

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 4 “Into the Forge”

By Jon Wasik

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The Ilari Mountains smelled of pine, and of flowers, still blooming against the coming fall. The air was warm, but not hot, not like Arkad preferred. Never the less, it reminded him of mountains remembered from a lifetime ago. Red skies, hot summer days, trekking through the same mountain paths since he was a boy.

Home. A great weight formed in his stomach, a familiar sensation by now. It wasn't so long ago, the wound was still achingly fresh. A sense of loss, not just of kin, but of birthright. Loss of identity.

Cold. That was what he had to look forward to now. The winter was coming, probably sooner than he expected. Winter in this wretched land.

The land that was now his people's only hope.

Tearing himself back to the present, he looked around at his warriors, scattered about in the mountain forests. They were holding at the eastern edge of the Ilari Mountains, their numbers scattered to help avoid detection. They could make no camps, make no fires, not without fear of being detected by their enemy. They ate their hunted kills raw, and foraged any fruit they could to keep going.

Stomach growling, Arkad rummaged in his travel pack for something to eat. There were still plenty of berries; he avoided eating them whenever he could. They were far too sweet for his palette, but he had already eaten the last of the mushrooms. Perhaps he could find something better. There were plenty of fresh kills to partake in throughout the scattered army, but he had ordered all of his soldiers to hold off on their main course until they knew for sure whether or not they would attack tonight.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

He looked southeast, into the trees. Of course he could not see their target city, a place the humans called Valaras. But he could smell it. They were upwind of the city, the winds of the desert beyond pushing the human stench into the mountains. His nostrils flared, drinking in the scent, anticipating the coming battle.

Valaras was key to their conquest of the human lands. Several of the human mining camps brought their bounty to that city for trade and crafting, to later be exported out to where they would be needed. Taking Valaras would hinder the human war effort, and give the orcs new weapons, and forges to make more.

From what his master said, it was also not well guarded, compared to other cities. It sat on the border of the great white desert, and on the border between two allied kingdoms, sparing it the brunt of the Lesser Wars. It would be an easy city to secure.

His head shot up when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. They were heavy and fast, so not human, but also two-legged, so not humans on horses. Smiling, he momentarily abandoned his travel pack and stood up. Several other orcs around him likewise stood and looked east.

From amongst the trees, two of his kin, one clad in leathers skinned from the reptiles of the Wastelands, the other in dark-steel armor, burst out from the underbrush, and slowed to a jog when they saw they had rejoined their army. They did not look harried or worn, just determined, and both wore large grins upon their faces, their fangs gleaming in the sunlight.

In moments they saw their leader staring at them, and so they turned to approach Arkad. He took two steps towards them, and then waited. His heart began to pump faster, his blood burning with anticipation.

“General,” Kilack, the dark-steel orc, said as they came to a stop.

Jon Wasik

Arkad stood taller than any other orc in his army, and so he towered over his soldiers, which in and of itself demanded their honor and respect. He puffed out his chest and looked down at them.

“You bring good news?”

“Yes, General,” Kilack nodded and pulled a rolled-up skin out from his own travel pack. He unrolled it onto the ground before their leader, and knelt over. He had used coal to draw a crude map of the city. The city wall appeared to have six sides, all at uneven angles.

“From what we could see, the Warriors’ Guild complex is here,” he pointed at the bottom of the map, “at the south end, not far from the main gate. There are, however, two smaller entrances on the north and the south-west ends. I believe we can breach one of them more easily with our qrishags.”

Arkad smirked. If he was right, the humans would still not know about the qrishags. He looked behind him and saw one of the great beasts several hundred feet away, under the cover of a large tree. With tusks and a single horn, and three times the size of a human’s horse, they were terrifying beasts of the Wastelands. Beasts that the orcs of Halarite had never used in war against the humans.

They hadn’t known how to tame them before Arkad and his master had arrived.

The great, gray-scaled beast snuffed, blowing a cloud of dirt out into the air. They were powerful, and would easily take down any wooden gates. Even ironwood would not hold up to them for long.

Arkad looked back to Kilack and asked, “Do there appear to be reinforcements?”

“No, General,” the soldier puffed his chest out and smiled. “I do not believe they could have anticipated us travelling this far north. More likely they expected us to attack their capitol.”

“Good,” Arkad smiled and looked east. If they moved now, he had no doubt that they would have the city by midnight.

“Tell everyone to feast on flesh now,” he raised his voice, loud enough for all surrounding warriors to hear him. “We leave within the hour!”

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

With only a hint of a smile on her face, Amaya Kenla passed through the corridors of the old structure of Archanon Castle. It had been added on to, built upon and repaired countless times over the generations, but it was a point of pride for the kingdom that the original structure still stood ten thousand years later.

Pride that she was beginning to feel again, renewed by growing faith in the throne. Faith in her king.

Her destination was the throne room, and would be the sixth time she had been summoned to it in the past few weeks. She still was not completely familiar with the layout of the entire castle, but the oldest part was rather simple, so she knew where to go.

As had become custom, she was not headed for the main entrance. That was for dignitaries, peasants, or anyone else granted an official audience before King Beredis. She was one of his elite Guardians, and discretion was called for.

She rounded a corner to enter through one of the side passages, but came up short, and felt her heart leap into her throat. Standing before her was the young Prince, Idrill Beredis. Her heart soured when she realized he waited for her.

“Ah yes,” he spoke as bile built up in the back of her throat. “Ms. Kenla, my father’s newest favorite pet.”

It was the first time she had seen him since she and her team had been brought before the King in shackles. There had been a part of her that had known she would eventually have to face him again, but did it have to be so soon?

Knowing how important it was to show him respect, no matter how little she held for him, she bowed before him. “My Lord Prince.” In her bow, she clasped her right hand against the sheath of her

longsword, some distant part of her wishing she could draw it. It wasn't the two flanking guards that made her decide against it.

Hatred boiled within her, but she had to contain it. Rising up to her full height again, which nearly matched the young brat's, she stared at him stolidly. She wanted to say something to him, but knew she could not unless he spoke first and asked her a question.

The Prince stared at her with passive eyes at first, but disdain very quickly filled his eyes. "Such manners for a criminal." Her blood boiled, and she gripped the hilt of her sword with her right hand, squeezing it, as if it were his neck. "You have begun to strut around this castle as if you belonged here, but mark my words," he raised his hand and pointed a finger at her nose, "you do not belong here. Criminals do not belong under the protection of this roof."

Jaw clenched, it took every ounce of strength she had in her not to reply. Something must have sparked in her eyes, however, as the Prince smirked. "I can see you wish to respond. You wish to tell me exactly what you think." He scoffed and shook his head. "I give you leave to say whatever you wish to me."

In that instant, she nearly gave in and sealed her fate. He was a spoiled brat, a dictator who would only destroy their kingdom if the King allowed him to succeed his reign. An abysmal human, the lowest sort of pond scum, and a man she would never serve.

Instead, she forced her jaw to loosen, and replied, "With respect, my Lord Prince, the King has decreed my team and I innocent of any wrongdoing or law breaking." Her voice was even, not betraying the rage within her.

The Prince's face soured and he placed his hands on his hips. "You broke the law," he spat out, "make no mistake about that. I do not care what ruling my father made. There will come a day when I ascend the throne again." He stood as tall as he could, as if his scrawny structure would frighten her. "When I do, I will not make the mistake of hesitating to have you executed."

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

She almost reminded him that laws written at the end of Klaralin's Reign three thousand years ago decreed that a King could choose his heir, it did not have to be his children. King Beredis was a good man, and he would choose an heir to the throne far more fit than the Prince.

Wouldn't he?

Her courage faltered at that thought. Though there was no proof of it, many in the castle believed the Prince had poisoned the king, and had it not been for the healing hand of a Master Wizard, the boy before her would have been crowned king by now, and she likely would have been executed to honor his coronation. Would the Prince try to assassinate his father again?

"Step aside, whelp," the Prince commanded.

With only a moment of hesitation, she followed his order. He began to walk past her, but then stopped and leaned towards her to whisper, "I *will* have the throne some day. Of that, you may be certain."

She felt her cheeks burn when he said that, but he passed by then, and left her fuming. The two guards flanking the side entrance remained stolid, unmoving, but she wondered if they felt as she did. Or were they loyal to the Prince?

Several moments passed as she composed herself by taking in deep breaths and counting them out. When she finally felt calm enough, she turned to the entrance and nodded to the guards. One of them opened the door for her, and she passed through.

Dressed as a guard to save face when in the castle, she normally blended in with the countless other guards that stood in recesses and between the statues of the throne room. If the King was in audience, it would appear as if just another guard had entered, and no one would question her. Chainmail armor, and a black tabard with the kingdom's symbol embroidered in silver on the front.

Jon Wasik

The only thing that could set her apart was if she drew her sword. Everyone would see that she held a Warriors' sword, a remnant from her past, but more a part of her today than ever before. The blade was sky-blue, and would forever remain her trademark.

The King was not in audience, and all of the guards were absent, a common practice when court was not in session. She walked as quietly as she could into the throne room, but her armor made that all but impossible. The King, standing at the foot of the steps that led up to his throne, turned as she came in. He had been conversing with Draegus Kataar, a man she now knew to be the leader of the Guardians.

Perhaps one of two people in the entire kingdom who knew who each and every Guardian was.

The truth about the Guardians was not quite what she had expected. The common citizens, and especially the Warriors' Guild, knew of the rumors of their existence within Tal, but those rumors were of a completely secret group that operated without impunity for the King.

What surprised her was how close the truth was to the rumors. However, they weren't completely secret, for that would give them no authority if no one in the kingdom knew of their existence. Everyone of any influence, whether a mayor, a captain of the guard, or a Warrior Commander, knew. They knew that if anyone ever presented the seal of the Guardians, they worked with the full authority of the throne behind them.

She bowed before the King, "Your Majesty."

King Beredis nodded, balancing his golden crown upon his head with ease. He wore black and silver robes today, and looked unusually concerned. "Amaya," he attempted to smile through his concern. She would never get used to being called by her first name by her King.

"Lieutenant," Draegus added his own nod. She had been granted that rank within the castle guard, matching her former rank within the Warriors' Guild. That had been a pleasant surprise for her.

"How may I serve you today, my Lord?" she asked, her face passive.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

The King drew in a deep breath, held it as he glanced at Draegus, and then let it out slowly.

“With something far more delicate than you are used to dealing with.”

This was enough to worry her. The King was usually very direct, and never hesitated. She had been given two assignments since Ironwood, both of which had been to deal with smaller orc encampments within the Kingdom. Every time, she and her six soldiers, plus the Wizard that now accompanied them, defeated the superior numbers easily.

That, she assumed, was what it meant to be a Guardian. To fight the battles no one else could. The armies of the Alliance were poised to strike the larger orc army the moment they showed themselves. They could not afford to spread their forces out for minor skirmishes.

“My mission for you today is not directly related to the war.”

Now she really felt surprised. The war effort, and all preparations for the coming battles, consumed every city, town and village of Tal. Of every kingdom, for that matter. What could be so important that her elite unit would not be involved in that effort?

“My Lord?” she asked, clasping her hands behind her back to hide her anxiety.

For a moment, the King stared at her with his endlessly dark eyes. She didn’t know if she should continue to return his gaze or not, so she found herself nervously looking at his chest.

“Are you a devout follower of the Order?” he finally asked her.

Her mind turned blank for a moment, the unexpected question catching her off guard. “Sire?”

King Beredis frowned. “I believe the question was rather clear.”

“I, um, yes,” she fumbled with her words. “I mean no.” She hesitated and considered her answer carefully. “I believe in the Order and the word of the Cronal, but I do not recall the last time I stepped foot in a sanctuary.”

“I see,” the King shook his head. “So you believe everything the Order has told us.”

She began to see where the conversation might be going. “For the most part.”

Jon Wasik

Her King raised a curious eyebrow. "For the most part?"

Uncertain how best to continue, she nodded. "Yes, sire. However..." She trailed off and looked at her feet, her insides turning. "I find it difficult to reconcile what has been said about the Battle for Archanon."

Drawing his lips into a thin line, the King nodded. "Indeed. That is true for many throughout the lands. We tried to prevent word from spreading too quickly, but that just wasn't possible. By now, news of the details of that battle has spread to every corner of Edilas. It won't be long before the colonies learn of it too."

She could only imagine how difficult the world would find the news, and how close to panic so many people now were. Elves. Dragons. Both intelligent creatures. One elf had fought in the Battle for Archanon, alongside the Keeper of the Sword. She had helped defeat Kailar. And four dragons had disenchanting Klaralin's pendant.

The existence of apparently intelligent beings besides humans was called for in the Cronal, but they were identified as demons. Evil spirits sent by Degrin to corrupt the followers of the Order of the Ages.

"If I may ask," she said after further thought, "what does this have to do with my team?"

Beredis looked at her with a stolid expression. "Many people within the kingdom are having difficulty accepting these new truths. We have all been taught from birth to believe everything the Cronal says. Yet there is now proof that the Cronal is wrong. Many will not believe. Some will panic."

She felt a sinking sensation in her stomach when she began to suspect what their next mission might be. Never the less, she said, "We are yours to command, Sire. Please continue."

Beredis drew in a deep breath and sighed. "A group has begun to cause trouble in Valaras. They claim this war is the result of our sins, and have begun interfering in work at smelters and forges."

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

“I see,” she spoke slowly, the void within her growing. “And you wish for us to stop these people?”

“Yes,” the king nodded. “Under normal circumstances, I would leave it to the Covenant to handle, or the local guards. However, today I received a report from a Wizard that these people took up arms and seized the Forge District. The Crafters’ Guild is furious and demanding action, and without a fresh supply of weapons and armor, we will lose this war.”

Although she was not a strategic commander, even Amaya knew how disastrous this could be. The forges of Valaras weren’t the only ones in Tal, but they were the key suppliers. In wartime, Valaras crafted more weapons and armor in a week than the rest of the kingdom combined did in a month.

However, the mission before her made her feel sick to her stomach. “Your Majesty, I...”

He raised a hand to stop her. “I believe I know your objections.”

“Which is why,” Draegus spoke up, “we have chosen you and your team for this mission.”

“Sir?” she looked at her commander curiously.

“We don’t want you to go in with swords drawn, ready to attack,” Draegus shook his head. “If it comes to that, we want it to be a last resort. These are citizens of Tal. Frightened, unable to cope with the new reality that faces us all. It also wouldn’t surprise me if most of them are rallying behind only one or two leaders. If you can get those leaders to quiet down, the others might calm down and return to their homes.”

“With respect, your Majesty,” she looked at her king, “I am not a politician or a negotiator.”

“You are, however, a leader,” the King looked at her confidently. “Which means you have charisma. I have also seen that you are reasonable, and you care about the lives of the innocent. I do not know if reason can sway this group, but we must try, and there is little time. Orcs could strike at any city at any time, including Valaras. We have to be ready. We need those forges up and running.”

Jon Wasik

“Yes, Sire,” she nodded, feeling wholly uncertain about the path before her. How could she convince someone to lay down arms peacefully when they were convinced they were right? Especially when they believed they had the support of the gods?

“Let me be clear,” the King stepped closer to her, a genuine look of regret on his face. She felt a pit form in her stomach, and thought she knew exactly what he was going to say next. “Your mission must succeed. If they do not leave the forges willingly, the Guild will step in. I trust you know what that will mean.”

She felt at least part of the weight on her shoulders lift, but only a part. For a moment, she thought he was going to order *her* to clear them out by force. There was no possible way she could do that. These weren’t bandits, they were simply frightened people who believed they were doing the right thing to earn their gods’ forgiveness.

However, it still drove home the importance of the task ahead. If she didn’t succeed, the Warriors would march in and force them to give up the forges. Only death could follow.

“Gather your team,” Draegus nodded. “You leave immediately. Nia is already waiting for you outside of the western gate.”

“I trust you are comfortable working with her again?” the King asked.

Amaya smirked, amusement filling some of the void within her chest. “Yes, Your Majesty. She seems to fit in well with my team.” That was a lie. The young Wizard was barely out of apprenticeship, and didn’t seem to understand the finer points of interpersonal relationships. That didn’t stop Amaya from trying, and from doing her best to keep her team from ever taking jokes too far where Nia was concerned.

“Good luck, Amaya,” the King smiled weakly. “I hope for everyone’s sake that you succeed.”

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

For three weeks, she was all Zerek could think of. His heart beat faster when he imagined her face, and his entire body tingled in excitement. Some parts more than others. Try as he might to focus on work, she really was all he could think about. All he wanted to think about.

The thief that had stolen his orders, his dagger, and his heart.

Gods, that sounded terrible even in his own head! But there was no denying any of it.

Of course, he was reminded of that often. His first assignment, and he had lost the orders, signed and sealed directly by the King. It wasn't just an embarrassment to him, it was to Kai Loric as well. She had trusted him and vouched for him, and in doing so, his failure became her failure.

However, as he now stood before a member of the castle guard, nearing the end of another defense training session, he found that the ultimate results were well worth it. He was not the first of the King's messengers to become victims of thievery, and most had been outright mugged.

He and another messenger, Chessick, stood face to face in the courtyard outside of the castle barracks, wooden short swords in hand. A castle guard named Torick stood to the side, with Endel sitting on the cobblestone path next to Torick.

Chessick hadn't been kind to Zerek in the past few weeks. Taller than he was, Chessick's black hair was always pushed straight back, and he stared with founded confidence at Zerek.

"Now it's Zerek's turn," Torick commanded. He was not even a Lieutenant, but he clearly knew how to train others, and how to command those trainees.

"Come on, Zerek!" Endel cheered him on, pumping his fist into the air. "Kick his butt!"

Chessick raised his eyebrow mockingly. "Yeah, come on kid. Show us what you've learned."

Anger flaring his nostrils, Zerek charged at his adversary. He swung his sword in a fast circle to cut up from underneath. His opponent easily blocked, as was expected, but as his sword bounced off of the other, he used the momentum to swing with all of his might from the side.

So the fight was supposed to go. Zerek was meant to use the momentum of his swings to keep the pressure on his opponent, and Chessick was supposed to only defend.

Of course, the session was just about over, and Chessick never missed a chance to humiliate him. The next thing he knew, his sword passed through air, and then the world exploded in pain when the flat of his enemy's sword smacked his face full-force. His head jerked to the side, and his cheek immediately turned hot.

As did his temper. He turned back to face his opponent, and that smug grin on his face, and launched at him. He was ready to tear the boy's head clean from his shoulders!

Until Torick grabbed hold of his collar and yanked him back. Chessick burst into laughter, but this time he had taken it too far, and his own face caught the back of Torick's hand.

"That is enough!" Torick shouted. Zerek tried desperately to keep the smile off of his face when he saw how shocked and embarrassed Chessick was. Zerek's cheek burned just a little less. "I let you two continue to train together because I thought your rivalry would spur you to work harder." He pulled Zerek further away and then let go. "But now I can see that neither of you take this seriously."

"Hey, it's not my fault he keeps playing games with me," Zerek defended in frustration. "I want to learn how to fight, I *need* to learn."

"You'll never learn, you little-"

Torick interrupted Chessick's insult with the threat of another backhand. It was enough to make Zerek's latest nemesis back down. For all of his bluster, not to mention his greater age, Chessick was still a coward when it came to actual pain.

With a great heave of a sigh, Torick crouched down between them, steadying himself with the tips of his fingers, and stared at the cobblestone for a while. Finally, he looked at Zerek. "Part of what I have been trying to teach you both is to know when to fight and when not to. I know it has only been a couple short weeks, but this is perhaps one of the most important lessons I can teach you."

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

He then turned to Chessick. “This also includes learning when not to instigate a fight in the first place. Never instigate unless you know you’re going to win-”

“I can beat him any time, any day,” Chessick scoffed.

Torick paused, but this time he did not glare, he simply looked with a stolid, heavy face. “And unless you absolutely have to,” he finally finished. “There is enough bloodshed, enough fighting in our world without needlessly starting a battle.”

With a sigh, Torick shook his head, once again staring at the ground. “You two should never even be in such a position. You’re messengers. You’ll never find yourselves in the middle of a battlefield, or facing off against bandits in the wild. Just thieves in the alleys. An occasional mugger.” He again looked at Chessick. “They will taunt you, they will try to goad you into going after them. Whatever these thieves want from the castle, they’ll employ any number of methods to get it. Like goading you into chasing them into a group of a dozen of them. Then what are you going to do?”

Even Chessick wasn’t arrogant enough to think he could take on a dozen thugs. He gave no response back, he simply folded his arms and sighed in defeat.

“Guile, deceit, mistrust,” Torick shook his head. “This is how thieves operate. While you’re facing the biggest, baddest one in front of you,” he held up his hand, fingers straight up in the air, “their sneakiest one will come from behind,” he motioned with his other hand as if it were the stealthy assailant, “and take everything of value before you even realize it’s a trap.” Torick lowered his hands and shook his head. “Or worse.”

Zerek knew what the ‘or worse’ was. Part of him didn’t care if that happened. But then he realized if someone killed him, he wouldn’t ever see the girl again. She had given him his dagger back. Hadn’t hurt him. She had even allowed him to catch up to her. That could only mean that she wasn’t like the other thugs in the city.

Thief. That was what he called her. What was her name? He *had* to find out. He *had* to find her.

Realizing their training was over, he began to feel impatient, and unconsciously began to fidget. Torick caught on quickly.

“Alright,” he stood up. “That’s it for today. Put your practice away and get out of here.”

Chessick snuffed in Zerek’s direction, and stalked off towards the rack where they kept their practice weapons. Endel leapt up off of the flagstone and walked over to Zerek, Torick sauntering off towards the guardhouse.

Impatiently, they waited for both Torick and Chessick to wander off. Then Zerek looked at his friend with a grin. “Come on,” he hurried over to the rack, placing the well-used practice sword in its place next to Chessick’s.

A moment later, they were off, not towards the servants’ quarters like they should have, but towards the gate that led out into the rest of the city.

The gate guards, looking resplendent in their black and white tabards, hardly paid them any notice as they burst out and down the small hill. The castle and the elite of the city all lived on that small, flat hill at the center, the original borders of the ancient First City of Halarite.

Every now and then, Zerek gently touched his face, feeling the heat radiating off of where Chessick had hit him. He wondered how much of that heat was embarrassment. It wasn’t like he had gone his whole life without injury, he’d worked in a mine. But somehow, this hurt worse than any rock falling on him or stubbing his toes or banging his shins.

“Where are we going to look today?” Endel asked. That was when Zerek realized that he hadn’t been paying any attention to where they had been going, he just walked.

Indeed, where could they search? The city was huge, and it would be impossible for him to search every street. Well, not impossible, it would just take a very long time.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

After he had told Endel about why he had left the poor kid all alone in the Market those few weeks ago, his friend had at first been saddened, perhaps even with a hint of jealousy. But then he had decided that he was going to help Zerek find the girl, no matter what.

They had started by going to the bridge by the farm district, where he had last seen her. They'd explored that part of the city, not crossing to the farms at first, but just looking around the homes and handful of shops near the river. All of this they did in the one or two hours they could get away from the castle, usually when on a delivery run.

At that rate, they would never find the thief. So they started asking those who lived or worked in the area about her, giving them a description and hoping they would recognize her. Olive colored smooth skin, short brown hair, almond eyes, tattered cloak, ragged trousers and tunic. Clearly she lived on the street.

To his dismay, no one they had talked to recognized her. Not one person.

Where else could they look? Across the river, in the farm district? Or deeper in the city, further away from the river?

He had to find her. That was all he knew for sure. So he looked at Endel with determination, hiding his doubts and the emptiness he began to feel inside, and said, "We just have to keep asking around. Let's go deeper into the city. *Someone* has to know who she is."

Endel shrugged and nodded, "Alright. Come on, we'll go closer to the red district this time."

Tugging on Zerek's sleeve, he took off into a run, Zerek right on his heels. They always ran to and from the castle district. That and his many errands outside of the city had started to build his stamina. He could run further, go faster, and not tire as easily. He knew that would come in handy if he had to chase her again.

It took them several minutes, but they finally got to the blue district again. He had begun to familiarize himself with the city's layout, and knew that they weren't far from the red district. It was a

long walk to the river from there, so he questioned Endel's decision to stop there and begin asking around.

"It's like Torick said," he shrugged. "Thieves are about misdirection, right? Maybe she took you to the river so you wouldn't have a clue where she actually spent her time."

Zerek considered it for a moment, and realized his young friend was right. His heart fluttered with renewed hope. "Okay. So, what, start looking around here?" He looked west, towards the red district. During the day the everlasting torches that lined the streets weren't as easy to identify, but the borders between districts were still rather obvious. Especially the red district. Only military stayed there. City guards, Warriors, and their compounds and barracks and training grounds. Near the center of it was the actual Guild complex itself, with a brick watch tower that rose up from the center.

"I kind of doubt a thief would hang around Red," he looked at Endel, doubtful.

"Exactly," he smirked. "It's the last place anyone would think to look for a thief."

He sighed and nodded. "Alright. Why not, let's try it." The main streets of Archanon were all brick-laden or stone, and the one they stood upon now was no exception. It was busy with traffic, carts and horses, men and women, all going about their business. He often wondered about all of those people he saw every day, going about their business on the streets. So many people in one place, all with their own lives, with their own agendas, their own problems.

Having lived in mining camps all of his life, it was almost overwhelming.

Ignoring the fear he felt, he began to ask everyone he could on the street. Some ignored him completely, some were outright rude to him, but he was used to all of that. Every now and then, he came across a sympathetic ear, and he asked. But no one recognized her.

Just when he and Endel were about to give up and head back to the castle before they were missed and punished, he found his first clue with an old lady at a vendor's stand selling bread.

"Excuse me, my lady," he put on his best charm.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

Giving him a warm, albeit toothless smile, the old lady nodded, “Well hello there, young man. Come for some fresh bread?” She leaned in closer to him, which he found just a little uncomfortable. “I’ll give you the freshest if you’ll give me a handsome smile.”

Feeling his cheeks grow warm, Zerek resisted the urge to back away. He didn’t want to offend her, even if she didn’t have any information for him.

“Uh, actually, no,” he tried to smile for her. “No, I’m looking for someone.”

“Oh, is that so?” the lady stood up straight, or as straight as she could. Folding her arms, she asked, “And just who might you be looking for?”

“I don’t know her name, but I think she’s someone who lives on the streets.” He gave the description he had given a thousand times, adding in that the girl had the most mischievous, but beautiful, smile.

Zerek didn’t expect the curious eye the bread lady gave him. “Hmm. And why exactly do you want to find her?”

He’d never been asked that question before. Everyone just told him that no, they hadn’t seen anyone like that on the streets. A spark of excitement ignited within him.

What should he say? Should he tell the old lady that the girl was a thief, but he was head over heels for her? No, that just sounded dumb. So what, then?

Endel came to the rescue, in a manner of speaking. “He’s got a big crush on her,” the kid chimed in. “Wants to find her and try to kiss her.”

Zerek pushed at his friend, his cheeks burning in embarrassment. “Hey! I do not.”

“You do too!” Endel stuck his tongue out at him.

Glaring and feeling completely beside himself, he was suddenly shocked to hear the old lady cackling. “Oh, I think your young friend is right,” she beamed at him. He looked at her, but then turned his face down to try to hide his red face. “Oh yes, you definitely do.” She sighed heavily and leaned

against her stall. "If only a man would pursue me with such fervor again. I tell you, in my day, I was quite the looker. If I had wanted to, I could have gone home with a different man every night."

Something turned in his stomach, making him ready to vomit. That was not a vision he wanted to imagine. The bread lady just stared off into the distance dreamily.

After what felt like hours, Zerek became impatient. "So, have you seen her?"

"What?" she snapped out of her reverie. "Oh. Yes, good lad, I have." She pointed around the corner, down a smaller street. "Go down there until you get to Freelance Square. Turn right down the very next alley way. If you don't find her there, you'll find someone who knows her there."

With his excitement returning, Zerek smiled and started to jog down the road she had pointed out. "Thanks, lady!"

"You better be nice to her, young man," she called after him, but he barely heard it. He barely was aware that Endel was rushing along side of him. All he could think about was finding the thief, seeing her again, and most importantly, finding out her name.

Amaya found her team already awaiting their new orders in the castle barracks. As she entered to brief them, the other castle guards, knowing her importance, gave them a wide berth.

While they all wore castle guard uniforms when not on assignment, they had been given a great deal of freedom in what they wore and used for weapons elsewhere. That made for a very unique team.

Elic chose to wear chainmail armor reinforced with steel spaulders, shin guards, and wrist guards. He also proudly wore the Tal tabard, black with silver rather than white lines, denoting his station as one of the King's elite. He also still wielded his father's steel longsword, passed down to him when his father, a city soldier, had been mortally wounded in battle.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

Peren wore light leather armor and carried a pair of small daggers as backups to his ironwood bow. He was incredibly strong, making him one of the few people capable of using an ironwood bow. He was also one of the most accurate archers she had ever served with. Archery was somewhat of a lost art as the Mage population had increased in the past century. Who needed archers when Mages could serve as ranged attackers?

She knew better.

Idalia wore only chainmail armor, preferring a balance between protection and mobility. She had returned her husband's duty sword after their battle in Ironwood, and had been provisioned one of Archanon's finest steel longswords from the armory. Her own Guild weapon had been destroyed upon her incarceration.

Nerina, strong and brash, and often drunk when not on assignment, wore full chainmail and plate armor, carried a one-handed steel mace, and a heavy spade-shaped shield bearing the kingdom's icon upon its face. It already bore several scratches and nicks from battle.

Vin, the silent, nimble one, wore barely-adequate, blackened leather armor, and carried a pair of daggers and a number of throwing knives. When possible, he always preferred stealth and misdirection over direct combat.

And Gell, perhaps the craziest of her entire troupe, wore leather with only some chainmail reinforcements, and carried axes. Three to be precise. One was a larger, two-handed axe carried upon his back, another was a small one-handed axe on his hip, and an even smaller throwing axe was strapped to his left boot.

After Amaya had briefed them and they had strapped on their gear, they marched down the main avenue of the market district with a purpose and authority they had all readily adopted. She looked at her crew, and began to realize just how unique they each were.

The Warriors' Guild did not value uniqueness, she realized. Oh sure, you could dye your weapons and armor a unique color that suited your taste upon graduation, but she wondered if that was meant to mask the fact that a Warrior was part of a uniform machine. Everyone carried swords, no exception. Normal Warriors a short sword and shield, Mages a longsword. Most archers were approaching an elderly age, and had become subjects of ridicule in the Guild.

Now, as Guardians, she and her team could wear what befitted them best, and wield whatever weapon made them most comfortable. Maybe being forced out of the Guild wasn't so bad after all.

Amaya wore mostly leather armor, with hardened guards at her shins, hips, shoulders, and wrists. She had kept her sky-blue longsword, given to her by her former Commander, Uric Din, three weeks ago. It should have been destroyed, like the rest of her teams' swords. Instead, it had been preserved by the one man she hated most, and given to her in a seemingly innocent and genuine display of kindness and affection.

Yet she couldn't bring herself to get rid of it.

Once outside of the western gate, they came upon Nia, waiting patiently outside of the magical enchantment that surrounded the city and prevented the creation of portals. She wore her forest green robes, lightly embroidered with gold symbols that looked like they had meaning, but Amaya could not guess what. All Wizards seemed to wear the same kind of robe, and Amaya began to wonder if they ever changed clothes.

"Greetings, Lieutenant," Nia half-bowed to her, her pinewood staff remaining stationary beside her. "I have been briefed on the mission objective. We may depart as soon as you are ready."

It was like talking to a dead fish. And as they always did when seeing Nia after a few days, Gell and Nerina glanced at each other and snickered. She shot them an icy glare, knowing exactly what they were thinking. Nia seemed to have little emotion, and they often chided her for that.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

The one that recurred the most was a joke that Wizards forgot to teach their children how to feel. Amaya didn't find it very funny. Less so when Nia seemed not to understand that it was meant as an insult.

"Go ahead, Nia," Amaya nodded once. "I take it you know where we are going?"

"Yes," Nia nodded, turning away from them and stamping her staff down, the jade stone embedded at the top flaring green. Amaya, though not the strongest of all Mages, felt the sudden excitement of energy around them. "We have negotiated portal entry points at every major city on Edilas."

Within moments, a blue-white wall of light opened up before Nia, and she waited patiently for them to precede her. Amaya glanced at her team, only to receive a mischievous smirk from Gell. She glared at him in warning, and then motioned for them to follow her.

Having become accustomed to portal travel, she did not hesitate as she walked through the wall of light, and felt only a slight shift in temperature. Instantly she found herself standing in one corner of the courtyard at the Warriors' Guild complex.

She stepped away from the portal to allow her team through, and began to get her bearings. That was when it dawned on her, as her eyes fell upon the mountains the city was nestled up against. Mountains to the *west*, not the east. They were on the other side of the Ilari range, somewhere she had never before been, and never thought she would be. She knew that only a dozen miles east of the city, the land turned to white sands, the beginning of the Desert of Ca'aluun.

As the last of her team stepped through, they were greeted by an older Warrior she knew to be Commander Argus. His hair was shockingly white, his skin rough and dark red from years of too much sun. That only added to his daunting presence.

He regarded her with a stoic, hard look, his eyes a sharp blue against his reddened flesh. She didn't know what he was thinking. Did he hate her for having lost her position in the Guild? It was

considered to be a horrible dishonor, at least to Warriors. But if he thought less of her, he did not show it. He nodded to her, "Lieutenant Kenla." His voice was gruff and strong, the weight of decades of being a Warrior giving a slight edge to his words.

"Commander," she nodded back.

"I was notified to expect your arrival," he continued, regarding her assembled team. She still couldn't even begin to decipher what he thought about her, about them. It was like conversing with a statue.

Deciding she needed an ally in the Guild, if that was even possible, she thought to appeal to his vanity. "I thought that might be the case. I could really use your advice in these matters, sir. Any chance you could brief us on the way?"

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows slightly, a hint of surprise and even admiration. Shrugging, he nodded and waved for them to walk with him. "Sure, why not?" Setting a brisk pace, they quickly made their way out of the Guild complex and into the streets of Valaras.

She was only partly surprised to find that, unlike most towns and villages, the streets were made of stone, similar to Archanon. No doubt that was due to Valaras's wealth as one of the key suppliers of refined ore, weapons, and armor in Tal. Not to mention their exports to Erien.

"Their leader is a man named Trebor Tem," he began, his voice still hard, but a purpose behind it. She noted he did not speak to her as if addressing a subordinate, but rather as if briefing a peer. That should have comforted her, but somehow it did not. She wondered about that fact, but focused her attention on his information. "He's a cook, runs one of the local taverns. Everyone in town knows him." Argus shook his head, "And I do mean everyone. That's how he was able to rally support."

With a frown, Amaya asked, "A cook? I almost expected it to be one of the clerics."

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

“Believe it or not, the Order is staying out of this,” Argus shrugged. “I wish they’d condemn the man, he’d lose all support. On the other hand,” he looked at her, “It could be worse. If they publicly supported him, he’d have the whole city on his side. I don’t have to tell you what happens then.”

As they continued further into Valaras, she noticed how unusually desolate the streets were. Even small towns were usually busier than this, and Valaras wasn’t small by any measure. She could only guess that with the forges and smelters shut down, the city had likewise shut down.

Moments later, she discovered she was partly right. They rounded a corner around a large three story building to find the famous Forge District of Valaras.

In most villages and towns, a blacksmith, whether their craft was weapons and armor, horseshoes, shovel spades, or any other number of metal pieces, had individual forges. Smelters were also often operated as single shops run by a family, with a single furnace for the smelting process.

Valaras was much more than that. She knew the history, anyone who served in the Tal Warriors’ Guild knew it. Valaras had started like any other city, with individual forges. However, the eastern side of the Ilari Mountains was rich in ore, especially iron ore. This allowed for a greater number of smiths to work in the same area for a low price.

This began the slow, steady build up of forges and smiths in Valaras. Just a few centuries ago, it was already considered the center for weapon and armor smithing. Then a woman in Valaras discovered how to purify coal, allowing it to be used in smithing. With plentiful coal deposits in the mountains further north, Valaras boomed.

The first smiths forged business partnerships and combined their properties in town to build complexes with multiple forges and furnaces. This trend caught on, and before long, the entire central core of Valaras was made up of large, multi-forge buildings. When business was slow, they could shut down unneeded forges and furnaces. When a Lesser War started, every single one operated at capacity to produce the needed weapons and armor to fuel the kingdom’s war machine.

Jon Wasik

That was why Tal had won so many of the Lesser Wars. Falind and Saran often came to the negotiating table because they simply could not keep their Warriors and soldiers armed.

Though Amaya had never visited Valaras before, she could imagine the numerous streams of smoke pouring from the countless chimneys that broke up the skyline. What a sight it must be. Today, however, not a single puff of smoke filled the sky. Every single chimney was cold.

And the streets leading into the Forge District were guarded by armed civilians.

Commander Argus led them up to a squad of Warriors holding their own line fifty feet away from a mirrored line of civilians. There were only eight Warriors facing two dozen of the civilians. She noted that the civilians wore armor and carried weapons that no doubt came from the forge, but even that would not give them the upper hand against the trained and seasoned Warriors.

Based on how nervous all of the civilians looked, they knew they were outmatched.

“Captain,” Argus addressed one of the Warriors, a woman with bright red hair, steel plate armor, and a scarlet longsword that denoted her as a Mage.

“Yes, sir,” she turned to Argus and stood at attention.

“Report,” he ordered, looking past her at the line of soldiers. They all shifted uneasily when he did that, and she began to wonder what his reputation in town was. Something inside of her was beginning to twist and turn the longer she was in his presence.

“No change, sir,” she glanced over her shoulder. “Including no change in the guard, so I imagine they are getting tired.”

Amaya could tell that was the case just by looking at the civilian line. They all had deep lines set under their eyes, and not one of them seemed able to stand up straight. One even slouched against the nearest building.

“Good,” Argus smiled. “That’ll make things easier.”

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

He started to move past the Warriors, but Amaya grabbed his elbow to stop him. He did stop, but the icy glare he gave her was enough to freeze her stomach.

“To be clear, we’re going to talk to them,” she looked at him evenly. “Not attack.”

At first he did not reply, he simply stared at her. The ice she saw before was still present, but beyond that, she still could not read any expression in his eyes, any emotion. It was then that she knew - if she didn’t get the forges up and running again, a lot of people were going to die.

“Lieutenant,” he emphasized her rank, “I will do whatever is necessary to ensure this kingdom is protected and ready to fight our enemies.” She noted he said enemies, plural. She also knew he was a veteran of the last Lesser War.

“I understand that,” she folded her arms. “But the King sent me to find a peaceful resolution to this situation, and you’re going to give me a chance to do that.”

Argus raised an eyebrow at her. “Oh? Peaceful?” He glanced over her shoulder, and then looked her in the eye. “Then why did he send you with your entire team?”

She stopped at that, knowing full why. In case she failed.

But there was also another reason. Her team created a more intimidating presence for her. Perhaps King Beredis thought it would give her an upper hand in negotiations.

That was when she realized that it would likely have the opposite effect. She once more looked at the civilian line, saw how tired and overly nervous they were.

No, this wouldn’t do.

So she looked back at Elic, and said, “Everyone stay back. I’ll handle this alone.”

Elic’s eyes grew wide with surprise and concern, but he did not object. “Yes, ma’am.”

She then turned to Argus and gave him a hard look. “We’re giving peace a chance, Commander.”

Narrowing his eyes at her, he shook his head. “You’re not going in there alone.”

Jon Wasik

“Yes I am.” She felt her stomach flutter, a part of her still feeling nervous about standing up to a Guild Commander. It didn’t matter that she had the King’s full support backing her, a lifetime of training was hard to overcome. Wanting to help him save face in front of his Warriors, if that was even possible at this point, she added, “Consider it an order from the King, as communicated through me.”

At first he simply continued to stare at her. Then he stepped closer to her, in a threatening enough manner that she felt and heard her team stir behind her. He leaned close enough to whisper in her ear, “Be cautious, *Guardian*.” He said her title with disdain. “You do not want me as an enemy.”

She stepped back and looked at him with determination. “Nor do you want me as yours, Commander,” she spoke quietly. “Now my team will remain here, prepared to assist me if I call upon them. You will afford them every courtesy, is that understood?”

Her hands shook, her breath caught, and she felt like a young girl defying her parents. But she stood her ground.

“As you wish, *Guardian*,” he nodded. “Be my guest. And when they kill you and string you up as an example, I shall tell the King you died through sheer stupidity.”

With that, he turned his back to her, and stood staring at the civilian line. If it hadn’t been for the seriousness of the situation, she would have laughed at his child-like antic. Instead, she turned back to her troupe.

“Be wary,” she looked at each of them. “These sound like religious fanatics, and that is never a good start to negotiations.”

She expected someone in the group to object to her going in alone, but she did not expect it to be the Wizard. “Are you certain it is wise to attempt this without support?”

She looked deep into Nia’s gray eyes, and slowly shook her head. “No. But if we go in looking like we’re ready to destroy them, it’ll immediately create a barrier in our discussion. They’ll feel threatened and at a disadvantage, and will attempt to respond in greater strength.”

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

“Then perhaps I should accompany, and no one else,” Nia added, stepping forward and planting her staff next to her. “If the worst should occur, I can create a portal to effect a quick escape.”

It was a good thought, and for a moment Amaya considered it. Then she realized where it would go wrong. These were religious fanatics, reacting violently because everything they believed in was now being disputed. The Wizards, claiming to be a separate species from humans, were therefore considered heretical by many.

“I’m afraid this is something I must face alone,” she shook her head. “But I thank you for your offer.”

Nia opened her mouth to object, but then closed it and nodded ever so slightly, her face still dead-pan. “As you wish.”

Once again, Amaya looked to Elic, whose strength she had come to rely upon. “Keep them safe while I’m gone.”

He smirked and nodded, “Of course. Lieutenant.”

A smile crossed her face, the use of her rank a reminder to her that she was strong, and had earned her position as their leader. Her friend always knew what she needed to hear.

Though she still felt trepidation, she turned and faced the civilian line confidently. With her hands disarmingly at her sides, she walked past the disgruntled Commander Argus and into the neutral zone between sides.

The distance was not great, but she swore she could feel an intense conflict of energy in the magic between the two, and it made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Resisting the urge to shudder, she quickly approached the line of civilians, all of whom readied weapons at her approach.

Stopping ten feet out, she addressed the closest civilian to her, “I am Amaya Kenla representing the Guardians of the King of Tal. I wish to speak to Trebor Tem.”

Adrenaline surged through Arkad as his feet carried him swiftly through the mountain pass. Here at the lowest point between two peaks, his army still had plenty of cover amongst the trees.

It was a well-travelled pass, and before they had even approached the summit, they had come across a small group of travelers taking an empty cart into the mountains. He alone killed three of them, and Kilack slaughtered the other two, leaving the rest of his army bloodthirsty and jealous of the first kills of the day.

That blood thirst would be their undoing someday, he knew that. Within himself and the others who had travelled to the Wastelands with him, the lust was strong, but under control. Those who had grown up in the Wastelands, however, could go into an uncontrollable rage. What little intelligence they retained was lost, and they became little more than animals.

Their fear of him is what kept them in check. What made them obey his orders no matter how strong that lust became. He could tear them all apart in an instant.

Or so they believed.

Running only a half dozen feet beside him, Kilack caught the same sight that Arkad did, a small break in the trees just big enough for them to see the city at the foothills of the mountains. "We made better time than anticipated, General," Kilack spoke. He was no more winded than Arkad, their run of dozens of miles barely fazing the orcs.

"I know," he replied, never faltering in his run. "We will reach the clearing long before sunset."

"Do we stop?" his Lieutenant asked.

He considered it. While he felt proud of his soldiers for running so fast without signs of tiring, he also knew that they were too close now. If they stopped to wait for the sun to set, it would increase their chances of being discovered. Thousands of orcs ran behind him, and as they further made their way down the slopes and the narrow pass opened up, they would begin to spread out in all directions, to eventually attack from their pre-designated flanks.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

He had miscalculated, though he would never admit that to his troops. It had been his intention to begin the attack at night, when the orcs would be harder to see. But they had no choice, they had to push on.

It would not matter. They would reach the city before reinforcements could arrive, regardless, and they would secure it quickly. Once they had the city, no force could overcome them. Plus the other army they had sent west would likely have already been discovered, and would distract any potential reinforcements.

“No,” he replied, feeling the ground beginning to level out beneath them. Their pace would slow now that they no longer ran downhill, plus he would need to slow down to allow his troops to fan out to their flanks. “Keep going.”

Then another thought occurred to him. “The humans I have known in the past were always overly cautious. It is not uncommon for them to build escape tunnels for their royalty and their rich.”

“They are cowards,” Kilack spat.

“Yes, but they are also industrious and intelligent,” he glared warningly at the lieutenant.

“Never underestimate humans. But we can use this to our advantage.” Raising his voice, he shouted, “Pass the word to all units. On our approach to the city, raze all farms to the ground, and look for any hidden passages. If a unit should find one, enter it and take it into the city, in case we fail to breach the gates.”

Immediately he heard his troops pass on the word, and Kilack looked at him with a twisted, toothy smile. “While they defend from without, we shall dismantle them from within.”

Arkad smiled at the leap of logic. “Exactly.”

He could almost taste it. The freedom and restoration of his people was at hand.

Freelance Square was like many of the other squares in Archanon, but that didn't mean Zerek didn't stop for a moment to marvel at it. So many people, walking in and around the various shops and stalls. Even in the blue district, there were so many stores, so many people, so much gold changing hands. It made him wonder how a city of its size could support itself. Did all of the shops survive, or did a lot of them close up shortly after opening?

In the center of the square was a fountain with a stone statue, and while there was no running water spouting out of it like he had seen in several others, it was still an incredible effigy that towered several stories high. Set in a light gray rock, the statue was of a blacksmith pounding an indistinct piece of metal on an anvil. He and Endel took a moment to approach the fountain and read the dedication upon it.

"In honor of the last true freelancer, Omerin Galatein," Endel read aloud. "Oh I know all about him!"

Zerek smiled at his over-enthusiastic friend and looked back to the edge of the square, towards the alley that the bread lady had told him to go down. "Tell me about it," he said idly as he led his young friend towards that alley.

"He was the last smith standing," Endel smiled, "during the Freelance Revolution. All the other smiths, fletchers, everyone who crafted anything had been bribed or forced into joining the guilds. He refused, even when the Queen demanded he do so."

Crossing the square became difficult as a surge of patrons passed by, but Endel, being small and nimble, managed to stay near Zerek. He kept talking through the people. "When he was arrested, there was this public outcry, and all of the crafters of the city refused to work."

They finally pushed through, and stood at the entrance to the small alley. "Yeah?" Zerek looked at Endel. "How'd that work out for them?"

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

It was rare to see Endel's smile disappear. This was one of those moments, as a terribly sad grimace pulled the edges of his mouth down. "That was Queen Amaru."

That was a name everyone in Tal was familiar with, and Zerek felt his stomach sink. He knew what it meant. Mass arrests, executions, torture. She hadn't stopped until everyone did exactly as she ordered. And even after that, she probably continued to randomly arrest crafters just to remind them who they had defied. It had been centuries ago, but the memory was still felt fresh in their history. The one time Tal royalty had become worse than Klaralin.

Looking down the alley, Zerek drew in a deep breath, and turned his mind to what lay ahead. He hoped this wouldn't be quite so disastrous. "Come on," he smiled, and they entered.

More than once, Endel had warned him about going into alleys while he had any amount of money or valuables. Not *all* alleys were bad, he had warned, but many were. Today, Zerek had no money on him what so ever. No orders, no valuables, except for his dagger, which he kept a hand on to ensure no pickpockets could take it.

It was definitely very narrow compared to most of the streets he had previously stuck to, but not so narrow as to make him feel claustrophobic. It did, however, feel dirty, and several beggars sat or stood along its length, their rags of clothing stinking to high heavens.

He didn't dare ask any of the homeless, and seeing that he and Endel were only kids, the beggars took one look at them and looked away despondently, knowing they probably had no money to give them.

Zerek didn't know whether to pity them or despise them. The city guards seemed to do a good job keeping them off of the main streets, so Zerek hadn't really seen any before now. He never would have guessed there were so *many* of them. Men and women, children, elderly. The elderly...they looked so frail, he wondered how they had survived the last winter, or how they could possibly survive the coming one.

He began to wonder why the old lady had sent him there, but then he remembered that the girl had looked homeless. Only instead of eking out a living as a beggar, she stole what she needed to survive. So that meant he'd have to start asking them.

Scared that one might decide to mug him, like he had heard about, he wrapped his fingers around his dagger and prepared to draw it. Approaching a homeless boy that wasn't much older than Endel, he began, "Excuse me..."

The boy looked at him with sad, blue eyes. The look immediately pulled at his heart, and whatever trepidation he'd felt about the beggars before, it vanished. They were just people. Scared, lonely, frightened, more so than he was.

"Do you have any food?" the boy asked, his voice weak and high-pitched.

"Um," he looked at Endel. "No, I'm sorry."

"Oh," the boy turned his head down and stared at the rags he'd wrapped his feet in.

"Look, I'm looking for someone. A girl. She's maybe my age, or older, I don't know." The boy didn't reply, he just continued to stare down. "Has a torn up gray cloak. Beautiful brown eyes..."

The boy frowned and looked up at him. "Go away. She doesn't want to see you."

When the kid turned to leave, Zerek reached a hand out to stop him, but his hand was snatched up by an adult man. The kid took off at a run, and the man held Zerek's hand so high it strained at his shoulder, and he squeezed hard enough to send jolts of pain through Zerek's wrist.

"Ouch!"

"Leave him alone," the man said, glaring down at him with blazing blue eyes. With black hair just past his shoulders, a shadow of a beard just starting, and decidedly nicer, albeit darker clothes than the beggars, the man was an intimidating sight.

"Stop it," Endel charged the man and tried to jump up at his arm to pull it back down. The man shoved Endel away, who hit the wall and slid down onto his butt.

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

“Hey, don’t hurt him,” Zerek kicked at the man’s shins. The man hadn’t been expecting that, and his grip loosened just enough for Zerek to break free and back away.

“Why you little,” the man came at him, arms outreached.

Barely thinking about it, Zerek drew his dagger and sliced upwards, the tip of the blade catching the man’s palm as he drew back. Blood immediately began dripping from his hand.

That was when Zerek realized the man was not alone. On either side of them, blocking both paths out of the alley, were pairs of darkly-clad muggers. It was exactly the kind of trap Chessick had warned him about.

One pair moved to restrain Zerek, but the blue-eyed man held up his wounded hand to stop them.

For a moment, the man stared at Zerek with searching eyes, his mouth slightly open in surprise. Zerek backed up to get closer to Endel, even though that effectively put him up against the wall. “You okay?” he glanced down.

Endel whimpered a little, but nodded and pushed himself up, brushing off his trousers. “Yeah.” He looked at the man and asked, “Why’d you do that?”

The man ignored him, and simply stared at Zerek.

“Hey,” Zerek stepped closer to him, trying to act braver than he felt. “My friend asked you a question.”

The man raised an eyebrow and grinned. “You’ve got a bit of a fight in you.”

“Yeah, I do, and I’ve got nothing you can steal either,” Zerek shifted the dagger in his hand to point the tip up and towards Blue-eyes. “So you best just move along.”

Blue-eyes looked at his companions, and then bellowed out a laugh. “She’s right. You do have spirit.”

Jon Wasik

The tip of the dagger lowered a little, and Zerek narrowed his eyes, feeling his stomach leap into his throat. "Wait, you know her?"

"Yeah, of course I do," he shook his head. "And I know you've been looking for her. So does she."

Feeling excitement overcome his fear, he stepped even closer, lowering the dagger to his side. "Where is she? Who is she? I mean," he shook his head, "What's her name?"

The man shrugged, "It's not my place to say. But you might want to see what it is that note says," he pointed at Zerek's waist.

He frowned and looked down, only to find a small piece of paper tucked into his belt. "How..."

Laughing, the man folded his arms in front of him and leaned back against the wall opposite of Zerek. "Go ahead, read it. We'll wait."

Not sure what to expect, almost fearing the paper, Zerek drew it from his belt and un-crumpled it. The handwriting was surprisingly neat, and easily readable.

It read, 'Top of the Warriors' Tower, midnight. Don't be late.'

The frown on his face must have spoke volumes to the man, "Not what you expected?"

Looking up at the man, he shook his head. "How am I supposed to get to the top of the Warriors' Tower?"

"If you can't figure that out," Blue-eyes pushed off of the wall, "Then she's too much for you. Come on, we'll escort you back to the square." He began to lead the way out, the pair on that side of the alley parting for them. Zerek followed, with Endel timidly trailing behind him.

"Oh, and do yourselves a favor," the man looked over his shoulder. "Don't come into an alley again unless invited. Wouldn't want her latest crush getting killed."

Zerek's cheeks flushed, and he looked at Endel excitedly. Did the blue-eyed man just admit that the girl had a crush on him?

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

That put Zerek in a love-induced daze for the rest of the day.

The civilian that Amaya had addressed became the reluctant ‘volunteer’ to take her to the forge that Trebor used as his ‘command post.’ Those were the exact words the civilians had used, and she almost laughed outright at hearing him say it.

They were highly inexperienced, and if the Warriors decided to intervene by force, it would be a slaughter. Doing so would have one of two effects on the kingdom: it would either legitimize their cause, turning who knew how many innocents into martyrs, or it would strike terror into the hearts of any who would dare stand up against the war effort.

She wanted neither for her kingdom.

The forge was one of several large warehouse-sized structures in the Forge District, and seemed no more special than any of the others. That didn’t exactly sit well with her, the uniformity that had begun to crop up in large structures. Where was their unique character? The first one had been special, but the fifth? Tenth? Anything that made them special was lost.

They also didn’t serve as stores, she quickly realized. Or at least, the one she went into didn’t have a store front, not like what could be found at a traditional blacksmith’s shop. It was all about production. They entered through a wide set of double doors akin to a barn’s. Why in the world would they need such a large entrance?

It didn’t take her long to figure it out. There were several horse-drawn carts stored, some with what appeared to be raw ore in them, others with boxes marked as containing weapons – swords, maces, axes. It was the shipping and receiving center of the forge. She also suspected this particular forge was meant to craft only weapons, as she saw no other labels on the outgoing boxes.

Her own sky-blue sword was unique, every Warrior’s was. There was no other longsword exactly the shape and size of hers, with the unique channeling lines etched into it to help her focus

currents of magic through the blade. The weapons they crafted here? They weren't unique or special. They were just common, ordinary swords, bound for common soldiers.

Just past the shipping center, she saw a group of four people talking together. Their conversation quickly ended as Amaya and her unlucky guide approached. The others spread out around one man, whom she assumed was Trebor.

He was actually quite an unremarkable man, at least at first glance. He wasn't much taller than her, and kept his walnut-colored hair short and tidy, along with his goatee. His eyes were the most unremarkable shade of brown she could imagine. Visually, he inspired very little, and she wondered how he could have rallied so many townspeople to his cause.

Then he spoke, and she understood why. "Well hello there," he smiled easily, a charm previously absent suddenly altering her opinion of him. He stepped up to meet her and extended a cordial hand. "I am Trebor Tem."

It wasn't what she expected. She was prepared for an aggressive man, ready to sacrifice lives to make his point. Instead, he was friendly and kind, and his voice was disarmingly buoyant. She took his proffered hand, "Amaya Kenla."

"She's a Guardian," her guide said, looking her up and down.

"Oh my," Trebor tilted his head to one side in genuine shock. "It appears I've finally caught the attention of the King."

She narrowed her eyes at him and, after he refused to let go of her hand, forcefully yanked it back. "Yes," she shook her head. "Shutting down the Forge District has that effect."

"Well good," he laughed easily and looked around at his companions, all of whom nodded in agreement. They all appeared much more concerned about her presence than he did. "Excellent, I'm glad to hear that."

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

Something didn't feel right about the barkeep. He was just too jubilant, too friendly, smiled too easily. How could someone like him rally regular citizens to take up arms against their own people? She immediately went on guard, and tried to prepare herself for the unexpected.

Looking at his companions for a moment, she then leveled her eyes at Trebor and squared her shoulders. "By order of the—"

"Can I see the brand?" Trebor interrupted.

She paused, her line of thought broken. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

It was a tiny mark, branded by iron onto the inside of her left wrist, twin longswords crossing each other, like the logo of the kingdom itself, but instead of guarding a mountain, they guarded a crown.

As quickly as she could, she loosened her left wrist guard and pulled back the cloth beneath to show off the mark. Trebor examined the mark as if he were examining a small sample of ore or food, with skeptical eyes. "Uh huh, I see. Looks fresh," he looked at her. "A new recruit?"

It was a clever ploy on his part, to try to make her seem less legitimate, inexperienced. She knew better and continued with her original thought. "By order of the King, I demand you lay down arms and go about your business immediately." She had said it with as much authority in her voice as she could muster, and in the past, that had always commanded the respect and attention of everyone. She also noticed that Trebor's companions immediately looked far more worried about her.

Trebor, on the other hand, laughed jovially and stepped back, crossing his arms. "Oh, I see. I thought you had come to actually listen to what we have to say."

"You mean what *you* have to say," her patience was running thin, and the tone of her voice reflected that.

"I speak for everyone on the side of the gods," he shrugged easily. Some of the others nodded their agreement. "The kingdom has begun to lose its way. In fact it lost its way some time ago."

“I don’t care,” she lied. Initially she had come in to actually speak with him about his desires, to try to speak reason to him. However, his mannerisms made her realize that the moment she gave him any fuel to downplay her authority, he would have the upper hand. Perhaps he already did. “His Majesty, the King, has decreed an end to your activities. You will follow his command at once.” She paused and narrowed her eyes, analyzing Trebor’s nonchalant appearance. “Under my orders, everyone involved will be allowed to go home, resume their lives as if this never happened. No charges will be brought against you and your people.”

“Oh how very kind of you,” Trebor replied, his voice a little less jovial and a little more sarcastic.

“Yes, it is,” she narrowed her eyes. “But the offer stands only so long as you accept now. After that, there will be time spent in the dungeons for you and your,” she glanced at his companions, “lieutenants.”

She expected Trebor to laugh. Instead, he simply furrowed his brow and looked thoughtfully at her feet. His companions looked genuinely worried.

“Tell me, Miss Kenla, do you believe in the gods?”

The question did not entirely catch her off guard, but she marveled at his ability to change the subject with no segue. “Of course I do,” she nodded.

“Then you should know the gods are on our side,” he unfolded his arms and planted his fists on his hips. She took note of the short sword strapped to his left hip. She also felt no power from him. Thankfully, he was not a Mage and would prove little challenge in combat, if it came down to that.

“Demons have been allowed to go free,” Trebor continued, his voice slowly turning colder, less amused. “To influence our royalty. A weapon of the demons now rests in the hands of this Keeper of the Sword, giving him unnatural powers. A member of the Covenant has been unfairly discharged from service, banished from the Order because he stood up to everyone to capture and interrogate a demon.” His face was slowly turning to anger, venom in his voice. It was a frightening transition to

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

behold. “Our kingdom has lost its way. And if we do not correct it, then the world will end in cataclysm.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, “And letting the orcs slaughter us wholesale is your answer?”

A horrid grin crossed Trebor’s face. “It is our reckoning. We must be made to pay for our sins, to turn the scales of judgment back in our favor. And only those who are righteous in the eyes of the gods will be spared the sword. By doing this,” he waved to the cold forge, “we secure our futures.”

With her fear increasing, she began to realize he truly was not in his right mind. There was no way she could reason with him, even if she used what knowledge she had of The Order to counter his assertions.

“And the wicked, the *dishonest*, the abhorrent will perish.” He had emphasized dishonest. She cued on that. Something, she didn’t know what, itched at the edge of her conscious mind, a clue in his words.

“Dishonest,” she repeated quietly, narrowing her eyes. “Abhorrent. Who among your peers would you say that describes?”

“Any who do not follow the teachings of the Cronal, of the Covenant, our leaders in faith and righteousness,” he looked at her with confidence in his eyes, spoke with anger in his voice, all of his calm demeanor gone. Something was angering him. Anger, not fear.

He wasn’t afraid. That was key. Why wasn’t he afraid? She could understand people fearing the new reality they all lived in, that the Covenant was wrong and there *were* other intelligent beings in the universe. The most devout of the Order feared it more than any others, everything they believed put into question in one nearly cataclysmic week.

So why wasn’t Trebor afraid? Anger could be fueled by fear, but she neither saw nor heard fear in him. Just cold anger.

Anger and hatred.

“And any,” he finished, “who disobey their oaths.”

Those were the words that connected it in her mind. That made her realize where she had seen that kind of anger before. Where that anger came from.

Her face slackened, and she asked him softly, “Where is she?”

Trebor’s lieutenants all looked at her and each other in confusion and shock. Trebor’s face only hardened. He said nothing, but she could almost feel the anger rolling off of him. Or perhaps felt it within herself.

“A girlfriend? Wife?” She glanced at the lieutenants as their eyes widened when she said wife. “Ex-wife?”

She noticed Trebor’s hands began to shake, his fists still on his hips, but clenched so tight now that his knuckles turned white. Still Trebor did not respond.

Folding her arms, she nodded. “So that’s it, then? That’s what this is all about? Your wife left you?” Anger began to boil up in her, and she felt her face harden. “You would risk thousands of lives, the defeat of our entire army at the hands of the orcs, because you can’t stand the fact that she left you.”

Trebor’s hands began to lower, still in fists, but no longer on his hips. She paid as close attention as she could to his hands without taking her eyes off of his face. The anger she saw in him was a reflection of her own. “Shut your mouth, you filthy witch,” he spat at her.

A surge of adrenaline coursed through her, but she managed not to act, not yet. She likewise slowly lowered her arms, ready to draw at any moment. “That’s it, isn’t it? She left you for another man. And you can’t stand that.” She noticed his right hand slowly reach across his waist towards his sword. It was shaking.

“She broke her oath,” he growled. “She vowed to be with me always. We swore before the clerics, before the gods to remain loyal to each other.” His voice grew louder, his anger becoming

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

almost uncontrollable. “A traitor like you could never understand. You don’t know,” he shook his head, looking her up and down. “I had you pegged the moment you walked in that door. You’ve never earned the loyalty of a good man.” Now she felt her own hands shaking, and it was all she could do to keep from drawing. “You don’t deserve a good man.”

It almost happened. In her mind’s eye, she saw herself drawing, charging her sword instantly with an ethereal charge, and threw it out in a wave of destruction that killed Trebor on impact, threw him into the forges, breaking his skull upon the lead basins...

No, she thought to herself. Don’t let him beat you.

“I see,” she said, trying desperately to keep her own emotions out of her voice. There was just a slight tremor in her words. “She was unfaithful to you.” She tilted her head to one side. “What did you do to lose her loyalty?”

Even she couldn’t have expected his reaction. In an instant, his sword was unsheathed and swinging at her in a fast, angry arc. It was only instinct that allowed her to push out a magical shield just enough to deflect the tip from cutting her throat.

Backing away, she resisted the urge to draw her own weapon, and simply maintained her shield. He came at her again, swinging with an enraged shout, the blade missing her cleanly this time as she dodged and stepped to the side. When he came at her again, she used her open palm to try to push him away with magic. Mages used weapons, and sometimes even armor pieces, to focus their powers, weapons allowing the most deadly concentration of magic. But without using such focusing techniques, her power was weak, and that was what she wanted.

He stumbled backwards as the wall of magic pushed against him. She glanced at the lieutenants, all of whom had their hands on their sword hilts, but no one drew. The man who had escorted her in had drawn his weapon, but he did not attack. In fact, he backed away against the wall, horror on his face.

“I’ll kill you!” Trebor lunged at her. She finally drew her weapon, but only to use it to deflect his attack. She let his momentum carry him past and gave him a little boot to the butt to help him along. He almost crashed into a shipping crate, but managed to steady himself.

“You don’t care about righteousness,” she scowled at him as he reeled on her. She continued talking as she easily deflected his untrained, undisciplined, angry attacks. “You just think that the orcs will take her life, and spare yours.” She parried. “You want them to do what you don’t have the courage to.” He lunged again, and she just stepped aside, nudging him away with another unfocused push of magic. “To take her life, to satisfy your vengeance.”

He stopped his attacks, his breathing heavy and ragged, his eyes glaring at her. “You don’t understand,” he glared. “She ran away with him.” Once more he came at her, his sword swinging from overhead.

Deflecting the blow easily and stepping aside, she laughed, “So you want them to take her life and her lovers. What a coward...”

“That’s not what I mean, you blind idiot,” he pivoted on one foot and swung for her legs, but her blade met his, and she slid his up and over to plant his weapon’s tip firmly into the ground. “She ran away with my son!”

That stopped her from doing anything else. With his weapon safely immobile for the moment, she looked at him in shock. “After I caught her and that bastard together, she took my son and ran away.” He tried to pull his weapon back, so she disconnected their blades and stepped back to a safe distance.

Trebor held his weapon ready, but he did not strike again, his breathing hard and his face red. She could keep him at bay indefinitely, his skills and fitness far inferior to her own. “She took my boy. Said I wasn’t worthy of him, of either of them. I couldn’t stop them,” he lowered his weapon, staring at

The Orc War Campaigns – Into the Forge

her with pain in his eyes. “He’s just a baby. He can’t choose for himself. He’s innocent. He’s...he’s not like her. Not evil. Not treacherous. Not yet...”

She did not lower her guard, but she did look upon him with a better understanding. Her own anger finally subsided, and she was thankful for that. It wouldn’t have taken much for her to destroy him, and the longer they fought, the more she was tempted to take his life.

That would only turn him into a martyr. Instead, this is what she needed. This is what his lieutenants needed to see.

Furthermore, she realized she was wrong. The Order wasn’t just a weapon for his anger. “You think the gods will protect the innocent. So you think the orcs will slaughter her, spare your son, and somehow reunite the two of you.”

He looked down at the ground, finally looking defeated. For a long time, he didn’t reply. Amaya watched as multiple emotions contorted his face. Anger, despair, deep sadness.

“Only if I am worthy,” he finally said.

He was defeated. Not so much that she had defeated him combat, but in that he felt unworthy. Trebor Tem had failed himself, failed his son, failed his family.

Slowly she lowered her weapon, eyes fixed on the sky-blue blade, her own pain coming to the surface. Her own failures. And the man before her was no longer one to be feared, nor respected. She simply pitied him.

A deep void formed in her stomach when she realized that. A darkness that began to consume her soul. *What does that mean for me?*

“Trebor...” she began, but found that words failed her. What could she possibly say to him?

And then the bells rang. Only one at first. Then another. And another, until it was a cacophony of rings echoing through the walls. They were soon followed by the horns of the Warriors.

Jon Wasik

The sounds didn't quite register at first, and she looked around in confusion, as did everyone else.

Then her heart hardened when she realized what those bells were for. Why the Warriors called out with their horns.

The orcs had come.

To Be Continued...