

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 9 “The Storm, Part 1”

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The Orc War Campaigns – The Storm, Part 1

At last, the time had come.

After only two months of fighting the orc menace back, Commander Uric Din reveled in the knowledge that the deciding battle of the war was upon them. In just a few hours, they would finally move forward with their plan to attack the orc encampment and destroy what ability the filth had to wage war.

It would become a day that history would forever remember, and for once he would not be left on the sidelines. He was but a mere recruit during the last Lesser War, and his Warriors had not been a participated in the Battle for Archanon three months ago.

This time would be different. Finally he would make his mark on history.

He strode through camp, hidden in the dead forest of the Wastelands, nodding to his unit of Warriors as he did so. They looked to him, saluting him as he passed.

The orcs were stupid beasts, they should never have gathered their entire army in one place. Even if they recognized their mistake and sent units off to spread out, it was too late. Last night, the Allied armies had encircled them completely, cutting off supplies and hunting parties.

Now the time had come. He knew that it would be any moment that the horns would sound, and the first attack would commence. Their strategy was sound, and his units were among those that would attack from the north, drawing the orcs out of their circular defensive. Once the south was exposed, Warriors and Wizards to the south would charge their weakened line.

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It was a sound strategy that he wished he had come up with. It would have gone a long way towards ensuring his shot at making General some day. Never-the-less, his units would be part of the first strike, and that counted for something.

Stopping at the end of his line of Warriors, he looked further down, through the gnarled, twisted forest at the Warriors from Daruun. Their Warriors were legendary, having fought against Falind Warriors on the Great Road over three months ago and at the first battle of the Sword of Dragons. He couldn't see Commander Idann Kale, he must have been out of sight.

Kale would be his greatest competition for the General position.

The sound of rushing feet and breaking twigs caught his attention, and he turned to see a runner coming towards him. Instead of walking to meet the runner, he waited for the young girl to come to him. When she stopped, he folded his arms and looked down at her.

"Commander," she said, only slightly out of breath. "You must come quickly."

He frowned, shaking his head, "What could possibly be so important, girl? We're on the eve of battle."

Shaking her head, she said, "Lieutenant Kenla's team just came through a portal with a Wizard, just behind our forces, all of them wounded."

Feeling his heart skip a beat, he nodded for the girl to lead the way, and took off in a run after her. He knew of Amaya's mission to locate and eliminate the Orc General, who was mysteriously absent from his assembled forces.

There was no straight line through the gnarled, twisted forest, so traversing the short distance took far greater time and effort than he would have liked. They passed behind his line of Warriors and went to what was previously the standard point of entry for Wizard portals, before they had redeployed their forces.

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In that clearing was a disaster. Elic, Peren, Vin, every one of them had once been Warriors under his command, and every single one of them was wounded. Wounded, but none of those wounds appeared fatal, strangely enough.

A few of his own Warriors had been drawn back by the commotion, and quickly rushed to the aid of the wounded Guardians. The Wizard that accompanied Amaya's team, her name long forgotten, stepped closer to Din.

"Commander," she nodded, her face smug in typical Wizard arrogance. He noticed a rather nasty looking bruise near the Wizard's right temple. The orcs had managed to overpower her?

He had known the King's mission for Amaya had been a foolish one...

"What happened?" he asked, glaring at the Wizard. "Where is your Lieutenant?"

"It is complicated," Nia leaned heavily upon her staff, shaking her head. "We were confronted by the General and a unit of Wastelands orcs. He was accompanied by..."

"Nia," Elic suddenly called out. The young man was kneeling, but upon seeing Commander Din, he pushed himself up and made his way over, limping badly. Blood trickled down his left leg, staining his leather armor.

"Mister Morgin," Din narrowed his eye. "Is there a problem?"

Elic thought for a moment, biting his lower lip, as if chewing on a problem in his head. His eyes darted between Din and Nia, clearly uncertain. Immediately Din's suspicions flared, and he knew that Elic wished to hide something from the Commander.

"If something has happened to Amaya, I would know of it," he stepped closer to Elic threateningly. The young man didn't flinch, which was quite a departure from when he had been under Din's command. Clearly he had become more brazen as a Guardian.

"I think I'd rather talk to another Commander," Elic shook his head. "Or General Artula."

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“Are you kidding me?” Peren spoke up, holding the pieces of a shattered ironwood bow. The broken bow really caught Din’s attention. Someone very strong would have had to have broken that weapon. “The longer we wait, the more likely something horrible will happen to the Lieutenant!”

“I agree,” Nia nodded calmly, little emotion on her face or in her voice. Din found that lack of feeling to be unsettling. “I must return to the site and continue my divination of the orc portal. The longer we delay, the greater the risk to Lieutenant Kenla’s life.”

Adjusting his stance to take further weight off of his wounded leg, Elic shook his head, “I don’t trust Din.”

Reaching for his sword, Din glared at the Mage and shook his head warningly. “Watch your tongue, whelp. I am a Commander of the Warriors’ Guild, and you will show me my due respect.”

Raising up his left hand, Elic pointed to where a brand was hidden by his bracer. “And I am a Guardian. My word is the King’s word.”

Grinding his teeth, Din was so tempted to pull his weapon and strike down the insubordinate peasant. However, he did not need to.

The Wizard was the voice of reason. “I must return, with or without aid, and finish what I began yesterday.” She slowly rested a hand on Elic’s shoulder, eliciting a look of quiet surprise on his face. “However, no other Wizard knows the location of the abandoned camp. Therefore any reinforcements must come with me now.” She stepped in front of him and stared into his eyes intently. “Time is our enemy today, Elic. Let me save her.”

Finding the exchange almost amusing, if it weren’t for his need to know what had happened, Din folded his arms impatiently. Elic looked down, clenching his jaw and searching the ground for answers. Finally, he nodded and looked at Din.

“I can’t go with you, I’m in no shape to fight. Most of us aren’t.” He looked intently at Din. “Please go with Nia, and save her. Take any Warriors you can spare.”

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Looking over his shoulder towards the front line, Din sighed. The assault was about to begin, and his chance to make a name for himself was upon him. This was his battle to win, not go off chasing after his former lover.

But then he realized that Arkad must have defeated them. Looking at Elic and the Wizard, he realized what it would mean if he was the one who defeated the great orc General where the Guardians had failed.

Plus Amaya would be forever indebted to him for saving her life. Not a bad secondary victory.

Finally, he nodded. Looking out at his Warriors that helped tend to the wounded Guardians, he pointed at each of them, “You will all accompany us on this mission.”

“Sir?” one of them asked. “What of the battle?”

“You are six out of sixty, I think they can spare us on the front line.” He then turned to the runner that had retrieved him. “Find my Lieutenant, tell him to take command of our unit for the assault. Tell him we’ve gone to rescue a Guardian.”

Without question, the runner nodded, “Yes, sir.”

As she took off running for the front line again, Din turned, and saw Idalia approaching him. “Aside from some bruising, I’m good to go.” She rested her hand on her sword, strapped to her hip. “I can still give those bastards some payback.”

Knowing all too well how gifted Idalia was, he nodded. “Come if you like. Anyone else?”

None of the others volunteered. Elic shook his head, “Trust me, we would if we could. But we’d only get in the way with our wounds.”

Din shrugged, and looked at Nia. “After you, Wizard.”

Smiling, he realized that today would actually turn out better than he expected. Perhaps the gods favored him after all.

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In the deep, unending black, there was only one sensation that Amaya was painfully aware of, and that was how cold she felt. Not the kind of cold where you shivered and rubbed your arms to try to get warm. No, this was so much more. As if the very center of her being was frozen solid, as if her soul had become a glacier.

There was no actual physical pain, not right away, just the torturous cold...

And then a voice. Deep, quiet, almost a whisper. "The cold will pass."

She tried to open her eyes, but the light stabbed at her and she clenched them shut. *That was a bad idea*, she thought.

"Do not try to move," the reassuring voice said. "Give yourself a moment. The magic is still wearing off."

Who's voice was that? Where was she? The last thing she remembered was trying to stop her team and the orcs from fighting. Rushing to the defense of her team when that failed. There was a flash of light, a force slammed into her, knocking the wind from her, and then darkness.

Which meant...what? Suddenly dread sank into her stomach, and she began to wonder just who spoke to her.

Pushing through the pain, Amaya opened her eyes. The world was blurry, but it began to clear before long. She saw that she was in a hut, or tent, something covered with animal skins. It was definitely not human-built.

Slowly, she turned to the direction the voice had come from, and it was worse than she had feared. Sitting cross-legged on the floor across from where she lay was General Arkad.

She was a prisoner.

Except that her hands were not bound, and she still wore her leather armor. She searched for her sword, but it was no longer strapped to her hip. Slowly she sat up and took a moment to cautiously get her bearings. Several layers of animal skins acted as her makeshift bed, and there were two other

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such beds within the hut, but aside from that, there was no furniture. A set of everlasting torches were stuck in the ground in the center of the tent, their blue-white light adding little to the ambient glow from the shaft of sunlight that beamed in through the entrance.

And then her eyes settled upon the orc General again. Was that really his voice that had spoken to her? It couldn't be.

Then he spoke again, and it was all she could do to keep her jaw from dropping. "I experienced the same cold not long ago." His was a soft, deep, and even sympathetic voice, with so much intelligence behind his words.

Absently, she reached for the translation necklace she had put on after they had captured Kilack, but it was gone. No doubt Arkad had one as well, but...did he wear it? Or did he speak her language this well without it?

The longer she sat up, the more she began to feel a horrible throbbing pain in her temples. It grew worse and worse, until it was blinding, and she had to shut her eyes and push her fingers deep into her temples.

No longer caring who it was she spoke to, she asked, "Will this damned headache ever go away?"

"Of course," Arkad replied. "Just give a few more minutes."

The pain grew worse, as if someone had jabbed a pick through her head, and she slowly lay down on her side, curling into a ball, wishing, willing it to go away. *Gods, make the pain go away!*

That was when she discovered that laying down was helping, and the pain began to ease, slowly but at a steady rate. When she no longer had to clench her eyes shut and she could pull her hands away from her head, she looked at Arkad. He did not smile, nor did he revel in her pain. He just watched, his mottled-gray face bearing a look of deepest sympathy.

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A month ago, she would have been shocked, or would have doubted his sympathy. Now, however, she realized it was genuine. He was genuine.

He was not a monster.

“I am sorry,” he nodded at her. That was the first time that she realized he no longer donned his darksteel armor, but instead wore surprisingly well-tailored leather trousers and a leather shirt. The patchwork colors of the leather indicated that it was pieced together from smaller animals within the Wastelands, but it was far better quality than anything she had seen an orc wear, aside from the darksteel armor.

Shaking her head a little, she asked, “What happened?”

Leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, he let out a deep sigh. “The situation quickly grew out of control. Tana, the shaman who...who led us. She could scarcely control our forces, they were so angry. Anger whose source was not linked to what was happening.” Arkad paused, staring down at her with a look of pain and sadness. “Anger fueled by centuries of mistreatment.”

It took her several heartbeats to realize he meant at the hands of humans. Amaya opened her mouth to object, but the objection hung on the tip of her tongue, a wall of realization blocking her words.

The orc that sat near her was not a different species from the ones they had fought in the Wastelands for three thousand years. He was one and the same. Granted, Arkad was a giant even for an orc, but that didn’t change the fact that he was the same species as the others.

There was a spark of anger in Arkad’s voice when he added, “We are not the beasts you think we are. But if you treat someone like an animal long enough, perhaps they will believe that’s exactly what they are.”

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He let those words hang in the air for a long time, and she felt a chill run down her spine. A thought that had once before come across her mind came back to the forefront – who were the monsters, really?

Then another thought occurred to her, and she felt dread once more fill her stomach. “What happened to my team?”

Arkad looked her straight in the eyes before he replied, “I do not know for certain, but I do believe they all live. It took every bit of control that Tana has, but she held them back. We took you, freed Kilack, and fled, hoping to avoid any further bloodshed. Your men killed six of us.”

Resisting the urge to correct Arkad when he said ‘your men,’ she allowed herself a small feeling of relief. Maybe they were all okay. Maybe the peace they had begun to speak of in the abandoned village could still be achieved.

Which brought her to her next question. “Why am I here?”

“You are here because I wish for my people to survive,” a sing-song voice called from outside of the hut’s entrance. It was then that the small, lithe orc shaman stepped inside. “You are here because I still wish for there to be peace between our two people.”

Like Arkad, Tana wore finely-tailored leather clothes, including a pair of sandals that looked rather comfortable, even on the woman’s mottled, four-toed foot. Her gaze felt like it penetrated Amaya’s very soul, and she had to actually look away for a moment to catch her breath.

Tana stepped closer, and Amaya flinched, but she shushed her, and said, “Be still, young woman. I mean you no harm.”

She still clenched her eyes, and waited for the shaman to do something horrible to her, but then immediately blushed at her reaction. This was the same woman who wanted peace, and whom associated with Arkad. Plus if she had meant to hurt Amaya, she could have done so when she was unconscious.

So she slowly opened her eyes and forced herself to look into the orc's green eyes, noticing for the first time a hint of red in them. Her eyes were sympathetic, caring, even nurturing, and her hand hovered over Amaya's torso. A moment later, a smile stretched across her face.

"You are fine, child," Tana said. "You should be okay to sit up now, however I advise you to do so slowly."

Raising a curious eyebrow as the shaman backed away, Amaya pushed back up to a sitting position. There was still pain, but it was a small fraction of how bad it had been before. Amaya gave herself a moment to feel steady sitting up, and then once more looked at Tana.

"Peace," Amaya repeated slowly.

"Yes," Tana nodded once. "Peace between orcs and humans on Halarite. A peace which has never existed before, but which I believe is possible."

Creasing her brow, Amaya's first instinct was to shake her head. "I...I just don't see that happening." The look of disappointment on Tana's face made her quickly add, "I believe you and your intentions, I really do." She glanced at Arkad for a moment before looking back at the shaman. "And I really would love to see this war end in peace, but it just isn't going to happen. There are too many humans who view orcs as monsters. Too many who see you as the ones who killed their brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. That's all they see when they look at orcs."

After a moment of thick silence, Arkad grunted. "Monsters."

She didn't know if he meant humans were monsters, or humans saw orcs as monsters. Nevertheless, she nodded at him.

Tana let out a very deep sigh, but then a look of determination came across her face. "Let me tell you a story," she said, sitting down cross-legged in the center of the hut. "A story of where my people come from. How we came to be on Halarite. And the future that both orcs and humans share."

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Zerek took in a great big breath and held it for a moment, staring at the open gates that led up the hill to the Castle District. His stomach was doing back flips, and he felt his palms sweating. This wasn't something he ever expected to do in his lifetime.

Letting out the breath slowly, he shook his head. What in the name of the gods was he doing? Granted, he wasn't breaking into the castle, not yet anyway, but that was the point to his visit. To prepare for when he would break in. When he would betray his oath.

The person he had mentioned to Sorin was Endel, and he had intentionally neglected to mention him by name. He knew Endel had once been a part of their brigade of thieves, and had even been sent into the castle with the very same mission Zerek had.

Now, after Endel had settled into a life in the castle and given up on his mission, Zerek was about to go in and ask his friend to help complete that mission.

His friend...was he still his friend? They certainly hadn't parted on the best of terms. In fact, Zerek had felt betrayed, and hadn't been shy about letting the kid know that. Did this make Zerek a hypocrite?

It was only after someone said his name a third time that he suddenly came back to the present, and realized that one of the guards at the gate was calling his name.

Feeling a giant grin cross his face, Zerek stepped forward to greet his former trainer. "Torick!" he replied, genuinely happy to see him.

"Hey, there he is," Torick met him and clasped his hand in a vigorous shake. "Off in your own world there, eh kid?"

Zerek laughed and shrugged. "Yeah. I've only been gone, what, a few days?" He looked up at the wall and the gates into the inner city and sighed. "It already feels like a lifetime."

Raising an eyebrow and stepping back to get a good look at Zerek, Torick smirked, "Wearing a military trainee's uniform, I see. You look sharp, kid!"

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It was nothing, really, just a fine, black button-up tunic over a white shirt and black trousers, and a pair of very comfortable leather boots. He wore his dagger strapped to a wide leather belt, a silver buckle breaking up the dark colors. He'd been told it was what they were supposed to wear while out on their one and only day off of training every week.

He shrugged casually. "I have you to thank for it, you know."

"Well, yeah," Torick glanced at the other guard on duty. "You learn quickly, and you're pretty strong already."

Nodding, Zerek said with as much sincerity as he could, "Thank you. Really, thank you so much, sir." Feeling his head swim at what was in his future and what he was about to say, he sighed. "Your confidence in me...it means a lot."

Looking uncomfortable now, Torick just shrugged again and leaned against the gate frame. "Hey, kid, you earned it."

Feeling like he was a horrible liar, a cheat, a terrible soldier, Zerek shuffled his feet a bit and looked down at the ground. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't figure out what. The conversation had to move forward, but he felt too guilty, his mind was just racing with the what-if's of getting caught.

It was Torick who broke the silence. "Just came by to gawk at the gate, then?"

Looking up at the guard, he shook his head. "No. I, uh, actually have a favor to ask. You see," he felt his face turn red, and he hoped his former trainer thought it was due to embarrassment, "I kind of left things with a friend in a bad place. I want the chance to make it up to him. To tell him I'm sorry."

Torick frowned and said, "Yeah? The only other person you ever hung around was that kid, Endel."

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Sheepishly, Zerek nodded, “That’s the one. I really need to talk to him. I…” He hesitated and ran his fingers through his hair, trying to think of what to say next. “I don’t want to lose my only friend in this city.”

For a long moment, Torick was silent, and Zerek couldn’t bring himself to even look up at him. He waited for him to turn him away, which would mean he’d have to sneak back into the Castle District later that night.

Instead, Torick came close to him and rested a hand on his shoulders, prompting Zerek to look up into his face. To Zerek’s surprise, Torick looked sympathetic, and a little hurt. “He’s not your only friend in the city, kid. But yeah, I’ll make the arrangements. Come with me.”

Together, the two walked through the gate and up the hill into the Castle District. Here the houses were three times the size of those in the wealthiest of the rest of the city, each belonging to the most influential families. Those who had the throne’s favor, or had enough money to make themselves important.

Then again, Zerek thought, thinking back to his days going into towns with his father to sell ore and buy supplies, if you’re rich, it’s probably because you have power. Can you have one without the other?

He tried to awkwardly apologize to Torick for what he’d said, never having considered Torick as more than his defense trainer, but the guard brushed off the apology. “I’m in the military myself, and I know that you generally don’t consider your trainer a friend.” He grinned down at Zerek, “More like a slave driver, eh?”

Smirking a little, Zerek laughed despite himself. “Well, I wasn’t going to say anything, but yeah.”

“Hey, there’s the jovial young man I started to shape into a soldier!” Torick nodded. “That’s more like it.”

Before long, Torick had led him to the castle's horse training grounds, on the backside of the castle and away from the other houses. He looked towards the stalls with dread, knowing that Endel was likely in there mucking them out right now. Could he really do this?

Pointing to a bench at the edge of the training grounds, Torick asked him to wait there, and then went into the stalls to look for the stable boy.

Zerek sat impatiently, watching the main entrance with intense nervousness, his fists clenching and unclenching regularly. Would Zerek be mad at him for walking away like he had last time? Or would he be understanding? Plus, what would he think of Zerek asking him for help? Would he laugh at him? Tell him he was a fool to think he'd help after leaving him behind?

He looked down at his hands, watching them work themselves with his tension. Should he even be this nervous? It hadn't even been this bad when he finally found Laira... Then again, they'd not exactly had time to be nervous, what with the guards chasing them and all.

That memory suddenly sparked a realization in his head. This wasn't the first time he did something outside of the law. He'd snuck in and out of the Castle District before, ran along rooftops, ran away from guards, and spent time with Laira when he should have been attending to his duties.

Was this time so different?

Immediately he knew that the answer was yes, because this time he was betraying an oath he had only taken a couple of days ago. And yet, he also realized that this time, it wasn't for personal gain. What if the thieves were right? What if someone in the throne, the Prince or someone else, was lying to and betraying the people, betraying the King? If he could find evidence, bring the betrayal to light, then those responsible could be brought to justice.

If the thieves were right, if Sorin was right, then doing so could potentially avoid an economic pitfall for the entire kingdom. What exactly that would mean, he wasn't sure, but he knew that if the

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most prosperous kingdom in the entire world suddenly had no money with which to pay its Warriors, its workers, its people, then they really were in trouble.

Movement caught his eye, and he looked up to see that Torick and Endel were already halfway between the stalls and his bench. Feeling a surge of energy, he stood up, ready to run to meet them, but then he stopped. What could he say?

However, before he could begin to work his mind into a greater frenzy, a giant smile suddenly stretched across Endel's face, and he ran the distance between them, wrapping his little arms around him. "Zerek!" he cried out. "I'm so glad to see you."

Feeling altogether shocked, Zerek returned the hug and felt himself smile more than he had in days. He didn't know what to say, so he ended up sounding dumb when he simply said, "Hey."

Torick smiled and shook his head. "Alright, Endel, I'm leaving him to you to keep an eye on while he's here. Remember, he's technically no longer assigned to the castle, so you cannot leave him alone until he leaves."

Finally unwrapping himself from Zerek, he turned and nodded. "Of course, sir. Thank you!"

With that, Torick gave them a mock salute, and then headed back to the gate.

After a moment watching the guard walk away, a look of sheepish guilt crossed over Endel's face, and he backed away a little, looking down at his feet. "Are...are you still mad at me?"

For only a moment, Zerek toyed with the idea of teasing Endel and letting him think that he was uncertain, but he couldn't do it. "No, my friend. No, I'm not." As he said it, he realized he wasn't, not anymore. Whether Endel had been complicit in Laira's deception or not, he wasn't mad at him.

A broad smile overcame the boy's face as he looked up at Zerek. "I'm glad. I was afraid I'd messed up our friendship."

Shrugging a little, Zerek said, "It was a really bad day. And I'm really sorry that I reacted like I did." He felt his stomach stir a little as he said it, the memories from that day flashing through his mind.

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His fist flinched a little, still a little stiff and sore from punching the pillar in the stalls. Yes, Endel had kept the truth from him, but did that excuse how he'd acted?

Maybe, maybe not, but he swore to himself he wouldn't do it again. No one had been kinder, more understanding of him.

"Like I didn't earn it," Endel shrugged. "But I'm glad you came back to talk to me. So tell me, what's been going on? What have I missed in the past few days?"

Feeling his face warm, Zerek nodded and began to walk towards the Castle District's wall. "Well, a lot. More than you'd believe."

Endel stopped them long enough to beam a smile up at him. "You and Laira made up?"

Laughing at his friend's excitement, Zerek nodded. "Yeah, yeah we did. She...well, I think I understand why you both did the things you did." He looked at Endel, hoping his sincerity showed through in his eyes. "Especially once I found out what's going on, and, umm," he felt his face grow warm again, "once it was explained to me, a few times, just how bad things could get if it wasn't fixed."

As they continued walking towards the wall, Endel nodded morbidly. "Yeah, I don't think I really understand it myself. But Sorin, he...he thought I'd have the best chance at getting in, being so young. That they would take me in as a pity case. Which they did."

"How long ago was that?" Zerek asked, realizing he still didn't know a whole lot about Endel's past.

"Only eight months ago," she shrugged. "But I failed. I mentioned that, didn't I? I failed and I couldn't go back to face Sorin and everyone else, and the Steward and everyone was so nice to me. So I stayed." He looked over towards the slave quarters, just coming into view around the castle. "I stayed thinking I'd be safe here."

He wondered something about how Endel had spoken of those events before, of how he spoke of them now. "Is Sorin dangerous? Are you afraid of him?"

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Blushing, Endel shook his head vigorously. “No. He’s intimidating, and he’ll sometimes go too far with things, but he’d never actually hurt me or anyone else. He’s a good guy. Well, as good as a thief can be, anyway.”

Smiling up at Zerek, he continued, “He brought everyone together in the Sanctuary before I was found. Made them all work together. Created a sort of code that anyone who worked under him had to follow. Never steal from someone else who was poor. Never steal from each other. No killing. That sort of thing. It made things better.”

Still hesitating, Zerek asked the one question that had been on his mind ever since he’d found out who Sorin was. “Is...can I trust that his intentions are honest? That he doesn’t mean to hurt anyone?” He continued on nervously, looking around as if afraid someone else from the thieves would overhear him. “I mean, it sounds like he’s not, but he really does frighten me.”

“Don’t let him,” Endel shrugged. “And yes. You can trust him. If you’re willing to take my word for it, anyway...”

Smiling, Zerek nodded and clasped his friend’s shoulder warmly. “I am.”

Endel smiled, and then stopped them when they came within arm’s reach of the wall. They looked up towards the top, the sun having peaked over the wall at midday.

Feeling his stomach twist a little more, Zerek looked at Endel, waiting a moment until he too looked at Zerek. “Endel, I don’t have a right to ask you this. And I feel horrible asking it, but...” He paused, clenching his fists at his sides. “We need your help. I know that I have no right to ask –”

“I’m in.”

There hadn’t been even the slightest hesitation in his voice, so Zerek frowned down at him. “You don’t even know what we need.”

“I have an idea,” Endel shrugged. “Besides, you need me.”

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Raising his eyebrows, he asked, “Do we, now?” Endel was right, they needed him to help guide them through the castle, Zerek no doubt knew it better than any of them.

“Yeah,” Endel smirked with pride. “There’s more than one reason I was originally chosen.” Pointing both thumbs at his chest, he boasted, “I am the best lock-pick there is in the group. And I happen to know that what we need is behind a locked door.”

Frowning, Zerek asked, “You know what we need? Where it is, and everything?”

He nodded, but the pride vanished and his face turned red once more. “Yeah. But I couldn’t get close to it. I’m a stable boy, I don’t belong in the castle, and every time I tried to get close, I was found and told to get out. I can’t do it alone. Neither can you.”

Zerek nodded once. “Alright. Then we’ll do it together, along with Laira.”

Endel smiled, and launched himself at Zerek to embrace him in another hug. “Good! I don’t want to leave the castle, but I still want to help.” He pulled away and beamed a smile up at Zerek. “If I can make up for my screw up, then maybe I won’t feel so bad staying here.”

Feeling amused, Zerek snickered and laughed. “I have no doubt you’ll be invaluable, my little friend. Now come,” he pried himself out of the kid’s embrace and began walking along the wall. “Tell me what you found, and let’s figure out how we’re going to get it.”

There was a change in the air, Arkad could feel it. As he, Tana and Kilack walked through the To’kar camp at a leisurely pace, he shifted his shoulders up and down anxiously. When he looked up at the sky, he could see only scattered clouds, nothing to indicate a storm was coming. However, when he took in a deep breath, he could smell it too, the smell of distant rain.

Tana, noticing his sudden diverted interest, paused for a moment, and then began to lead them towards the south. Arkad strayed at first, not noticing they had turned left, but when he did realize it, he quickly caught up.

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After a moment of silence, Tana looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “I think we may have begun to sway the human woman,” she said idly.

It took a moment for her words to register on Arkad, but when they did, he looked at her skeptically. “Whether or not that is the case, she said it herself, she cannot control what the rest of her kind do.”

Kilack nodded from the other side of Tana and said, “The humans have always been content to keep the Wastelands orcs’ population under control, but this time is different. We essentially declared all-out war on them. Twice. I do not think they intend to just leave us be.”

Though he had not been a part of the initial attack on Archanon under Klaralin’s command, Arkad was very familiar with those events, and the damage inflicted upon the human city. The ancient Wizard had succeeded in opening the gates for the orcs, all of whom had been clad in the same kind of armor he was given upon his arrival. They had streamed into the city and slaughtered hundreds of humans, destroying as much of the city as they could before they were frightened away by the dragons.

What if they come back, he thought to himself, shivering. *We cannot stand against dragons...*

Tana nodded thoughtfully, drawing in a large breath before speaking. “Perhaps, but I believe she can be convinced not to tell others of our existence.”

They came to the southern edge of the camp and began climbing a steep hill, the dry, sharp grass crunching softly underfoot. He wondered where she was taking them, but gave it little thought as he continued to focus on the topic at hand.

Suspecting where Tana was going with the conversation, he wrestled with the idea in his head as well. “You would prefer that we not kill her,” he said, keeping emotion out of his voice. He wanted to see what her intentions were.

Though her face was long and concern was beginning to create new wrinkles near the sides of her eyes, Tana nodded. “Indeed. She is the first human we have seen on this world that is sympathetic

to our people. She could have killed Kilack,” Tana motioned to the other warrior, now wearing the same finely-tailored leather clothing as Kilack. “She didn’t.”

“In fact she prevented another from doing just that,” Kilack nodded, looking over to Arkad. “I was...surprised. I did not think a human would care whether we lived or died.”

Raising an eyebrow, Arkad suggested, “Perhaps she wanted more information from you before killing you.”

Looking towards the crest of the hill, which they were moments from seeing over, Kilack nodded. “That was my initial thought. However, she then took the time to try to speak to me, to...” The younger orc paused, a deep frown furrowing his brow. “To try to get to know me.”

It took every bit of self control Arkad had not to let his jaw fall open. Up until now, he had been under the impression that all of the humans of Halarite treated the orcs like animals, and everything he had seen since his arrival confirmed that. To hear of one who treated them like actual people...

It was then that he could see over the top of the hill, and as they took the final steps to the top, Arkad’s jaw really *did* drop, and a feeling he had not felt since he fled his home took hold of his stomach.

Fear.

A wall of black stretched across the horizon before him, reaching up into the heavens as if the stars themselves could not escape the monster storm before him. Flashes illuminated the interior, and even though it had to have been a hundred miles away, he swore he could see the clouds swirling in lighter and darker patterns. It was the most menacing sight he had ever beheld.

Somewhere along the way, they had stopped walking. The conversation had died, leaving them in an eerie silence that belied the distant storm.

“What...what is that?” Kilack asked, his own fear giving his voice an edge that made Arkad shudder.

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“A great storm,” Tana sighed. “It came this time last year, and from what the Wastelands orcs have told me, it comes every year at this time. Always from the south. Always from the sea.”

Kilack looked first at her, then at the camp, and finally back to Tana. “You’re still here, as are many of our brothers and sisters...”

“The storm is survivable,” she nodded. “In fact, the further it comes inland, the weaker it will become.” She smiled and looked at Arkad meaningfully. “In fact, by the time it reaches us here, it will be a mere torrential downpour.” The General raised an eyebrow at her, skeptical of her use of the word ‘only.’ “Oh there will be lightning, lots of it, and plenty of wind, but it is easily survivable. And it will wipe away all of our tracks.”

Suddenly the pieces in Arkad’s head clicked into place, and he gazed out at the storm, the fear subsiding. “I wondered why you had not fled the area sooner. You were waiting for the storm.”

With a broad smile, Tana nodded. “We can travel further south-east, away from the orcs, away from the humans, and our tracks will be completely hidden. No one will ever know how to find us.” Crinkling her nose, she looked up at the sun, marching dutifully towards the west. “However, it will not reach us until an hour or two before nightfall, and we cannot travel in complete blackness.”

She sighed heavily and turned towards the camp. “We will have to remain here for the night, and pack up in the rain tomorrow morning to move out.”

Arkad grimaced, knowing all too well how annoying that would be. Still, it was the best plan available to them. Idly he wondered why Tana couldn’t just move all of the orcs at once with a portal, but then he recalled that after their return through the portal with Amaya, Tana had been completely exhausted. Obviously moving even a dozen orcs was difficult, let alone an entire tribe.

Soon enough, they could be free. Free from the shaman, free from the humans.

Free to live as they saw fit.

Which made his thoughts stray to his brothers still in the field. Those ready to face an overwhelming human force. There were so few of his people left from their home, so few who had come through to Halarite, and now the majority of those survivors were about to be slaughtered.

He realized that was perhaps another reason to give this human, Amaya, a chance. After hearing Tana's tale, Amaya had told them that the humans were preparing for a big assault against the orc army. She could have just as easily not told them, so perhaps that meant she was worth trusting.

Tana looked at Arkad thoughtfully, and then slowly turned to fully face him. "Will you stay with us?" she asked. "You don't have to, and I know you wish desperately to try to go back and save as many of our kin as you can from the humans."

Could she read his mind? Shamans were powerful, but he didn't imagine that there was anyone who could actually do that. Maybe it was just that she understood him.

However, he also realized that the future of his people did not lie with the shaman from Akaida. It did not lie with Orinda. It did not lie in war with the humans. That would only lead to their destruction, and the end of their race.

Tana's goal was not invasion or destruction, it was peace. Peace with the humans. Perhaps this was what made her such a powerful shaman, why orcs chose to serve her even when another shaman vied for control over their hearts and minds.

She valued their lives.

In Arkad's mind, this made her far more worthy to serve. Far more worthy of loyalty.

And then she did something he did not expect. She slowly reached out a hand and gently touched his. He looked into her eyes, and when he saw affection in them, he felt his face grow warm.

"I would very much like it if you stayed with me," she spoke quietly.

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Suddenly his head spun, and the world seemed to blank out around him. Was she implying what he thought she was? No, he was a soldier. He had given up the thought of finding a mate, of having children...

He could not think of that now. He slowly pulled away from her, but he did nod before she could react. "I will stay. For the future of our people, the only future where we might survive."

The heartbreak she felt was impossible to hide, and she withdrew her hand slowly, painfully. It hurt him to see her feel such anguish, but he knew it was the best thing he could do, the *only* thing he could do. Their people needed both of them to be clear-headed.

"However," he said, anxious to move away from the uncomfortable topic, "I can't leave my people to be slaughtered. The other refugees who fight side by side with the Wastelands orcs deserve the same chance I am getting. A chance to make a new life for our people."

Tana looked up at him, shaking her head. "I know you very much desire to help them, but if you go, the shaman would eventually learn of your betrayal, and would continue to hunt us down."

"Assuming she survives the war against the humans," Arkad shrugged. "If they do not know of her existence yet, they will eventually figure it out. They have to assume that is how I obtained portal portions in the past."

He folded his arms in front of him and stared down at her, unwilling to budge. "I must give them this chance. But I can't without your help. So I ask you," he paused, wanting to emphasize what he was about to call her. "Please, my Shaman, let me give my men a chance to come with us. I am still their General."

Tana clenched her jaw, looking down and sighing. "Very well. But I cannot go with you, General." When she looked into his eyes, he could see how much she feared losing him. How much she wanted him to stay. "You must go alone."

Arkad nodded slowly, already having anticipated that fact. He was about to reply, but then Kilack stepped closer to him and said, “No, he won’t go alone.”

With a giant smile on his face, Arkad was about to tell him that he needed his trusted Lieutenant to stay behind and keep an eye on the To’kar camp, on Tana. But then he realized that he didn’t want to go alone. He wanted his lieutenant there to back him up, in case everything went wrong.

“Very well, my friend,” he clasped Kilack’s shoulder. Looking to Tana, he hastily said, “Don’t worry. The rest of my soldiers will remain with you. I will command them to protect you and the tribe at all costs.”

Tana nodded, “That is acceptable. I will begin preparing your return potion.” She turned to leave.

As she walked down the hill back towards the camp, Arkad looked again to Kilack. There was much he could have said, thanking the one man who had stuck by his side through everything, even the very end of their world.

But words would be too little. So instead, they turned towards the camp, and descended together.

Endel and Zerek had spent several hours together, and Zerek was grateful that he had been able to reconcile with his friend. After they had talked about Endel’s discovery and come up with a partial plan, he and Zerek had spent time catching up. Even though very little time had passed since Zerek had begun his training, it felt like so much had happened.

Now he and Laira strode through the sewers of the city. Every now and then, he caught the scent of what sewage actually was, and it made him gag each time, but thankfully Laira knew the best path through the passages. Strong winds in the tunnels helped keep the smells tolerable.

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He hadn't told Laira yet that it was Endel that he had gone to see, and he could tell she was annoyed at him for keeping silent about it, but she said nothing more of it. He knew that if anyone would be sympathetic to Endel, it would be her, but he still wanted to keep it quiet until he spoke to Sorin.

It was quiet in the thieves den when they entered. Most everyone was out in the city, trying to work as much as they could before winter set in. He knew what that meant, what work for the thieves meant, and it didn't sit well with him.

It felt like he was in too deep, now, that there was no turning back. How had he gotten caught up with these people?

When Laira took hold of his hand and led him towards the meeting place with Sorin, he remembered how, and felt his face flush.

The same group of people were already assembled and waiting, but that did not surprise him. He was supposed to have come back now, and he thought he was right on time. Still, Sorin looked impatient.

"Alright, young man," he folded his arms and looked down at him. "Did you get everything you needed?"

Zerek started to say "Yes" but was interrupted by Sorin, "Because I don't very much like people under my watch keeping secrets from me."

Feeling his face flush, Zerek narrowed his eyes at him, and before he realized what he was saying, he replied, "I don't work for you."

Everyone remained dead silent after that, looking back and forth between them. Zerek glared up at the thief master, wishing he felt the confidence that he wanted Sorin to see. He wasn't even sure where he had gotten the courage to snap at the older man, but he knew he was tired of everything. Tired of being misled, tired of being used, tired of everything.

A brief flash of a memory from his last argument with his father passed through his mind, but he knew he didn't have time to live in the past, and just bit down and let what he'd said sink in.

After a very long moment of palpable tension, Sorin tilted his head to the side. "Very well, oh great master thief. Would you be so kind as to grace us with your expertise? Who is your contact in the castle, and how do you plan for us to get what we need?"

Ignoring Sorin's sarcasm, he looked around at the gathered thieves. "When I first entered the service of the throne, there was one young boy who befriended me...Endel Marric." He waited patiently for there to be an outburst of some sort, for everyone to object to his plan before he could spell it out, but all he saw was a look of slight surprise in Laira. Sorin showed no outward reaction.

"I learned recently that he was once a thief like all of you," Zerek continued, "and that he failed in his mission. The very same mission you intended for me. Well, Endel got in. He even figured out where the ledgers are kept that record every bit of gold that enters or leaves the castle. The only problem is that it is too well guarded, and he was caught every time he tried."

"So you are making excuses for him, now?" one of the other thieves scoffed.

Much to Zerek's surprise, it was Sorin who stepped up to defend him. "Be silent," he said. "Endel is just a child, and we asked much of him." Unfolding his arms and leaning forward over the table, Sorin nodded eagerly. "Please continue."

Shocked at Sorin's sudden change in attitude, Zerek nodded. "Apparently the castle treasurer or coin master or whatever he's called these days actually holds his office in the treasury," he continued. "And so the ledgers are in there too." He felt himself blush at the memory of having young Zerek explain to him what ledgers actually were. He should have known, because his mother had once kept ledgers for their mining camp, before she died. He just didn't know what they had actually been called.

"And those ledgers would be proof that the castle's coffers are empty," Sorin narrowed his eyes, nodding. "We never knew where they were kept. How did Endel...? Is he sure of this?"

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Zerek nodded, folding his arms before he realized what he was doing. “He is positive.”

“So,” Laira looked down at the center of the table, her eyes going unfocused as she thought, “the question is, how do we get in there to steal the ledgers?”

Sorin stared at her for a moment, but then looked again at Zerek. “You two already have something in mind, don’t you?”

Zerek couldn’t help but grin. “We do. But,” he turned and reached a hand out to lightly touch Laira’s back, “we need help.” He turned again to Sorin to continue, but as he pulled his hand away from her, she took his hand into hers, and drew closer to him. That distracted him for a moment, but he was glad for her support, and her touch. “Endel told me that the entrance is down a short corridor,” he continued, “and the entrance is always guarded by two soldiers without exception. There’s no way to sneak by them, and no other way in or out.”

“So you need someone to distract the guards, get them to leave the door unguarded,” Sorin nodded approvingly.

“And since I’m one of the fastest runners here,” Laira smiled, “you thought of me, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Zerek smiled sheepishly. Would she be mad at him for not consulting her first before making her a part of their plans?

A slight squeeze of her hand told him he was okay, at least for now.

“I’m going too,” Sorin nodded. That elicited a couple of gasps from the other thieves.

“Sorin, no,” one shook her head. “You’re too important, what if you’re caught?”

“This task is too important,” Sorin shook his head, pushing off of the table to stand up straight. “We’ve worked towards this goal for nearly a year, ever since the Prince took over stewardship of the throne. Now we’re closer than we’ve ever been.” He took a moment to look into the eyes of everyone present, including Zerek and Laira, before he finished, “I’m going to see this through personally. I started us on this path, and I’d be a coward not to finish it.”

Once again, Zerek found himself having to reevaluate what he thought he knew about Sorin. Sometimes he seemed like such an uncaring person, and yet, now he was taking a personal interest in the events that would affect the future of the entire kingdom.

Zerek began to suspect that Sorin had not always been a thief, but if not, then what was he before?

Ignoring his questions for a moment, Zerek said, "I don't think we should have anymore in our group than that. More people will make it harder to sneak around the castle." He tried to sound smart about it, but those words had been Endel's, not his. The fact of the matter was that he was not an experienced thief, and he had no doubt the others could see through his façade.

"Agreed," Sorin smiled and nodded. "Good point, young man. So now the only question is, how do we get into the Castle District?"

"That's the easy part," Laira chimed in, smiling at Zerek. "Because you've been sneaking in and out of there for months, haven't you?" She squeezed his hand again.

Feeling his face turn bright red, Zerek nodded. "Indeed."

Suddenly Sorin laughed, not an amused or sinister laugh, but one of pleasant surprise. "I can't believe it. We actually have a plan. We actually can do this..." He looked incredulous, shaking his head and running his hand through his hair. "After all this time."

Zerek let the moment sink in, despite one question that he wanted to ask. All of the other thieves joined in Sorin's joviality, laughing and patting each other on their backs. It was amazing to see the sudden shift in everyone's moods.

When the congratulations and laughter died down, he finally asked his question. "So, when do we do this?"

Sorin paused in his breath, glancing around at the assembled thieves, before he shrugged simply, and said, "Tonight, of course."

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Thunder rolled through the valley of the To'kar encampment, vibrating Arkad's chest. He felt a chill run through his body, one which even his flame-enchanted axe could not keep at bay.

Craning his neck back to look up at the towering black clouds, he couldn't help but feel as if it was a giant wave cresting overhead, ready to drown him and all of his people. It didn't help matters that the sun had drawn close to the horizon.

He recalled that there had been a storm just before the outsiders had invaded Akaida. A small one compared to this, but it still made his pulse race and his heart freeze.

Today will not be like that day, he thought to himself. *Whether I rescue one or dozens of my people today, everyone else is still safe here.*

As if reading his thoughts, Kilack stepped up next to him, wearing his battered and worn darksteel armor. "We can weather this storm together, brother," Kilack looked up to him, nodding confidently. "As long as you're leading us."

Pride filled Arkad's chest, a sensation he had not felt in many months. It was a welcome warmth against the life-sucking cold that seemed to surround their very existence. He smiled down at his Lieutenant and nodded. "Then let us finish this."

Turning together, they faced Tana as she stepped out from her hut and approached them. She seemed to pause for a moment, exhaustion apparent in her weary eyes. She looked at both of them with her piercing eyes, and for a moment, Arkad felt a slight electrifying pulse pass through his body.

With a smile growing upon her face, she stepped up to Arkad and nodded. "I was prepared to give you an encouraging speech," she said, "but it seems your hearts are already steeled for what is yet to come."

"We are soldiers of Akaida," Arkad puffed out his chest proudly. "We are always ready to fight for our people."

“Good,” she nodded, and then extended her hand, a vial filled with a lilac-colored fluid suspended within it. “Here is the potion.” He accepted it from her and held the deceptively tiny vial up for inspection, the stopper seemingly jammed in almost too tight. “I apologize for taking so long to craft it, but it is not a normal one. I have tied it to your soul, General. Once you throw it down, the portal will open to just over the hill,” she pointed off to the south, “and will not close until you step through. This will allow you to send back as many orcs as you can.”

Nodding in satisfaction, Arkad stowed the potion in a pouch on his belt, and then hefted up his axe, ready to go.

But Tana was not yet ready to send them on their way. She raised up a cautionary finger, and added, “This is dangerous. Anyone can pass through the portal. Any *orc*, any *human*, anyone. You must not let our enemies through, at all costs.”

Arkad stared down at her, the weight of what she’d just said pressing against his chest. This could be his greatest moment as a general, leading his people to safety. Or it could be the moment when a single Wizard came through to find out where the To’kar were, and could rally an assault to wipe out the rest of his people.

He wouldn’t let that happen. Not today. “I swear on my life, I will protect our people with every drop of my blood.”

Expecting a satisfied smile from Tana, he was surprised when she grimaced, and reached out an affectionate hand to hold his. “Just come back safely, General. I...we need you.”

Feeling his cheeks warm, he squeezed her hand and bowed slightly to her. “I will, my Shaman.”

Releasing his hand, she turned to her right and raised her hands, open-palms facing away from her. The wind from the storm had already kicked up, but suddenly a new, stronger wind blasted from the opposite direction, and created a whirlwind of dust, twigs, and grass all around them. Tana’s eyes

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began to glow a bright red, and as he had before, Arkad wondered if her magic was what gave her eyes their hint of red amongst the sea of green.

Within moments, a red-white wall of light flashed into existence a few feet away. He felt the air around him crackle with magic.

This was it. This was the moment. There would be no turning back once he stepped through that portal.

So he didn't step. He charged.

Right into chaos! A blast of magic seared past his ear, a simple energy blast that was definitely not from a darksteel orc's enchanted weapon. He knew Kilack was right behind him, so he didn't stop moving, and let his momentum carry him into a surprised Mage bearing colors of gold and black. He barreled over the shocked Mage, and allowed his momentum to carry him a dozen feet further before coming to a stop.

Turning around, he was glad to see Kilack had not faltered either, and had finished off the Mage that Arkad had shoved over.

Tana's portal had taken them right into the middle of the clearing where the orc army had formed their line, and he grimaced to see that they were too late. From their vantage, they could see that the orc army was now completely surrounded, the humans and Wizards advancing on all sides...except one.

Looking east, he saw that his darksteel brethren had come together in one location and used their enchanted weapons to force a gap through the enemy lines, straight into the forest, where they had their best chance at escape. However, only some of the orc army was moving in that direction, most of them had not heard a signal to retreat.

For a long moment, Arkad considered sounding that retreat, but then he realized that Commander Zinrel had likely intentionally left the rabble behind, to cover the escape of the more valuable darksteel orcs.

It was a cold move, but from a tactical standpoint, it made the most sense. The enchanted weapons and armor could not be replaced, they did not know where Klaralin had obtained them from, and the loss of every single piece was a greater blow than losing 20 Wastelands orcs.

There was no time for him to debate the moral merits, who knew how long the battle had been going, or under what conditions Zinrel had given that order. Besides, Arkad was here for one reason alone, and he had come knowing that the Wastelands orcs' lives were forfeit anyway.

Waving for Kilack to follow him, they rushed towards the broken eastern line. Few humans made it through the orc line, and he admired that even against Wizards, the Wastelands orcs were still putting up a great fight. Their greater numbers alone gave them that staying power, but that advantage was quickly dwindling.

Still, after only having to fight off a half dozen Warriors and a single Mage, they made it to the breach point, just as the human army was close to closing it off.

Using his fire enchantment along with Kilack's ice-enchanted Mace, they broke through the closing line, and fled into the forest, seeking the last of his brothers.

The rumble of thunder vibrated the ground, sending shivers up and down Amaya's spine. The lightning strikes were getting more frequent, and fearing that a horrible storm was coming, she stepped outside of her hut. The pair of orcs standing guard looked at her in some level of surprise, but she had been assured by Tana that she would not be hurt and that she was free to roam the camp.

"I just wanted to see the storm," she told them.

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At first she thought the storm was coming from the west, since that was where she looked first and saw dark clouds closing in on the sun, which was less than an hour away from setting. Then she followed the storm south, and then looked straight up. The darkness was closing in all around them, and she felt her jaw drop as she stepped back away from the hut, fear gripping her heart. “My gods...”

“Do not worry,” Tana’s voice called from her right. The shaman was just coming around the corner of Amaya’s hut, and at her presence, the guards visibly relaxed. “The storm comes every year.”

Looking up again, she shook her head. “That is supposed to comfort me?”

Placing her hand on the shoulder of one of the guards, Tana eased that guard away, and nodded for the other to leave them. Once they were alone, Tana looked confidently at Amaya. “Yes. I was here to see it last year, and the rest of the tribe has told me tales. It marks the end of the warm season, and the temperatures in your lands will drop significantly in the next few days.”

Nodding slowly, Amaya said, “The official beginning of winter. Our first snow fall usually comes this time of year, though it melts within a day or two.”

A sudden gust of cold wind kicked up, and Amaya clenched her arms around her chest, rubbing her ribs to keep back the cold. Did that generally mild snowfall come from this mammoth storm?

With little warning, a shadow fell over them, and they looked west to see that the sun had fallen behind the edge of the storm. “The winds will likely take some of our huts,” Tana shook her head. “There will be flooding, replenishing the marshes to the west. And lightning will strike everywhere, but the rains will stop any fires. We will survive this, Lieutenant.”

Still not used to talking to an intelligent, well-spoken orc, Amaya looked at Tana in surprise. “Orcs never die from this storm?”

Motioning for her to walk, Tana led her away from her hut, probably in an attempt to distract her from the impending storm. “It happens, of course. And will become even more likely, given that tomorrow morning, we will pack up and begin our journey away from here.”

Nodding her head slowly, Amaya said, "You wish for the storm to cover your tracks, in case anyone else finds this encampment." Then another thought occurred to her, and she felt color drain from her face. "What does that mean for me?"

Tana did not look at her, and she feared the worst. However, she was surprised when Tana said, "We will let you go in the morning. I do not know if that is a better fate or not, but we cannot allow you to accompany us. Even if you wished to."

Feeling her shoulders slouch in relief, Amaya said, "I understand. Believe me, if the storm can be survived, I'll survive it. I've had plenty of training. Although..." She looked around, shielding her eyes from the wind and dust. "I do not know where to go from here."

"Worry not," Tana smiled at her. "I will create a portal that will take you back to our original encampment. From there, I think you know the way home."

Amaya heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Tana. I...I don't believe I deserve such kindness."

She hadn't even meant to say it, it just came out before she could stop herself. The shaman looked at her curiously, her hairless eyebrows creased upwards. "Oh? Do you really think so little of yourself?"

Blushing, Amaya shrugged. "I'm a human. We've not exactly treated your kind that well, though in fairness, we had no idea..."

When she didn't continue, Tana added, "That we could be intelligent? That we were individuals with souls of our own?"

Amaya found herself wondering if they actually had souls, but then stopped herself. "You have to understand," she ran her fingers through her hair, "we've been taught since birth that humans were the only intelligent beings in the universe. Anything else that gave the appearance of intelligence were said to be demons. It was only a few months ago that we began to question those assertions."

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Of course, what she didn't say was that Amaya had been imprisoned during that time, when the elf Elaria had revealed herself, when the Prince, as wretched of a boy as he was, had declared that Elaria was not a demon. And then when the dragons appeared in the skies above Archanon.

The news had first reached her when she overheard guards talking about it. After, when she had been released, she had sought out as much information as she could on the subject. Everything that The Order had taught them was suddenly in question.

And people were talking about it. Most often in complete fear of the future to come.

They had mistreated Elaria. They had mistreated the orcs.

"Maybe humans are the real monsters," she shook her head. "Maybe we're the real demons."

That little admission made her stomach sink, and she felt a great emptiness open up within her chest, threatening to swallow her whole. But then something unexpected happened. Tana lightly touched her shoulder, and stopped them so that she could fully face Amaya.

"Evil is not unique to humans, my dear," the shaman spoke, her green eyes piercing into Amaya's blue ones. "Orcs are capable of great evil. So are elves, and a host of other races in the Universe."

The idea of there being even more intelligent races out there made her head spin for a moment, but she should have realized that was the case. Elves, orcs, and dragons? Yes, there had to be more than just them out there. Perhaps thousands more. How big was the Universe, anyway?

She shook her head, "Does that excuse how we have treated your kind? Does that excuse how we act even towards each other? Does it excuse the horrid, twisted ways we destroy each other, fight each other in wars, manipulate each other?" Her voice grew louder as she spoke, and she felt as if her chest were about to explode as rage and anger suddenly filled in the void she had moments ago felt.

When she became aware of that anger, she stopped herself from talking further, and she turned away from Tana. Guilt, sadness, anger, so many emotions filled her. She had been so focused on her

mission to find Arkad that she had not thought about her own troubles, but now they suddenly came back all at once.

Tana allowed her a moment of quiet, until a sudden bright flash of lightning lit up the area, and was very quickly followed by a deafening boom. As if a signal to the gods, rain suddenly fell upon them. There was no gradual drip leading up to the downpour, it just hit all at once, and within moments, she was soaked.

Without a word, Tana tugged her on her sleeve and led them ahead. Amaya, fearing another lightning strike, followed without question, goose bumps rising up on her arms. They didn't even go for a specific hut, they simply ducked into the closest one, where three small children were being watched over by an orc woman.

"Shaman," the woman called out in surprise, and then bowed before her. She was actually a little taller than Tana, and it was just now that Amaya realized she had never before seen another female orc. Was Tana unusually small? Or was the other orc unusually tall?

"Be at ease," Tana smiled, and then looked at the children. All three were huddled as far away from the entrance as they could be, cowering in fear. Tana approached them, and held out a hand. A soft, golden glow extended from her hand towards the children, and she said, "Do not be afraid, young ones. The storm cannot harm us in here."

As the glow washed over the children, their fear visibly faded, and they even moved a little closer to the shaman. Even Amaya felt a little warmth radiating from the glow, and she stared in wonder at the shaman. She had never seen such a power before, and she began to suspect that there was more to this shaman than any previously encountered in history. What that was, however, she could not begin to guess.

Tana sat down cross-legged and beckoned to the children, and, tiny as they were, they crawled into her arms and lap and snuggled up. In that moment, she realized just how adorable they were!

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Yet again, everything she thought she knew about orcs changed. She felt guilty for ever thinking of them as mindless monsters.

As if reading her mind, Tana looked over to her and smiled. “Life is precious, Lieutenant. All life. And when you spared the life of Kilack, you proved to me that you were an honorable person. You are worthy, dear. Never doubt that. It is why I brought you here. Why I thought you were the only one who could help us.”

Smiling and feeling her cheeks warm at the compliment, Amaya stepped over to just a few feet beside Tana and sat down, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. The ground was cold, but it was better than being out in the rain. Her wet clothes didn't help matters, either, but there was nothing she could do about that now.

The glow from Tana's hands increased and filled the entire tent, so Amaya closed her eyes and basked in the soft warmth.

Tana was not evil, she thought to herself, keeping her eyes closed. Everything she thought she knew about orcs was wrong. Everything she thought she knew about the world, about the Universe, it was all suddenly different.

She had to help. She hoped that, somehow, doing so would make up for the terrible things that had happened to her, and the terrible things she had done to orcs.

Opening her eyes, she looked at Tana, watched as she rocked the young orcs back and forth, humming softly to them. It was a beautiful sight, and she realized how right Tana was. Life was precious.

All life.

In that moment, Amaya remembered the makeshift doll she had found at the abandoned orc camp. She reached into her soaked leather pouch and wrestled with pulling the doll out. Just as its head peaked out, one of the orc children, a little boy, gasped in surprise.

Amaya looked up at the boy in surprise just as the doll finally broke free. He extracted himself from Tana and started to move closer to her, but then stopped and looked at her hesitantly. The boy was clearly afraid of her, but the doll had caught his attention.

“Where did you find that?” the orc woman asked in surprise.

“I found it,” Amaya shrugged. “When we were looking for the General at your abandoned camp.”

She couldn’t begin to guess the age of the boy, she had no idea if they grew up as fast as humans did, but if he could speak, he chose not to. He simply looked back at the orc woman, then at Tana, before finally fixing his gaze on the doll.

Amaya looked at it, regretful that the face had been washed away. Still, that could be easily fixed once the storm passed. She reached her hand out to give the doll away, but he backed away in response. Each subsequent attempt she made to give it to him yielded the same result, so she finally just set the doll down as far away from her as she could, and then sat up straight.

As the boy’s eyes darted between the doll and Amaya, the woman tilted her head to one side. “He made that during the summer with his father.”

Amaya wanted to ask where the boy’s father was now, if she implied that his father had been killed, or if he was simply on watch duty right now. Either way, she felt a pang of guilt within her when she realized every single orc she had killed could very well have been a parent.

It was just like fighting other humans. Thinking back to when she had disobeyed Din’s orders to slaughter the bandits and their families, she shook her head and clenched her teeth.

The orcs weren’t monsters.

Suddenly the boy darted across the distance and snatched up his doll, before he returned to Tana and crawled back onto her lap. He looked at the doll and adjusted some of its pieces back into place before he clutched it to his chest.

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When he looked at her again, he gave her a surprisingly adorable smile, and she felt her heart melt.

Realizing that she couldn't just sit by and watch Tana and her tribe destroyed, she looked up at the Shaman. "I have something to tell you," she blurted out. Tana looked at her, still humming soothingly. Amaya hadn't told Tana who she really was before, fearing that the shaman might consider her a threat and execute her. Now, however, she no longer feared that. "I am not just a Lieutenant in the army, I am part of the King's Guardians." When Tana looked at her quizzically, she continued, "We are the King of Tal's most trusted guards and soldiers, and have the authority to speak with the weight of his voice. He trusts us."

Tana smiled and said, "Then perhaps it was destiny that you would be the one to come to our camp."

Grinning a little, Amaya shook her head, "I don't know about that. But I do know this...I will tell the King of what I have learned. I know that the general population will not be ready to learn that not all orcs are the evil killing machines we believed them to be, but he is an honorable man. Perhaps he can help ensure the Allied Army never comes this way. Never finds you."

Looking thoughtfully at her, Tana added, "And perhaps in the future, he will be the one to help broker the alliance that must inevitably exist between us."

Earlier in the day, Tana had told Amaya about her prophecy, that humans and orcs would one day stand side by side against the very enemy that had driven the orcs from their homes. It scared her, to think of such an army, but Tana had insisted that as long as the orcs and humans faced that enemy together, there would be hope.

This wasn't just about saving the orcs, she realized. It was about saving her own people, too.

If she could convince King Beredis, maybe everyone had a chance at surviving the coming days.

Pain seared through Arkad's arm when a blast of arcane magic slammed into him, shoving him into a nearby tree. Growling, he turned at the offending Mage, who looked determined...until she saw the look on Arkad's face.

With a violent swing of his axe, he blasted fire at her, as strong of a blast as he could conjure from the massive weapon. The flame engulfed a hastily-erected magical shield, but they danced around the edges and licked at her.

He could have continued to focus his enchanted weapon upon her and eventually defeated her, but they didn't have time to wait for that. Arkad was therefore grateful when Kilack came up behind her and swung his mace at her, shattering her spine and knocking her to the ground just as Arkad stopped the stream of fire.

They had tried to follow the orcs into their retreat, but were being pursued by relentless human forces, being stopped constantly along their path. Wastelands orcs also followed and tried to keep up, but all they managed to do was distract the enemy forces.

"Come on!" Arkad shouted, waving his hand for Kilack and any nearby orcs to follow. He charged further into the forest, shoving aside branches, angry at the trees for blocking his path, from keeping them from pursuing and, more importantly, rescuing his people.

They only made it another hundred feet before a group of enemy soldiers suddenly blocked their path, but only one Mage was amongst them. The rest were powerless.

Arkad didn't even have time to consider his next move, Kilack leapt past the General and swung his weapon, sending out a blast of instantly-freezing cold. The Mage managed to shield himself and those directly behind him, but the rest were on the peripheral and were frozen.

Tired of the delays, Arkad continued his charge, and swung his axe as he barreled into the Mage. Arkad brutally shoved the Mage over and left him and the other surviving Warriors behind to tend to their wounded.

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Kilack was right there with him, as he always was. Ready to fight for his General, and his people, as they had done so together for so long.

And finally, when he had begun to give up hope of catching up to his people, after what felt like hours of pursuit, they stumbled into a clearing in the forest, onto the remaining darksteel orcs. All of their heads turned to him and Kilack as they burst through, a handful of Wastelands orcs following behind.

However, a moment later, he noticed that orcs were not the only ones in the clearing. His heart froze, almost as cold as Kilack's enchanted mace, when he saw on the other side of the clearing a group of enemy soldiers he had not seen in months.

The Keeper of the Sword, bearing the great red Sword of Dragons, and his three companions, the Wizard, a Mage, and a Warrior, along with three other Warriors he did not know. They had effectively cut off the retreat of the orcs, and as the sound of pursuing enemy soldiers grew closer behind him, Arkad knew that their time was running out.

He looked up into the sky and saw that they had little daylight left, and that would only make matters more difficult. Now was the time, but he knew he could not yet throw down the portal vial, not without risking enemy soldiers following through.

There was only one choice, and he felt his gut twist at the order he was about to give.

He thrust his axe high into the air, and shouted, "For Akaida!"

And with a roar, he charged through the group of darksteel orcs, right for the enemy, roaring a challenge that the other orcs echoed. The ground thundered when they all turned and charged at the enemy along with their General.

The Wizard and the Keeper had both grown in power, and their initial salvo of magic slammed into the front line of the darksteel orcs with devastating effect. Bodies slammed into each other, and

bolts of lightning connected with a half dozen orcs, burning right through their enchantments and killing them instantly.

However, the darksteel orcs still had their enchanted weapons, and several used them to shoot out salvos of magic that forced the enemies to cease their attack and focus on shielding themselves, quite effectively thanks to their Wizard.

Until the orcs reached their line. Then it was all that they could do to keep themselves alive. Several more orcs fell, but the humans surrounded the Wizard to protect him, and this allowed many of them to run past. Arkad almost gave into his blood rage and charged into the center of their protected ring, wishing to destroy the Wizard that had defeated him at the mining camp, but he knew better. He circled around to chase after those who made it past the enemy.

However, the Keeper was not ready to let him go. Before he knew what was happening, the Keeper suddenly landed in front of him, having used his powers to leap over the General.

Showing his youth and inexperience, the Keeper smirked and asked, "Going somewhere?"

But Arkad didn't stop. He charged right at the Keeper, and swung his axe with as much heat pouring out of it as possible, setting the surrounding grasses and trees ablaze, and slamming into the Keeper's magical shield...

To no effect. The shield held, and as Arkad tried to plow over the Keeper, he slammed into an immovable wall, crunching his shoulder and bouncing back onto the ground.

As the flames spread, igniting the dead and dry underbrush around them, Arkad scrambled to his feet. The Keeper looked shocked by the brutality of Arkad's attack, but held his ground, his blue-white shield fading.

"Not this time," he settled into an aggressive battle stance. "This time, you and I are going to finish what we started."

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He didn't have time for this. Neither did the Keeper. The forest would burn fast, and while that had the advantage of cutting off pursuers, it also meant he would soon be cut off from his troops. He wasn't going to let that happen.

The blood rage threatened to overcome him, but he held it back. Blind rage would not win this battle...in fact, he realized, he didn't need to win this battle at all. He just had to get away.

The Keeper seemed arrogant, far more so than when they had first fought, and that gave Arkad the edge he needed. Counting on the human to meet him blade-for-blade, he attacked with an overhead swing.

Handling the Sword of Dragons with a deftness and speed that belied its size, the Keeper deflected Arkad's attack and tried an upward swing to cleave open his belly, but Arkad had anticipated the attack, and side-stepped it, though barely fast enough. The blade, impossibly sharp, cut up through the chest of his darksteel chest plate, sending the sparks of conflicting magic to the ground and starting mini fires.

Spinning around, Arkad hefted his axe and swung with every ounce of his strength, imbuing his weapon with all of the power that he could manage.

Had it been any other Warrior, the attack would have destroyed his opponent, but the Keeper was fast and smart. His shield protected him again, but it couldn't stop the force of the attack, and the human was sent sprawling to the forest floor.

Arkad sprinted several feet past the Keeper, and then turned.

Pausing for only a moment, he watched as the Keeper, stunned, tried to stand. And then he opened up his axe's enchantment, and sent forth a stream of impossibly hot fire into the forest surrounding the Keeper.

Jon Wasik

The flames did not engulf the Keeper, as he knew would be the case. The human threw up a shield and leapt backwards, impossibly high and far back, over the fires that had been set before, and to safety several hundred feet away.

For the moment, the enemy had been cut off. But at what cost? How many of his brothers were caught in that field behind the wall of fire?

His grip on his axe tightened, and he was almost tempted to find a way to rescue them. However, he also realized that many more of his brothers had made it past the Keeper and his companions, and were even now fleeing further into the forest.

Arkad had to rally them before they fled too far. Turning away from the flames, he ran into the forest, heedless of the danger behind him, or the danger still ahead.

To Be Concluded...