticed black orc blood against black armor?” Nia asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Impressive.”

“I’ll check to make sure he’s out,” Vin stated, moving towards the orc.

Fearing he would kill the orc, if it weren’t already dead, she shouted, “No! I’ll take a look. Nia, Elic, with me.”

Vin clearly looked disappointed, but did not disobey. Elic walked beside her, while Nia remained a step behind as they slowly approached. It was conceivable that the orc was faking his wounds to draw them in, but she very much doubted that. She had never seen an orc employ deceptive tactics like that. Of course, there was a first time for everything, but she didn’t think he was faking it.

She hoped.

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There was no denying the fear she felt as she drew closer to the massive body. Though not nearly as large as Arkad, the orc was still much larger than she was, and much stronger. He could easily have torn her limb from limb, if it had been at full strength.

When she drew closer, she could see that he was still breathing, but his breaths were very slow and appeared labored. His mace was at his side, but his hand had released it when he fell. Cautiously, she approached the mace, and motioned for Elic to be ready to strike.

With all due caution, she reached her free hand down to the mace just below the spiked ball, and lifted. It was as light as she expected, unusually light for a weapon of its size, but not all that different from the weapons she had helped collect in her previous engagements with the orcs. She also felt a surge of energy from the enchanted weapon. It was not unexpected, but she didn't think she could ever get used to that sensation. The weapon sent a cold energy that chilled her to her very bones, but also made goose bumps rise up on her arms and the back of her neck with a crackle of power.

Amaya backed away from the orc, and then tossed the mace behind her, as far from the orc as she could. The orc still didn't move, so she looked at Elic and motioned towards their quarry, indicating she wanted him to verify it was unconscious. She then focused and felt her powers flow from her body, through her hands, and into the blade of her sword, ready to send an arcane blast at the orc if it made any false moves.

Elic drew closer, and then slowly reached his hand out. Amaya felt her heart racing, thundering in her ears, but she couldn't allow herself to make a false move. If the orc was alive but wounded...

Touching the orc's shoulder and shaking it a little, Elic jumped back and gripped his sword. The orc didn't move, didn't so much as make a sound. So he tried again, but did not jump back this time. When the orc didn't do anything in response, he tried to roll it over, but it was too heavy, its armor too bulky.

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Sighing in frustration, Elic stood up straight and lowered his sword. “It’s okay. I don’t think it’s getting up anytime soon.”

Amaya sighed and lowered her sword, letting the arcane charge within the blade slowly flow back into her body, where she then let it dissipate into the Universe.

Then she smiled and looked first at Elic, and then at Nia. “Looks like we have our first prisoner of this hunt.”

Nia raised a curious eyebrow, and said, “Indeed.”

Amaya sheathed her sword, and then nodded at their prisoner. “Let’s strip him of his armor and bind his hands. I get the feeling he can help us find our target...”

Every single muscle in Zerek’s body ached and felt ready to give out on him. His hands hurt, he already felt blisters forming on his feet, and it was all he could do to keep his eyes open.

He’d never felt so alive in his entire life!

Training to become a soldier was hard, but it was the closest he had ever come to realizing his greatest dream. Sure it wasn’t the same as becoming a Warrior, but it still gave him the chance to serve, to help others, to fight for his country.

It gave him a chance to make a difference.

In the training yard of the barracks, he was among the last of the soldiers to warily put away his training sword and shield. Both were made of nothing more than wood, but they were certainly heavy enough. Especially after a morning of physical training, and several hours of evening weapons training.

The only real break they had been given was a couple of hours of lecture before and after lunch. And lunch had only been a half an hour.

The work load was very similar to working the mines, so he knew he could handle it. In fact, he almost relished in it, realizing that while his stamina for running had improved over the past few

months, his upper body had grown weaker, his arm muscles decidedly smaller than when he had first fled the mines.

He rested at the weapon racks for a moment, holding onto the sword he had just placed in it, and closed his eyes. Yes, he was glad to be rebuilding his strength. But by the gods, it was hard, and this was just his first day!

Forcing his eyes open, he turned to follow the rest of the trainees inside. They would eat their evening meal, much later than he was used to from being in the castle, and then would spend the rest of their night in the bunks.

Just as he passed inside of the door, the last one in, Lieutenant Oban stepped out in front of him. She was a tall woman, very strong and very much a military officer. He had seen only a few soldiers before the war, but never had he seen one who fit the role of a trainer or a leader as well as she did, not even Torick.

“Zerek,” she looked down at him. He wasn’t short by any means, but she really was tall. “Step into my office.”

If his heart hadn’t already been beating from their efforts in the courtyard, it would have started to race, and his stomach sank to his toes. Did she know about him sneaking out last night? Her expression gave very little away.

Knowing he had no other choice, Zerek nodded and followed her down the hallway. While everyone else turned right into the mess hall, she led him through a door on the left, into a small office. He wasn’t sure what he should have expected, but the office was surprisingly inviting. It was furnished very well, with what had to be a very old, though well-maintained desk in the center, and several small paintings of former...what was Lieutenant Oban, anyway? Headmaster? Teacher? What did they call her?

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Zerek felt embarrassed when he realized he had no idea. His life had been spent in the mines, not studying military protocol. Hopefully that would be one of the many things he'd learn about in future classroom studies.

The only thing that was uninviting in her office was that there was only one chair, a finely-upholstered, if ancient-looking, high-backed chair. There were none for her students or guests to sit in, and just from his crash-course in protocol and etiquette that morning, he knew it meant he was to stand at attention before the desk.

From behind him came another soldier, Morrison Tennit, one of Oban's trainers. Morrison had worked closely with Zerek throughout the day to help get him up to speed, but he hadn't been kind or easy about it. Zerek understood that was how the military worked, but it didn't mean he liked being yelled at. He missed Torick.

Zerek still didn't know what to expect, and his pulse continued to race as he felt his skin turn clammy. Or more so than it already was.

Oban stepped around her desk and faced Zerek, but she did not sit down. She wore what he had learned was considered 'duty armor,' granted only to full-time soldiers and only those who had achieved a rank that meant they were not always on patrol or other duties. It was for those who spoke regularly to Commanders, Generals, and royalty. He also noted that she wore a tabard bearing the kingdom's symbol and colors, a black background with a mountain guarded by two crossed longswords in white.

Her face was still expressionless, and he had no idea if he was in trouble or what her reason was for calling him in. Should he start apologizing for last night now? No, what if she didn't know, and he revealed that he'd broken the rules?

He had to remain quiet, and find out what she actually wanted. So he simply stared at her chin, not knowing where else to look. It felt awkward to do so, but she was taller, and he definitely didn't want to look further down...

"Well, young man," Oban finally spoke, "I have to say that I am quite pleased with what I saw today."

Feeling surprised, he looked her in the eye, and asked, "Ma'am?"

"Your performance today," she nodded, clasping her hands behind her back, gathering her black and white-trimmed cape in the process. "Torick said you were a quick learner, and he was not exaggerating."

Feeling his cheeks flush, Zerek smiled and looked down at his feet for a moment, before looking her in the eyes again. He tried desperately to force any fatigue from his face. "Thank you."

"Nothing to thank me for," she shook her head, "just an appraisal of your skills. As I believe was explained to you yesterday, today was your initial assessment, to see if you could remain with this class, or if you would be forced to wait for the next training session to begin." She looked to Morrison. "What are your thoughts?"

Zerek looked at him, worried that the blonde man would not endorse him. He had never hesitated to insult Zerek when he failed at something.

Yet when Morrison brought his hand up to stroke his blonde goatee, all he did was smile and nod. "Indeed. Torick did well with you." Zerek resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Of course he gave someone other than Zerek the credit for his progress. "I would be willing to keep him on, so long as he doesn't stay up as late as he apparently did last night."

Once again, his face flushed, but he did not say anything, fearful of revealing himself. He instead turned to Oban, who frowned at Zerek and nodded. "Yes. Some of your performance showed great fatigue faster than it should have for a boy in your physical condition."

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“I apologize, Lieutenant,” Zerek looked down, almost feeling like Kai, the castle steward, was lecturing him again.

Oban brought her arms forward and folded them, “Well it matters little. Your performance was adequate when you were fatigued, I imagine you’ll be even better once you’ve actually had a good night’s sleep. Which you will, by the way.” He looked up, curious as to what she meant. She clarified, “Whatever kept you up last night, it won’t tonight. You’ll fall asleep the moment your head hits that bunk, I guarantee it.”

“I see,” he nodded, fearing that she was right.

Zerek was supposed to meet with Laira tonight, so that she could introduce him to the leader of the thieves. He was to propose his infiltration method into the castle, and discuss what exactly they needed while he was in there. More than that, he needed more convincing that there really was something wrong, and that someone attached to the throne was lying.

He could scarcely believe it. The very people who had taken him in after he had lost everything he had known...could they really be lying to the people? It seemed unlikely, but he had to at least consider the possibility. If only because Laira believed it so passionately.

“Well, then,” Oban nodded. “Go get yourself something to eat, and then rest up. Believe me,” she leaned forward, a small smile cracking her cold exterior, “You’re going to need it.”

Nodding, he said, “Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

He turned to leave, but then Oban stopped him, “Oh, and Zerek.” He paused, still fearful she knew of his plans. He slowly turned to face her, but her smile only broadened. “Welcome to the Archanon guard.”

Despite his fears, Zerek couldn’t help but smile, feeling the pressure and fear within him lighten for a moment. “Thank you,” he nodded.

Jon Wasik

Without looking back, he quickly crossed the hall to the mess, and gladly accepted every scrap of leftovers he found. Without looking at or talking to any of the others, he dug in and ate up every bit of food he could, not caring that it really didn't taste all that good. It was food. It was *meat*, for that matter. Fowl of some sort, he wasn't actually sure what.

However, when he came to the end of his meal, guilt began to creep into his soul. He looked around the room as most of the other trainees had finished and were getting up to turn in for the night.

He was learning how to stand side by side with these men and women, and defend the city from threats. Yet tonight, he would be discussing how to betray the oath he had given just that morning, just so that he could break into the castle and find some evidence of wrongdoing on the throne's part.

Something didn't sit well with him when he thought of that. Something dark and uncomfortable began to grow in his stomach, and he had to work at keeping the meal he had just finished down.

After he turned his plate and utensils in for cleaning, he walked back to the bunks in a daze, suddenly not sure what he should do. He knew he wanted to be with Laira, despite everything. He really did love her.

Yet the more he thought about betraying these people, his city, his King, the more it made his stomach twist and turn.

He needed more time, more convincing.

And without even realizing it, he gave himself another day. He found his lonely bunk and lay down on it, intent on giving the situation as much thought as he could before the others all fell asleep and he snuck out again.

Except that within moments of lying down, his eyes closed, and his nightmares found him.

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When dawn came the next morning, Arkad's mind had become a flurry of conflicting thoughts. He mentally flogged himself for even considering betraying his shaman, no matter what evidence was presented before him.

Honor and loyalty. These were the tenets central to an orc soldier's life. He could have chosen a different life for himself in his youth, but he had chosen to become a soldier to defend his people, knowing what it would cost him.

Orc soldiers had no personal lives, pure and simple. He was never to find a permanent mate, never to have children of his own, nothing that could jeopardize his service, his loyalty. That was the price all soldiers paid.

Honor and loyalty, above all else.

Then why did he feel betrayed? First by the Queen, for putting her life above all others, and then by their shaman, who directed the orcs into a hopeless, unwinnable war.

It had seemed so clear before. The shaman had saved him and his people where the Queen had failed. Brought them to a world they could take as their own and rebuild the orc civilization. All they had to do was clear the humans out of the way.

All they had to do...was kill.

He literally reeled on his bed in anger, the thought of what that entailed enraging him, startling the guards in the hut.

His Shaman, a woman whose name he didn't even know, had sent him and his people out to kill not just soldiers and Warriors, but innocent men and women. Children.

Their mission had been to exterminate the humans to make way for a new order for the orcs. What angered him the most, what made him growl and glare at the guards in a near-blind blood rage, was the realization that he had allowed himself to be manipulated, allowed himself to view humans as lesser beings, as unworthy of life.

Jon Wasik

As the guards drew their weapons, ready to defend themselves, his anger redirected back to the humans. Weren't they the ones who had treated his people, those who had lived on Halarite for the past three thousand years, like vermin? Did they not bother to try to live peacefully with the orcs?

Arkad didn't know when he had risen to his feet, but his four guards looked absolutely terrified. His hairless head pushed up into the ceiling, and no doubt made him look foreboding.

Who should he be angry at? The Shaman? The Queen? The humans? Klaralin, for bringing them all here to fight his war?

It was as if everyone had used and manipulated the orcs, and he hated them all!

Letting loose a terrifying roar, Arkad took one step towards the guards, ready to shove them aside and rescue his men. Until the flap opened, and Tana stepped inside. She held her hand out before her, a blue flash emanating from it, but not making contact with him.

"Arkad!" she shouted, her voice surprisingly powerful when she was angry. "Do not!"

The blood rage abated just enough for him to stop himself from charging. He knew that she could simply use magic to incapacitate him again, and he did not relish the idea of waking up with that cold feeling, or those aching muscles, again.

"Do not let the blood rage control you again," Tana's voice had softened ever so slightly. "That is how she controls you."

That was enough to completely push back the rage. Instead, his anger was replaced by a sudden emptiness, a sensation of his stomach sinking into the depths of the world, right to the very center.

Silence engulfed the tent, and Arkad felt his shoulders slouch. His eyes fell to the ground as emptiness consumed him.

"It's how she controls everyone," Tana spoke softly, taking a tentative step towards him. The four guards looked nervously at her, but did not move. Their weapons were still pointed at Arkad, their stances uncertain, and still with a hint of fear.

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In battle, the blood rage could be both a boon and a curse. While it gave one a single-minded strength and will, it also meant they became blind to everything that happened around them, anything outside of their focus.

It was exactly what had happened to him, and to all of his people.

“I’ve been so blind, haven’t I?” he asked, his voice nearly a whisper.

Tana stepped closer, and gingerly reached a hand out to touch one of his forearms. He looked into her eyes, a striking green with just a hint of red. Whereas her words before had helped quell the blood rage, it was her touch that helped fill the emptiness, and drive away the darkness.

“We all have,” she replied. “That is why I came here, to escape the lies. To escape the treachery. To escape the end of our civilization, and preserve what I could.”

He frowned at her, and asked, “You knew the end was coming?”

She clenched her jaw and looked down at his feet. After a moment, she nodded and looked back up to him to say, “Not exactly the way it happened, but I knew it was inevitable. I felt the dread creeping into every corner of our world, anticipating the invasion. I saw the Queen’s mind slowly losing control. And I felt the coming of darkness, like a wave overshadowing the shoreline.”

Sighing slowly, Arkad eased back onto the bed, which creaked slowly under his weight. Tana allowed him to sit, her hand sliding down his forearm, then his hand, until the touch was broken. He feared the darkness would return, but it did not. Not yet.

“How can I trust you?” he asked.

Remaining silent for what felt like ages, Tana finally shook her head. “I do not know. But perhaps it can start by showing you trust. Come,” she started to back away. “Let us go for a walk. Your men would be greatly reassured by your presence.”

Jon Wasik

Feeling as if it would also do him some good, he nodded and stood up again, careful not to push against the ceiling again. The guards still had their weapons drawn, but one look from Tana and they quickly stowed them. She paused between the guards and looked at one carefully. "Remain here."

They did not question her order and simply stepped further away from the entrance, bowing their heads to her. Arkad was surprised at first, thinking it was yet another show of great trust. Perhaps that was what she meant it to be. However, he quickly remembered that she was more powerful than anyone he had ever encountered before. She would never need guards to protect herself. No, they had been stationed in his, for lack of a better term, prison to ensure he did not escape.

Watching the guards cautiously, he stepped forward and followed Tana through the flap, having to bend almost halfway down to fit through.

When he emerged, the sun blinded him at first, still low in the sky directly ahead. He stood up straight, feeling his muscles protest at finally stretching out, and brought his hand up to shield his eyes.

He couldn't even begin to guess where they were, or how far away they were from the ruined To'kar village. But one thing was for certain, their numbers had grown. He remembered being told that some of the orcs that had been sent to the To'kar village to force them to fight had instead joined with the rogue tribe, but that couldn't possibly account for the sprawling collection of tents and huts spread around the area.

There had to be thousands of orcs here! Enough to stand against the Shaman. Enough, he realized, to start over again.

Arkad also noted that there were no permanent structures. Granted that was common in the Wastelands, but every hut, every structure looked easy to dismantle, pack up, and leave with. This wasn't where they were settling, it was just where they had stopped for the moment.

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Tana gently touched Arkad's elbow and began to lead him further into the camp, so he followed while staring at his surroundings, at the numerous orcs he saw. It was families, pure and simple. More female orcs than he had seen in one place since his arrival on Halarite. More children.

Children...his orders had been to wipe out half of the To'kar. Did the shaman mean for his men to slaughter half of the children, too?

It wasn't long before they arrived at another tent, guarded on the outside by two orcs. Tana ordered them to bring forth their prisoner, and a moment later, Telark emerged. Like Arkad, he no longer wore his armor and had been clothed in a simple leather shirt and trousers. Once Arkad had spoken to Telark and was sure he was being well-treated, they moved on to the next tent, and the next.

When Tana brought him to the last tent, he felt his veins turn to ice. "If this is the last, then two of my men are missing."

She hesitated in her next response, but then nodded and looked him in the eye. "Yes. I thought you might notice, but I wasn't sure how to break the news to you. I'm still not sure how I can...how I can tell you."

Clenching his jaw and standing up straight, he nodded. "Two were killed in your attempts to capture us."

The energy he could see behind her eyes wavered, but she did not confirm what he suspected. Instead, she hesitantly said, "Two of your men would not be subdued easily, and they were wounded before I could get to them."

Looking to the tent, Arkad felt his heart beat faster in fear. He had not seen Kilack yet, his best friend and trusted lieutenant. Was he in there? Or was he dead?

"We are soldiers," he said quietly, his eyes never leaving the flap of the tent. Tana motioned to one of the guards, who entered the tent at her command. "To be captured is a grave dishonor. If you

had not..." He felt his muscles tighten at the thought, and he shook his head. "I am glad to be alive, but I feel shameful for my dishonor."

At first, Tana did nothing more than stare at him. When the silence grew deafening, she approached him and lightly touched his elbow, sending pins and needles up and down his arm. Arkad looked into her eyes, and once again found warmth.

"I am sorry," she spoke to him softly. What surprised him most was the sincerity in her eyes. She truly was sorry, and it made his heart beat a little bit softer. "I hope you will one day feel it was worth it."

It was then that something happened that had not happened in nearly a year. A smile crept across Arkad's face, and a small sense of hope kindled in his chest.

If only it could have lasted longer. The tent flap opened, and one of the guards preceded the occupant out. It was not Kilack.

While Arkad's spirits once again sank to a renewed low, he was pleasantly surprised by whom it was. "Tezarik," he approached the orc and clasped him on the shoulder.

"General," Tezarik nodded. "I am pleased to see you are alive and well."

"And you," Arkad replied.

"I overheard some of your conversation," Tezarik looked to Tana, then back at Arkad. "Who are we missing?"

Letting his hands drop uselessly to his sides, Arkad sighed deeply. "Kilack and Morkind."

Tezarik closed his eyes and clenched his jaw. "Not Kilack..."

For a moment, they remained silent by each other, each grieving for the loss of a great warrior. Arkad had lost so much in the past year that he was surprised by how deeply he felt the loss. Would he ever become accustomed to losing those closest to him? He had been taught from his youth that loss was inevitable, but he had lost so many of his men in the past year.

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“There is something else I must tell you,” Tana spoke hesitantly, stepping closer to them.

Arkad turned to face her, but did not think there was anything she could say that could help lighten his spirits. If anything, he felt she probably had only more bad news for him.

Tana hesitated, but then nodded and said, “One of those two men still lives.”

Feeling his heart leap into his throat, Arkad drew closer to her, “What? Who?”

“I do not know,” she shook her head. “His wounds were grave, and he was unconscious when we left. We thought he was dead. But my scouts reported to me last night that a human party hunting your troops entered our abandoned encampment and were attacked by a survivor from your team. He was too weak to do much of anything, and collapsed.”

Arkad felt his hands clench into fists. “So he is dead after all.” Why would she tell him only to dash his hopes once again? Was she manipulating him, too?

“No,” she frowned and stared up at him. “The humans did not kill him. They stripped him of his armor and have him tied up while they tend to his wounds. He has not woken up, but from what the scouts can see, he is still alive.”

Exchanging a hopeful and determined look with Tezarik, Arkad said, “We must go rescue him, now!”

He began to look around, as if he could spot where she had placed his armor and axe, but she once again gently touched his arm. “Not yet.”

“It could be Kilack,” he glared down at her. “We cannot leave his fate to that of the humans.”

“I know, Arkad,” she more firmly grasped at his arm, her hand that of a child’s in comparison to his mass. “But think about it. Why did the humans not kill him? Why are they tending to his wounds? We have been led to believe that the humans treat all orcs as monsters, to be slaughtered without regard.”

Feeling impatient, he shook his head and backed away from her, breaking their touch. “What’s your point?”

“These humans may be worth speaking to,” she replied. “If they know about you, and they learn about our tribe, the armies might never stop hunting for us in the Wastelands.” She looked around, opening her arms up to encompass the camp around them. “I do not want us to live in fear of attack for the rest of our lives. I wish to find a peaceful corner of the Wastelands to try to rebuild. And if these humans do not view us as monsters, if they are willing to treat one of our wounded with respect, then perhaps they would be willing to negotiate a peace on our behalf.”

Arkad almost told her that peace with these humans was impossible, but then he stopped himself short of that. His instinct still was to think of humans as horrible, evil beings. But that was what the Shaman had wanted him to believe, wasn’t it?

Tana was right. They needed to think carefully about how to proceed, about how to rescue Kilack.

He also realized that she already was forming a plan, if she was thinking of negotiating with the humans. “What do you have in mind?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

Tana drew in a deep breath, and then nodded. “I need your help.”

When the orc awoke, it was already mid-morning, and the sun marched steadily upwards. Amaya sat in front of a small campfire, staring into the flames.

Her thoughts had wandered all night, and sleep had been difficult to find. She kept thinking about the Ironwood assault, and the choice she had almost made then. Looking up across the fire, she stared at the orc, slumbering in nothing but the simple undergarment it had been wearing beneath its armor, and a blanket tossed over it to help keep it warm, and ensure its modesty.

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Only a few months ago, she had nearly killed orcs in their sleep. Had ordered her team to do the same. So who were the real monsters?

The orc suddenly jerked, as if waking from a bad dream, and his yellow eyes shot open. He snorted, and tried to sit up, only to find it difficult with his wrists, ankles, and even his knees bound together. The blanket partially fell off of his chest, revealing the mass of muscles that powered him.

Amaya slowly stood up, and the rest of her team focused entirely on the orc. Vin drew his daggers and began to approach the orc, but Amaya held up a hand. The orc continued to struggle, and she could hear the leather bindings strain, even though he was wounded.

She had pulled her sword and sheath off to sit on the ground, and she considered picking it up to lash it back onto her belt, but then decided against it. Making the orc feel more threatened than it already did would only make things harder.

Then it began talking to her. But not in any language she understood. With hard consonants and short vowels, it sounded like nothing but gibberish, and her spirits sank. The orc didn't speak their language.

"What in the name of the Six is it saying?" Nerina asked, her hands hovering over the mace strapped to her hip. Amaya lauded her for her restraint.

It was Nia who spoke up, "I believe it is their native tongue." Everyone stopped and looked to her, waiting for further explanation. No one on Halarite had ever heard orcs speak anything other than, well, what she supposed she should call 'human language.'

In fact, no one had heard another language spoken on Halarite in thousands of years. Each of the kingdoms once had their own languages, or so history books stated, but those languages had been lost during Klaralin's reign. He had forced all kingdoms to speak one language. While the Lesser Wars had continued to rage long after Klaralin's first defeat, none of the kingdoms returned to their old languages.

At least, not overtly. Their written forms were often used to help keep letters secret during wartime.

“So they spoke another language before they learned ours?” Gell asked. He was behind the orc and had to talk over its incessant rambling.

“It would seem so,” Nia nodded.

It wasn't long before the orc heaved a giant sigh, blowing the dust beneath it out into the air. It suddenly began to take sharp breaths in, and she wondered if its wounds were flaring up again...only then it sneezed, hard enough to blow out a renewed cloud of dust around it.

She almost laughed, especially when the orc shook its head rapidly to try to clear its sinuses out. It growled and glared right at her. It clearly recognized her as the leader.

“Well that's useless,” Elic walked up next to Amaya. “How can we interrogate it if we can't understand it?”

Idalia, off to Amaya's right, nodded in agreement. “Even if it was willing to tell us where Arkad is-“

“Which I doubt it would,” Elic added.

“-We couldn't understand it,” Idalia finished. “We should send it back to Tal for imprisonment. Maybe someone there can figure out its language.”

Suddenly Vin began to walk towards it, and Amaya felt her pulse quicken. “Or we could just end its misery right here,” he spoke quietly.

“Vin,” she barked at him. Both he and the orc looked at her, startled. “We don't kill unarmed prisoners.”

He frowned at her, his daggers still poised at the ready. “It's an orc. An animal. Who cares?”

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A part of her wanted to agree with him. A strong part. Even with King Sal'fe using the Staff of Aliz to resurrect fallen soldiers and Warriors, the war had been devastating and costly. There was a time limit to the Staff's powers. If a person was dead for too long, they could not be revived.

Such as those at the Relkin Mining Camp. When that young man, Zerek, had lost his family. She had made it a point to find out more about him after he helped stop the orcs in Archanon.

Not to mention the fact that Sal'fe did not have the time to spare, nor did Tal have the funds to pay for the use of the staff to heal non-lethal wounds. Those Warriors would live with scars and, in some cases, great pain for the rest of their lives.

However, that thought gave way to Arkad refusing to attack her when Zerek and his lady friend had come to help her. He'd refused to kill children.

So she gave Vin her most venomous glare, and nodded, "Stow your blades and go walk it off." When he didn't move, she turned to face him fully. "Now!"

It was the first time any one of her team had questioned her orders, but if anyone would have, it would have been Vin. Not because he was defiant by nature, but because he held a greater hatred for the orcs than anyone else.

Grumbling, he put away his blades, and turned to stalk off. Amaya began to realize just how much trouble capturing the orc was going to cause her.

For several moments, she watched as Vin walked away, her thoughts wavering between being sympathetic to his desires and her unwillingness to kill unarmed...people. She was brought back to the situation at hand when Elic began nudging her. "Amaya."

When she turned back to the orc, it was grunting and motioning its head, looking off to her right. She followed its eyes, and saw that it was motioning towards its weapons and armor, piled two dozen feet away from it.

“What is it doing?” Idalia asked. “Does it really think we’ll let it have access to its enchanted weapons or armor?”

When it looked again at Amaya, it stopped its motions and grunts and stared at her. Then it said something, a word she couldn’t understand, and then looked at its armor. It did this three times, looking at her, repeating the word, and looking at the armor.

With a frown on her face, she walked over to the armor and knelt down. The orc nodded, and repeated the word again.

There was something in the pile that it wanted her to find. So she started sifting through it all, holding up various pieces of the armor. It used a different word and shook its head. So she held up another piece, and he did the same thing. Over and over, she tried every individual piece of armor or clothing, and it said a different word for each one and shook its head.

Until she held up a necklace with a small black crystal. When she held it up, the orc repeated the first word, nodding its head emphatically.

“I believe the orc wishes you to give him the necklace,” Nia tilted her head to one side.

Standing up straight, Amaya observed the necklace carefully. As with all of the orc’s weapons and armor, she felt a power emanate from it that made her neck hairs stand up on end. It was enchanted, but with a power she had never encountered before the orc war. A powerful magic.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Elic shook his head. “Who knows what that will do. It could give it greater strength, allow it to break through its bindings, protect it from a spell...”

Amaya shook her head, “We could guess all day at its purpose and never figure it out.” Looking to Nia, she asked, “Can you determine its purpose?”

The Wizard had already been moving over to inspect the gem, and held her free hand out to accept it from Amaya. She closed her fist around it, and then closed her eyes. There was a pulse of power that emanated from her, but it soon faded.

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Opening her eyes and her hand, she shook her head, “I cannot say for certain. It does not appear to be offensive in nature, but beyond that...” She was about to hand it back over to Amaya, but then stopped. The look of suspicion on her face was palpable.

“What is it?” Amaya asked, suddenly worried. “Is it dangerous?”

Nia looked at her in surprise. “No, but I think I have an idea of what purpose it may serve. How much do you know of the elf that visited Halarite?”

Tilting her head to one side, she shrugged, “Not a whole lot. Just what rumors have been going around. The Order thought she was a demon, but the Prince determined she was not. And she ended up helping Cardin Kataar finish off Kailar.”

“She was from another world,” Nia looked at her, the first spark of excitement she had ever seen in the Wizard giving her eyes a glow. “And she does not speak our language. But she was able to communicate with everyone because of a pendant she wore. An enchanted pendant that allowed her to understand our words and us to understand her words.”

Feeling her jaw drop, Amaya’s eyes fell upon the unremarkable black gem on the necklace. It was magic beyond anything known on Halarite, but then again, so was the magic that enchanted the darksteel orcs’ weapons and armor.

“We still can’t give it to him,” Elic insisted. “We can’t get close to him, not while he’s awake and, well, pissed off.”

She looked at the orc, its eyes darting between her and the necklace. It grunted and nodded.

That’s when it clicked. “No, that’s not what it wants.”

Everyone frowned at her, but instead of explaining, she picked up the necklace and began to pull it over her head.

“No!” several voices shouted at her.

But it was too late, and the necklace was already around her neck.

Jon Wasik

“You fool,” Nia stepped away. “I said I suspected, I do not know for certain!”

“Can you understand me now?”

It was when that voice spoke that everyone stopped chastising her. Everyone looked between her and the orc expectantly, wondering if she had understood it. She looked into its sharp, yellow eyes, and nodded. “Yes,” she nodded at it. “Can you understand me?”

Heaving a great sigh of relief, the orc nodded. “Yes, I can.”

It spoke very well, very clearly, unlike the broken sentences that the Wastelands orcs formed. Then again, she realized it was likely far more comfortable speaking its native language, and the stone translated it into perfect human language.

Human language...that was a thought that was going to take getting used to.

She slowly approached it, and then, ensuring that she kept her distance, she knelt down to be able to talk to it easier.

No, not it, she realized. Him. She had to stop thinking of it like a thing. Maybe, just maybe, if she treated it better...

“My name is Amaya,” she said. “What’s yours?”

The orc stared at her for a long moment, before it allowed its head to lie back on the ground, putting his neck at an awkward angle. He seemed to be considering whether or not to answer her question, as if giving her his name would somehow give her power over him.

Finally, he sighed, and said, “My name is Kilack. Lieutenant in the service of General Arkad.”

She felt her jaw drop slightly, not having realized that they had one of their target’s most trusted soldiers in their midst. This could work out better than she expected.

“Where is your General?” she asked.

He narrowed his eyes at her, but did not speak.

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“Is he still alive?” Again, no response. “At least one of your other darksteel soldiers was killed here, and your team appears to have been overwhelmed. You’re on your own, and I have to assume that you wanted to be able to talk to me for some reason.”

For another long moment, the orc did not respond. Finally, however, it lifted its head up, and looked intently at her. “We were ambushed. I believe by the very orcs we were sent to find.”

She frowned at his statement. *Why were they sent to find other orcs?*

Instead of asking questions, she patiently waited for Kilack to continue. “Only they weren’t supposed to have any sort of magic on their side. Our weapons and armor, our training, should have given us an advantage. Yet they were able to defeat us quickly. They incapacitated the General at the very beginning. Smart, but cowardly. They have no honor...”

Amaya was surprised to hear that the orcs had a concept of honor. Everything she thought she knew about them pointed to them having no sense of honor, nor a sense of cowardice, just the basic animal instinct to survive.

He sighed and looked down at the dirt. “I would have rather died in battle, but they left me for dead. Left me to die slowly of my wounds...”

She shook her head, “Hopefully that won’t happen.” She motioned towards his bandaged left rib cage. “Hopefully you’ll heal.”

Kilack was ready to say something, but then he clamped his mouth shut. “Yes. Hopefully.”

She waited for Kilack to continue, but he said nothing more. Was that all there was? “Where is your General now?”

He continued to avert his eyes for several more moments, but then he looked at her, “I do not know. I’ve failed him.”

“Not necessarily,” she shook her head. “If you were searching for these orcs, where were you going to go next?”

Jon Wasik

The orc once again took several moments to respond, no doubt wondering what he should or shouldn't tell her. "We never had time to figure that out. The ambush happened before we could begin to discern which direction the tribe fled."

"I see," she sighed and looked down. She began to lose her balance for a moment from crouching down so long, so she stood up and looked back at her team. They all waited impatiently for her to tell them what was going on.

For a moment, she thought the pendant had actually changed her words when she spoke. "What of all of that could you understand?"

Elic shook his head, "Only your words, not his."

"Ah," she nodded. "Well, apparently they were trying to find this tribe of orcs, only to be ambushed by them. Sounds to me like dissent in the ranks."

She looked back down at Kilack, but he did not confirm nor deny her assertion. "He also claims they never found out which direction the tribe had originally fled in."

"Then we're stuck," Idalia sighed. "We don't know where to go."

"For all we know," Gell spoke up, "They've already killed Arkad for us."

She looked for a response from Kilack, but then remembered that he could understand only her. "Maybe, but we have to be sure," she shook her head. "Or our mission is a failure."

"Perhaps I can help," Nia said. "I may be able to ascertain where their outgoing portal traveled to."

Everyone looked at the Wizard in shock. "You can?"

"Perhaps," she shrugged. "I am quite skilled at portals for my age. However, it will require several hours uninterrupted."

She nodded, and said, "Work as quickly as you can. We may not have much time before this other orc tribe moves on."

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As Nia turned and began to walk towards where they had found the exit portal earlier, Amaya turned back to Elic. He asked, “What are you going to do?”

For a moment, she hesitated, taking in a breath but holding it a moment. Finally, she let it out and looked at Kilack. “I’m going to see if I can’t get to know our prisoner a little bit better.”

“Ouch,” Zerek whispered to himself, pinching the back of his hand as hard as he dared. It was all he could do to stay awake. After another exhausting day of training, he wanted to stay awake so that he could try to rendezvous with Laira.

He’d been distracted throughout most of the day, still performing his training, but his mind and his heart weren’t fully into it. He kept wondering...was he doing the right thing? Should he even sneak out tonight? Even if he did, should he tell Laira that he’d made a mistake, that he couldn’t betray the oath he took not two days ago to protect and serve the kingdom and the city?

The truth was, he probably wasn’t going to be able to decide. Not unless he knew more about what the thieves were trying to prove.

Which meant that when he was certain everyone in the barracks was asleep, which given everyone’s exhaustion, wasn’t all that late, he forced himself to ease up out of the bunk and sneak out.

It was certainly a different experience, sneaking out of what was essentially a small fortress. There were regular patrols, but his experience sneaking out of the Castle District proved invaluable. Especially since they left the main gate open this time, much to his surprise.

His original rendezvous was somewhere that meant a great deal to both him and Laira – the rooftop upon which he had first found her, that fateful night when he meant to climb the Warrior tower to earn her love.

Only even after his failure, she still ran with him across the rooftops, still spent the next couple of months holding his hand, making him feel like the world was a ray of sunshine. Did she stay with him

because of her mission? Or had her test, tasking him with sneaking up onto the tower, been meant to see if he was worthy of enlisting or not?

It made his head spin, and he began to feel like he no longer knew which way was up.

Within minutes, he made it to that flat rooftop, climbing up with practiced ease, only giving a casual glance around for patrols. He knew that most of the patrols now focused on what were perceived to be the most vulnerable parts of the city, not in the center where there could be no surprises.

Laira was already on the rooftop waiting anxiously for him. She hadn't heard his ascent, but the moment she noticed him approaching, she didn't say a word, she simply flew at him and wrapped her arms around him, nearly knocking him over.

Her embrace was warm and firm, and he couldn't help but wrap his arms around her waist to hold her close. Wishing the moment could last forever, he closed his eyes and let himself become lost in that moment of happiness.

"I was starting to get worried," she whispered, pulling away just enough to press her lips to his. Further losing himself to her touch, to her breath, her taste, her lips, he wanted to run away with her. Leave the city, the thieves, everything behind. Everything that was making him doubt who he was and what he was doing.

When she finally pulled away, he slowly opened his eyes, searching for hers in the dark of the night. "I'm sorry," he said, touching his forehead to hers. "I fell asleep last night. It's so much work, so difficult..."

She smiled, "It's okay. You're here now, that's what matters."

They remained in each other's embrace for at least several moments, his sleepiness long since gone. How long could they remain as they were, standing atop a rooftop across the street from the Warriors' Guild, unnoticed?

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Not long, he wagered. So he pulled away a little, taking her hand, and nodded. “Lead the way.”

With nothing more than a smile in response, she turned and pulled him along. Within seconds, they were in a full run, scrambling across rooftops, leaping over streets together with the grace of linked dragonflies, their movements synced as if they had known each other their whole lives.

Zerek had expected her to lead them to the canals, but instead she brought them to an old, abandoned building in the Blue District, where they entered as if they belonged there. Zerek was aware of the two guards just inside of the door, though hidden in the shadows. His experiences and his training were paying off. But the guards did not move, and allowed them to pass.

Within the old stone building was a basement, where they found a small hole in the ground. It was obviously man-made, but the remnants of the original ladder were all but useless, and a makeshift wooden ladder took them down into the depths of the cold, smelly sewers.

It took him a long time to get used to the smell. No, actually, he never really did, but when they finally stood before the entrance to their destination, he had finally stopped gagging. It was all Laura could do to not laugh at him.

Once they did stand before the entrance, atop a bridge over an underground canal, an apparently natural breeze through the sewer system helped abate the smell. The guard at the heavy steel door greeted Laura with a mischievous grin. Looking at Zerek, he laughed, “So this is the little heart thief.”

Laura’s blush was visible even in the flickering torch light. “Yeah. Is Sorin still in?”

Stepping aside, the large man grunted and motioned inward with his head. “Grumpy as he is over having to wait.” He looked hard at Zerek. “Again.”

He felt compelled to apologize to the big man, even though he had no idea who he was, but he managed to just keep his mouth shut. He was definitely in unfamiliar territory now.

“Thanks, Mekan,” Laura said wearily, tugging Zerek past him.

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What Zerek saw then was completely unexpected. It looked to be a series of ancient aqueducts, crisscrossing over and under one another. The everlasting torches could not illuminate the entire chamber, and it gave him the impression of being within a great cave.

No mine that he had ever stood in could compare. They had all been carved out to their minimum heights, tall enough for a person to walk through, barely, but never anything so grand. Nothing like this.

He didn't even think humans could build such things today, let alone however many thousands of years ago this had been built...

Laira allowed him a moment to gawk, but then pulled him along the edge of the great pit, until they came to a small sectioned-off area. Against the back wall was a map of Archanon, and surrounding a large wooden table were what he assumed to be the ranking members of the thieves. Assuming they even had ranks of any kind.

The man in the center was the one who caught his attention. Long black hair pulled back in a pony tail, the shadow of a beard, and piercing blue eyes. The same man that had caught Zerek and Endel in the alley when he first searched for Laira.

"Zerek," she brought him up to the only unoccupied side of the square table, "May I introduce Sorin, our leader."

His stomach did back flips, and his mind immediately turned suspicious. The leader had directed him to Laira. Had she even left the note on his person as he originally thought, or had Sorin planted it on him? How much had he really been manipulated?

Turning to look at Laira, searching her eyes for some sign that everything was okay, she instead seemed to avert her eyes, from both him and Sorin. She felt guilty, he realized. Could she know what he was thinking now? The pieces that had clicked together in his head?

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After a moment of silence, he turned to Sorin, who regarded him with a frown. “Is everything okay, young man?”

Not knowing what else to say, Zerek simply shrugged and nodded. “Sure.”

Clearly skeptical, but willing to let it pass, Sorin nodded. “I’m glad you agreed to meet with us. How much has Laira explained to you?”

Once again, Zerek shrugged. “Not a whole lot. Just that you all believe the throne is lying to the people about something, and that you’re willing to risk everything to figure out what, to find proof, and expose the lies.”

He once again glanced at Laira, but she kept her eyes locked on the table. He looked at where she stared, and took notice of papers strewn across it, papers he hadn’t noticed before. In fact, the one she stared at specifically was the set of orders from his first mission. The orders she had stolen from him.

In the span of a moment, he felt awe when he realized the chain of events that had led him to the sanctuary of thieves in Archanon. On one hand, he had gotten in serious trouble for losing those orders. Yet that failure had prompted his being given training to defend himself, giving him the skills to impress Amaya Kenla when the orcs invaded, and ultimately leading him to being enrolled to become a city soldier.

Was life really so interwoven and complicated?

“That’s pretty accurate,” Sorin leaned one hip against the table, showing him his profile while he folded his arms. He wore dark clothes, pretty much what he’d expect for a thief to wear at night, and his clothes were in considerably better shape than Laira’s.

Another one of the thieves at the table, a woman not much older than Sorin, chimed in, “We think the kingdom is, for all intensive purposes, broke.”

Her word usage made him pause, but it was another person, a young blonde man opposite of her, that called her out on it. "Intents and purposes, you dolt."

The woman literally growled at his correction, and it was all Zerek could do not to chuckle at the exchange.

However, his grin faded when he realized what they had just said. "Wait, what?" his jaw dropped. "You can't be serious."

Sorin nodded. "We are. Look at what's in front of you," he motioned to the papers on the table. "Every single one of these are orders we've intercepted from the throne. Orders. Nothing more. Did they provide you with gold to pay for the orders you placed or retrieve?"

Zerek thought for a moment, and realized that no, he had never been given gold. He had simply assumed it wasn't necessary, or that someone who *hadn't* failed his first mission would have been trusted to deliver payment.

He took a closer look at the papers, especially at the one he knew to be his first assignment. That document had been burned into his memory, so he really didn't need to look at it, but he did anyway.

The word "credit" stood out to him. A credit of three gold pieces to the blacksmith for horseshoes. A credit of two to Farmer Alexton for the vegetables and grains listed in the order.

He looked at another set of orders. More credit. Another set, and more credit. There were a handful that had statements like, "trade goods delivered with this letter," for payment, but mostly they all said credit.

No gold. Not one single piece of silver. No mention of precious metals or coins.

There were over two dozen orders strewn about the table, and he felt his stomach sink.

"How can the King be poor?" he asked, looking up at Sorin in awe.

But it was Laira who answered. "Because the Prince was an idiot."

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Looking at her in shock, he almost backed away. Such a statement could have easily landed someone in the stockade for a day. “Laira?”

Her jaw was clenched tight, as were her fists. She leaned against the table for a moment, but then pushed off and turned to face him fully. “He overextended the kingdom with all of his new laws and in enforcing them. He very nearly destroyed free trade in doing so, and then tried to tax non-existent trade. Started resorting to *other methods* to fund his stupidity.” He immediately noticed how much emphasis she’d placed on the words ‘other methods.’

Before he could ask about that, however, Sorin spoke up. “The King is covering it up,” he said.

The woman that had spoken before chimed in, “But that’s only making things more bad.” After so much time learning proper speech from Kai Loric, Zerek cringed at her poor grammar. “And if they don’t come forward soon, it’ll only get way worse.”

Raising a curious eyebrow, and feeling like he might regret asking her to speak further, he inquired, “How so?”

Thankfully it was Sorin who answered. “The economy has surged in the repair efforts,” he pushed off of the table and turned to fully face Zerek. “However, all of those credits, if gone unpaid, will soon result in everyone having no money with which to buy more supplies. Buy more seed. Pay people to work for them. Pay for repairs and equipment.”

Zerek frowned, trying to wrap his head around it. He could see the point, no one worked for free. What good was credit from the throne if they could never use it to pay for the things they needed just to make their livelihood?

But could it really be all that bad? Plus, as he looked at the papers...was it really true anyway?

“I don’t...I don’t understand,” he frowned. “The King protects us. We serve the King, and he provides us anything we need. Isn’t that how it’s always been?”

The incredulous look on Sorin's face made him turn red in embarrassment, his heart beating a little harder as if he'd just been frightened. "Kid...it hasn't worked that way in a very long time. Centuries at least, probably longer. The kingdoms have grown too big for that old system to work. This world runs on gold and trade. The thrones merely govern us and, through money, pay the Warriors and soldiers to enforce their rule."

"How do you not know this?" the grammatically-challenged woman asked. Hearing her say it almost made him break down, feeling like a total idiot.

It had never come up. Not while working with his father, not while listening in on negotiations for their latest lodes. Not in Kai's teachings. Not even in the two days of training he'd received at the barracks.

He'd never thought beyond his own life.

Feeling completely lost, and wishing he wasn't the center of attention, he looked to Laira. She looked at him with sympathy, but didn't seem to know what to say. All she could do was draw closer to him and hold his hand. As if knowing that he was looking for someone to confirm for him what the others were saying, she nodded once.

Shaking his head, he again looked down at all of the documents. "So...if that's true, what do we do?" He looked up at Sorin's sharp blue eyes. "What are you planning to do?"

"We need evidence," Sorin leaned forward and planted his hands firmly on the table. "We need to show the people what the throne has done, force them to come clean. Let the *people* decide what to do."

He felt scared at the idea, all those people, hundreds, even thousands, finding out their city had been rebuilt upon a fake foundation. Would they panic, like he was starting to do now? What would happen?

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Having no idea how to respond, what he should or shouldn't say about his fears, he looked again at all of the orders on the table. "This isn't proof enough?"

Sorin shook his head, "It's all circumstantial. No one will believe this is proof of anything."

That's when he remembered that they wanted someone on the inside, in the castle, to help them accomplish their goals. He felt a horrible cinch in his throat, and had to gulp it down before he could meet Sorin's gaze again. Laira gave his hand a squeeze of encouragement, and it was the only thing keeping him from running away.

"I guess I should ask...what do you need me for?"

Standing up tall, now suddenly a very intimidating figure, Sorin folded his arms and looked down his nose at Zerek. "Well, we originally needed you to sneak into the coffers, or into the King's study, or into the Governor's offices, and find some document, some proof, that the throne has no gold to back itself. But since you don't work in the castle anymore, I'm not sure that you *can* help us. But Laira said you might be able to get us in."

Endel's innocent-looking face suddenly passed before his eyes. What sort of trouble might he be getting his friend into with this?

But at the same time, he felt like a complete idiot in front of these people. He didn't even know the basics of how society was built.

Once again having to gulp down a lump in his throat, he nodded. "Yeah. I know how to get in. And...and I know someone who might be able to help us sneak around the castle."

A wide grin crossed Sorin's face, one which twisted a knot into Zerek's stomach. "Good."

Amaya's dreams were always the same. Claps of thunder, flashes of lightening, and *him* standing before her. He was bigger in the dream, twice her size. And she was helpless before him. He would backhand her, hard enough to send her flying across the grassy field, until she tumbled to a stop.

She would fight back. Or try to, but he was too strong, too powerful. She couldn't touch him. But he could touch her, and he did so with such violence, asserting his will over her, until...

Until she awoke, a scream just ready to escape her lips. Amaya bolted upright, the world spinning around her for a moment as she tried to remember where she was.

The orc village. She was in the abandoned orc village, surrounded by her team, and safe. Or at least, as safe as she could be in the wilderness of the Wastelands. There was a creature, a small, hideous, furry one was only a few feet away, barely illuminated by the predawn glow. It hissed at her, baring two-inches-long teeth at her. With barely a flick of concentration, she flicked her fingers at it and released a highly uncontrolled and very weak blast of magic at it.

It did little more than nudge it, as she expected without using a weapon to focus her powers, but it frightened the...rat? No, rats were more attractive looking than it was. Never-the-less, it scampered away, terrified of the one that could touch it without touching it.

She noticed that Elic and Idalia, both asleep nearby, stirred at her use of magic, their Mage senses pulsing from her uncontrolled use of power. Further away, Nerina, who was awake and on watch, looked at her with bemusement, as well as an apologetic look for letting the creature get past her.

Amaya nodded to her, but remained sitting on top of her blanket. It was still warm enough, at least down in the Wastelands, that she didn't need to cover up at night, and she was thankful for the precious little cushioning the blanket gave her.

She closed her eyes to rub them, but the images of her dream flashed before her, and she had to force her eyelids open to keep the images away.

Din had never actually forced himself on her like he did in her nightmares, but that didn't seem to stop her dreams from making her feel like he had. It didn't stop the images from haunting her. Why had they started now? After, what, six months since he had betrayed her?

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Well, there was no sense trying to get back to sleep, she realized. The sun would be up very shortly, and she wouldn't be able to close her eyes again for a while. With her body protesting every inch of the way, she stood up and stretched.

Then she felt it, a sudden surge in the magic around her, like static electricity, raising the hairs on her arms. Someone nearby had just used powerful magic. Had it been Nia? Had she finally figured out where the orc portal went to, and tried opening one of her own?

No, she would have told Amaya first. She looked over to where the Wizard had stood most of the previous day, working to discern where the outgoing portal's destination had been. She saw Nia's form lying on the ground, but she stirred at the very moment the pulse of energy flooded the area.

Amaya's sensitivity to magic wasn't nearly strong enough for her to get an idea of what direction the sense had come from, but she knew it wasn't within the camp. Fearing the worst, she reached down to pick up her sheathed sword. She still wore her light leather armor. Though uncomfortable to sleep in, they dared not take their armor off while still within enemy territory.

There was another pulse, and this time Nia shot up from the ground, the gem of her staff glowing a sharp green.

"Lieutenant!" she shouted, looking into the forest.

Feeling a surge of energy course through her body at the alarm, she started moving through their camp, shouting, "Up, everyone up, now!" As everyone was startled awake, trying to come to terms with what was going on, she added, "Arm yourselves, now!"

As she and Nerina ran towards the alarmed Wizard, Nia cast another spell from her staff, and a beam of bright light illuminated the tree line.

Amaya's heart nearly stopped at the sight she saw. Emerging from the trees, like a flood of ants from a disturbed ant hill, came orcs. Dozens of them, all clad in leather armor, bearing well-crafted iron weapons.

Jon Wasik

Leading them was the very orc they sought.

Stopping beside Nia, she stared in awe. General Arkad likewise came to a stop, raising his free hand to stop his soldiers' advance. His other hand held his double-edged axe at the ready.

She frowned at his actions, having expected his troops to outright attack. When she could sense her own team coming up behind her, she raised her left hand with a closed fist, and everyone stopped in a line to either side of her.

It took her a moment to also realize that none of the orcs accompanying Arkad wore darkened steel armor. However, these also weren't the normal Wastelands rabble, their armor and weapons were far more refined. Suddenly she felt like she lacked very necessary intelligence on their adversary.

They were in a standoff, she realized, and she wondered who would be the first to flinch.

Then, much to everyone's surprise, a very small female orc stepped around from behind Arkad, and stood just in front and beside him. She wore surprisingly nice-looking leather clothes, dyed a color that she thought was pale blue, but was discolored by Nia's green-white staff light.

After several moments of tense silence, the petite orc waved her hand, and much to her surprise, all of the Wastelands orcs stowed their weapons. General Arkad did not, but he did lower his axe.

Suddenly Amaya felt the color drain from her face. She knew exactly what stood before them now. Before she could voice her revelation, Nia did so for her in a voice of shock and awe, "It is a shaman."

In the beginning of the war, many had suspected a shaman might have controlled the orcs. However, by the time they had routed the hordes back into the Wastelands, there was much doubt behind that assertion. The orcs had lost every battle since their initial victory at the Relkin mine. Surely a shaman would have stepped in personally to attempt to change the tides of war.

Now their greatest fear stood before her.

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History books were vague about the powers of orc shamans. Their births were very rare, but it always marked a change in the behavior of the orcs. Any time orc attacks upon the Freemount Trade Passage had increased, they suspected a shaman and sent in forces to find her and eliminate her. They were never far from where the attacks were, and while casualties were often much higher when facing a shaman, they seemed disorganized and were always defeated.

It had been three hundred years since the last one had been confirmed and killed. Yet she couldn't help but think, *What are the odds that a shaman has appeared at the same time that Klaralin showed up?*

There was no refuting what was before her eyes, and the power that Nia no doubt felt. They were in trouble.

Yet the shaman had forced her troops put their weapons away. Therefore Amaya was not entirely surprised when the shaman spoke.

"My name is Tana of the To'kar Tribe," her voice boomed across the void between them. She was surprisingly loud, and more to the point, very well spoken for an orc. "I believe you know General Arkad," she motioned to the giant that towered behind her.

Flashing back to Archanon, Amaya stepped forward and said with a nod, "Yes, we've met. Briefly."

"We have not come here to attack," Tana continued. "We do not wish to engage you in battle."

"I find that unlikely," Vin grumbled from her right. She glanced at him in warning, and then looked at Tana.

"Then why so many orcs?" she asked. "You outnumber us three to one. More, if you count your powers and the General's prowess." Arkad's face twisted for a moment into what looked very much like a smirk. She shuddered at that sight.

“To ensure we survived if you attacked us outright,” Tana continued. “Human mistreatment of orcs is well known, and we...I,” she corrected herself, “thought an overwhelming force might make you think twice.”

“They’re animals, we can take them,” Vin grumbled. Once again she had to shoot him an icy glare. He was starting to speak out of line more and more, and she was quickly growing tired of it. This was definitely not a good time for it, either.

“Why do you wish to speak to us?” she called back. “No orc has attempted peaceful communications with us before. We have no reason to trust anything you have to say.”

“And what of Kilack?” Tana replied, motioning behind the Guardians.

Amaya glanced back to see that the bound orc was very much awake, and had shifted around to watch the encounter. Was he afraid? Hopeful? What was he thinking? She’d spent several hours attempting to converse with him yesterday, but after their initial exchange, he had remained largely quiet.

“Our scouts say you spoke to him at length yesterday,” Tana continued. “You also refused to kill him when you first encountered him.”

Amaya frowned back at the shaman. “What of it?”

“You’re different,” Tana said plainly. “You refused to murder a wounded, defenseless orc. This makes me think there is hope for you.” Tana stepped forward once for emphasis. “For all of us, perhaps.”

It took only a moment for the meaning behind Tana’s words to click into her mind, and just when she thought she could never be more surprised than she had just been, she was proven wrong. Unable to believe her own conclusions, she asked, “Hope for what?”

Folding her arms, Tana nodded once. “Hope for peace.”

Peace...with the orcs? Did they even understand that concept?

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All of her life, all she'd ever heard was that orcs were mindless killing beasts bent on wiping out humans. From the moment the war started, she felt as if all of those stories were true. The orcs invaded their lands by killing innocent miners. Not engaging against soldiers or Warriors, but killing people who were just trying to make their way through life.

They were animals...weren't they?

For the hundredth time since that night, she imagined Arkad, refusing to attack her when Zerek and his friend came to her side. When their worst enemy had refused to kill children.

However, this time she saw something else when she remembered that night. A look on Arkad's face she hadn't quite noticed before. Shock and regret.

Maybe he wasn't so inhuman after all. Maybe none of them were.

Lowering her sword, she nodded. "What do you have in mind?"

The smile that crossed Tana's face was somewhat frightening, but she realized that was only because of how different the orcs looked from them. She started to walk towards them, Arkad staying behind and raising his hand to keep the orcs in place.

Realizing that the shaman wished to meet Amaya in the center, alone, she sheathed her sword and lashed the sheath onto her belt. She started to walk towards Tana as well, until...

It happened so fast that she had no time to react. A blur whizzed past her from behind, heading straight towards the shaman. The shaman reacted quickly, raising her hand and deflecting the dagger with a grey-white shield.

Amaya's eyes grew wide, and she spun around. "Torik!" she shouted Vin's last name. "Stop!" But he had already thrown another dagger. She tried to intercept, but there was no way she could.

Only this time, the attack was answered with one from the shaman. A blast of lightning struck out at Vin, catching him in his right shoulder. He spun through the air like a dancer, until he crashed into a heap on the ground several feet back.

Jon Wasik

Before Amaya could shout orders, Peren had drawn his bow and released an arrow.

“No!” she shouted, looking back to the orcs. The arrow was deflected as easily as the two daggers had been, but this time with disastrous consequences – the arrow deflected back into the ranks of the Wastelands orcs, piercing one in the leg. Though non-fatal, it was enough to incense them, and the orcs suddenly turned into a frenzy. They drew their weapons and charged at them with deafening roars, despite Tana’s calls for them to stop.

Another arrow flew past her, striking one orc square in his chest, penetrating his leather armor. And then Nia joined in, a bolt of lightning lashing out at Tana.

The rest of her team charged, weapons at the ready, no matter how much she shouted at them to stop.

Too long had the orcs been their enemy. Too many battles where it was kill or be killed. It was the only reaction her team knew to the threat of orcs. She suddenly realized that it was no different for the orcs. Their shaman had been threatened, and they had to save her, save themselves, at any cost.

Tana and Nia were locked in a battle of devastating magic, leaving the orcs and humans to fight each other. Arkad joined in, no doubt intent on keeping safe those under his charge. And Amaya realized she had no choice but to do the same.

Perhaps there would never be an end to the war. Not unless one side was completely wiped out.

Drawing her sword, she charged after her team, drawing energy into her blade. They were outnumbered, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t win.

That is, until Tana overpowered Nia. She hadn’t even realized it had happened, until Tana was able to turn on Amaya and her team.

And then the world went dark.

To Be Continued...