

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 1

“Invasion”

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Zerek Betanil wanted out. Out of the mines, out from under his father's shadow, just plain out. And he wasn't afraid to let the whole world know it.

"I don't care!" he shouted at his father, his voice echoed within the chamber in the mine. The two other workers had stopped long ago to listen to their latest argument. "I'm never going to live a good life in this place, so who cares?"

His father, Tegeth, tried to draw himself to his full height at his son's outburst, but he only managed to squish his head against the low ceiling. It almost always made Zerek laugh. Almost. This time it did nothing to cool his anger, or his father's.

"I care!" his father bellowed back in his deep voice. "I care about your safety, and the safety of every man and woman here."

Seeing red, even in the low light from the candles and couple of everlasting torches, Zerek tore his helmet from his head and threw it down at his feet, where it skipped down the incline towards the exit tunnel behind him. "Like a stupid helmet is going to keep me safe from a cave-in."

One of the other miners behind his father, Elina, wiped dirt from her face and shook her head. "Listen to your Dad, kid. There's..."

Tegeth reeled around and pointed a finger at Elina, "You stay out of this."

She looked taken aback by his outburst, but then just rolled her eyes and turned away to hide her embarrassment. Zerek had never seen his father openly yell at Elina. She was small for a miner, smaller than even Zerek, but she was strong and never seemed to run out of stamina. She had always been his father's favorite.

More so than Zerek ever was. He ran his gloved hand through his mussed up black hair and clenched the back of his neck. "Dad, look..."

His father turned his attention back to his son, and despite the fact that he couldn't stand up straight, he finally looked intimidating enough to make Zerek back down. "I'm done fighting over this. You want to make it in the Miner's Guild, you follow the rules. It's as simple as that."

He wanted to shout back that he didn't care if he made it in the Guild. He didn't *want* to be in the Guild. Not *that* Guild, anyway. But those born to miners rarely got to choose their life, not unless they somehow were born with magic. Then, and only then, they got to choose a Warrior's life.

Zerek had no power. No power over magic, and no power over his life. And his father never missed an opportunity to remind him of that.

Tegeth took two steps towards Zerek, which only made him back up into the mine wall. He felt the cold rock and iron ore on his bare arms and through his dirty, stained, tattered work shirt. "And you *will* stop mocking this life, do understand? You're a sight better off than a lot of those homeless kids in the city."

"That's a matter of opinion," Zerek muttered under his breath, but immediately felt his stomach drop at saying it.

The wide-eyed glare his father gave him was enough to form icicles in his stomach. "Get out of my mine," he roared, flailing his hand towards the exit tunnel.

"Fine," Zerek yelled back and started stomping away.

"And pick up your helmet," Tegeth commanded.

He stopped when the helmet was at his feet, and was sorely tempted to kick it out of his way, not caring how much it weighed. But no, that might actually earn him a smack across the face, a rare punishment since his mother's death. Knowing how hard his father could strike, he scooped the helmet back up, stuck the cumbersome on his head, and stormed away.

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It took fifteen minutes to make his way out of the mine, and he had to pass through several other chambers that were actively being mined before he made it to open air and clear skies. Normally he reveled in the freedom from the mines, and after each shift he would stop and take a moment to stare up at the sky, usually nightfall by the time he was allowed to leave.

This time, it was not yet sunset. The sky was just starting to show signs of the coming reds and purples, and that should have comforted him, but the anger within him was still boiling. As he passed by other miners loading up a cart with fresh ore, they asked him what was wrong, but all he could manage was a snide, "Nothing," as he passed by.

The one thing he *did* take the time to do was tear his helmet back off. He clenched it in his hands as he passed out of the clearing and into the tree line. The Relkin Mine was in the far south of the Ilari Mountains, not far from the Wastelands, but still far enough north that trees grew tall, and the underbrush thrived.

So he found solitude in the trees, away from his father. Away from the dark, dank, deep mines.

When he felt far enough away that there was no way his father could hear him, he screamed up into the trees, and threw his helmet as hard as he could against a boulder. He hoped to have broken the ridiculous, clunky thing, but knew that wouldn't happen. It clanged and bounced off of the boulder harmlessly.

He felt pressure build up in every part of his body, like he was ready to explode in rage. To no one in particular, he screamed, "I don't want this life! I don't want to be stuck underground for the rest of my life. Why can't you just let me find my own way?"

His own way. That's what he wanted, or so he kept telling himself. At that moment, he looked out straight ahead, further into the forest, towards the center of the vast mountain range. That could be his freedom. All he had to do was keep walking. Keep walking and finally be free of everything he hated.

Free to do what he wanted, when he wanted. Go where he wanted. Go...go where?

To Archanon? Where his father had friends everywhere? To another country? No, he couldn't leave Tal.

Then what would he do? He was too old to join the Warriors. He had nothing to offer them, anyway. What about one of the other Guilds? No, they wouldn't take him. Why would any of them need a boy who only knew how to mine?

That was the truth of it. He had no other skills worth bartering for. He had been born into a mining family, and he was always a miner. Always trapped underground.

Feeling defeated, as he always did after an argument with his father, he slouched down onto the boulder, drew his legs up, and covered his face. His gloves smelled of leather and dirt, and that did little to help his mood.

Before he could stop them, the tears started streaming out, and the dirt and dried sweat around his eyes stung. The void in his stomach grew only deeper and darker.

If only it had been his mother that had lived. She always understood, even if she didn't know how to help him. At least she had understood.

So did someone else. "Hey, kid," Elina's voice startled him. He looked up, saw her walking towards him with her helmet in her hand, and he tried to sniff away the tears.

"Hey," he choked out. She saw his helmet on the ground and tossed hers next to it as she passed by.

"Don't let him get to you," she sidled up next to him on the rock, but knew not to try to put her arm around him when he was crying. It only made him miss his mother more.

"He shouldn't have yelled at you like that," he clenched his hands into fists. "What's wrong with him?"

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She looked back towards the mine and shrugged. "He worries. About everyone, but..." She glanced at him and sighed. "You more than anyone. You really scared him today."

The argument had started when part of the newest tunnel had collapsed near where Zerek was working. He had set his helmet aside before it happened, so when his father came to see what the noise was all about, and saw Zerek without his helmet on, he exploded in anger.

Now that he felt less angry, Zerek did realize how stupid it was. It was less about the cave-ins than about the low ceiling and jagged rocks and ore that jutted out. Someone could easily split their head open if they stood up too fast without a helmet on. Plus Zerek once saw a helmet save someone from an errant pick axe.

He shook his head slowly, realizing all too well the stupid dangers that came with being a miner. If he was to die, he would have rather died fighting an enemy Warrior or bandit. Not from a rock slide or a cave-in.

"I just don't want to do this anymore," he sighed and buried his face in his hands again. He kept the tears back this time, but just barely.

"I know, kiddo," Elina spoke softly. "I know."

For a long time, they sat in the diminishing light silently. After a while, Zerek raised his face up just enough to look out into the forest, towards the mine. The shift would end very soon, and he'd have to face his father back in their tent. Either that or sleep out in the cold night.

But then they heard it. At first, the only indications that there was a problem were the shouts, and a low rumbling. Zerek thought it was probably just that someone had accidentally dumped over an ore cart. But the shouting got louder. The rumbling grew more intense.

And then they both heard an inhuman roar. Zerek's heart instantly leapt up into his throat. He and Elina bolted onto their feet. "What in the name of the Six was that?!" she breathed.

Another roar, and another. The shouts from the miners turned to terrified screams. His skin turned cold, as did the pit of his stomach. They both took off at a run towards the mine.

In the short distance to clear the tree line, Zerek's mind ran through countless possibilities.

Bandits?

Nope, not with that kind of roar.

Wolves?

Not even close.

Bears?

He'd heard bears roar, he knew what they sounded like, and that wasn't what they kept hearing.

Cresting over a small hill at the tree line, they found out what made the unearthly sound. But neither could believe it. Neither wanted to believe it.

Monsters. It was really, truly monsters, attacking the mining camp! And not just a few, either, but a whole horde of them.

No, not a horde. As the wave of dozens of the hideous, long-armed, muscular, armored creatures poured out of the forest and overran the miners, there was only one word that was right.

It was an army. Some wore leather skins for their armor, others wore rusted, battered iron. One he saw in particular wore blackened metal plate armor. That one monster pointed its equally blackened sword towards a group of miners clustered together, and suddenly a blast of fire shot out from the sword's tip. It engulfed the group of miners, men and women that Zerek had known all of his life. Their anguished screams made him jump in terror.

Neither he nor Elina could speak, or move, or do anything. They stood frozen and watched as the horrific scene played out before them. The monsters continued to overrun the miners, burning and destroying the tents, slaughtering everyone not working the mines. They even struck down the children that fled the burning tents

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And then those within the mine started to stream out to investigate the ruckus, just as the orcs reached the entrance tunnel.

Including Zerek's father. But he would not go down without a fight. He was the first to emerge, and as the first monster reached him, he drew himself up to his full height and swung his pick axe right down onto the charging monster's head. A sickly black-red blood oozed from the wound, and the monster fell to the ground.

But he had countless friends. The other miners, armed with their pick axes, also swung them, and some managed to kill or wound a few of the blood-thirsty brutes. And then they were overrun. One miner went down, and another. One of the monsters leapt onto the back of one of Zerek's friends, Doren, and sliced his throat. Zerek felt his throat catch at that sight.

Until he saw a sword jab straight into his father's stomach. He never remembered screaming, "No!" He never remembered what happened next. He just remembered the rusted iron blade running straight through his father's gut, out his back, and the look of rage on his father's face.

The next thing he remembered was running through the forest as fast as he and Elina could. He heard the sound of rushing feet, and he glanced back to find three of the monsters chasing them. All three wore leather, two held haphazardly-forged daggers, and one held a rusted iron short sword.

Worse still, the long-legged monsters were faster than them, and would soon catch them. Terrified, Zerek looked ahead and tried to run faster. Elina was just ahead of him, and glanced back, but the terror on her face told him he didn't want to look again. That was when he noticed a dagger in her hand, the one he knew she always carried. It was rare, but sometimes bandits attacked the miners' camp, and the more experienced ones knew that they needed to be able to defend themselves.

She glanced at Zerek. And then she stopped. He ran past before he realized what was happening, and he too stopped. Elina turned and faced the orcs. There was no way she could beat them!

But that didn't stop her from trying. The first one leapt on top of her, but she stuck her dagger straight into its chest as it did so, the sharp steel blade easily pierced the leather skins. They tumbled to the ground, and she pulled the blade, with considerable effort, from the monster's chest. The others were right behind their now-dead companion, but suddenly stopped, realizing probably for the first time that they were alone, and that the woman before them would not go down without a fight.

She faced them, and then screamed in rage at them, "Well come on!"

The beasts glanced at one another, but only the one with the sword was brave enough to attack. It jabbed its weapon towards her, and she managed to dodge it before she thrust her dagger at it. She missed. Then she started swinging her blade wildly at it, but it merely stayed back.

As their fight took them away from the other monster's body, Zerek saw his chance. He didn't know how to handle a weapon, not really, but he had played with wooden ones when he was a kid. So he rushed to the dead creature and pried its weapon from its still-warm hands. The handle was just as shoddy as the irregular blade, covered in what appeared to be lizard skins.

Elina had drawn the monster so that the third one faced away from Zerek. In a blind rage, he charged at the creature and stabbed it in its back. It screamed in surprise and pain, and batted Zerek away with its giant arms. Zerek's torso exploded in pain, and the wind was knocked out of him when he landed several feet away.

Its scream distracted the other one, which allowed Elina to push in and stick her finely-crafted dagger right in its throat. It coughed, and whatever strength it had quickly disappeared. After only a moment of it clutching at its throat, it fell to its knees.

The one Zerek had stabbed turned back. Elina tore her dagger from her opponent, and then rushed at the last one. She let out an enraged battle cry, and jabbed her blade straight into the last surviving creature.

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From where Zerek lay, he couldn't see where she had stabbed it at first, but it was enough to stop it dead in its tracks. For a moment, they stood staring at each other, the monster's face one of shock and pain. Then Zerek saw that Elina had the same look on her face.

It had also jabbed its blade straight into Elina's side. Bright red blood began to seep into her dirt-ridden white tunic. Together, they fell to the ground. Elina pushed the creature's hand away and tried to pull the dagger from her side, but then yelled out in pain.

Zerek scrambled to his knees and crawled over to her, not quite able to make himself stand. "Elina," he cried weakly.

He made it beside her. The monster next to her was also still alive, as it squirmed around, but it would not live much longer.

"Zerek," she managed to say. Her right hand stopped trying to pull the blade out, and instead reached for his cheek. He clasped it firmly against his face, not caring about the warm blood she smeared on him.

"No, please," he shook his head, and felt his eyes sting from renewed tears.

"You must..." She coughed blood, and gulped. "You must tell Archanon." He clenched her hand in his, not wanting to let her go. "Find...someone. Orcs." The word froze his heart. That's what those monsters had been. "The orcs are back."

Before she could say more, her eyes grew distant. Her hand slackened in his, and her head eased back. She exhaled her last breath, and was gone.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there, her hand in his. He stared at her beautiful, blue eyes. The last time he would ever see them.

It was night fall by the time he recovered. He eased her hand onto her chest, and let it rest there. Both of the moons were out, one nearly full, the other only half, but enough of the pale light broke through the trees that he could see everything around him.

The final orc was long-since dead, but it had managed to roll over and reveal Elina's dagger, planted right where a human heart would be. Clearly it was a good place to stab an orc, too, whether there was a heart there or not. He crawled around Elina, and then grasped the dagger's blade. It did not want to come out, so he struggled at first, but finally yanked it free. Through his stuffed nose, he caught the first stench of the orc, and felt himself gag.

Then he actually threw up. He hadn't eaten since midday, but clearly there had still been something in his stomach, and the stench and the hollow feeling inside of him was too much.

When he finished retching, he sat back, feeling weaker than ever. After several minutes, he wiped his mouth clean, and then looked down at the dagger. Unlike the orc's, this one was very well-crafted steel, with a light leather cover on the handle, and a usually shiny hilt and pommel, both of which were now stained with the monster's blood.

He used his dirty shirt to clean the blade as best he could. But he could not see it well enough, so he knew he had to find an open space to get better moonlight. He looked up, had no idea where he was, but knew he couldn't stay. So he stumbled up onto his feet and started to walk away. Away from the carnage. Away from his family.

Lieutenant Amaya Kenla walked through the corridors of Archanon Castle with her head held high, and her posture tall and strong. Or at least as strong as it could be in shackles. The restraints chafed her wrists as she strained against them in a vain attempt to put her arms at her side to walk with military precision. Her black hair, dirty and unkempt, kept getting in front of her eyes, and she had to jerk her head to one side to try to get the errant, dirt-clumped locks out of her way.

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It was a point of pride for her, that even as a prisoner, she was composed and resolute. Two months in the Archanon dungeons would not destroy her, nor would she show weakness in front of her Warriors.

They marched through the halls of the Archanon castle, towards the throne room. A room she had never actually stood in before, but definitely not one she had expected to enter as a prisoner of the kingdom.

Tal was, after all, the very kingdom she had served all of her life. She was a Warrior of Tal, but she had been betrayed. Betrayed by one man that had been closer to her than anyone else. And betrayed by royalty.

But as she and six of the Warriors that had once been under her command approached the doors leading into the throne room, she smiled. Today would be their vindication.

Word had spread quickly amongst the countless other prisoners of Archanon. The smart-mouthed little Prince had been overruled by his father, once King Beredis had recovered from his mysterious illness. All prisoners that had been arrested as a direct result of the Prince's laws were all being brought before the King for a review of their crimes, to determine if they were innocent or not.

She and her Warriors were not guilty of any crime, as far as she was concerned. Now she had to make the royalty believe it.

The two Archanon soldiers that walked in front of her reached the throne room doors and led the way in, the doors already opened from within by the King's personal guards.

To visiting dignitaries, the throne room was meant to be awe-inspiring. Several statues of past kings and queens set in stone stared down upon them as they walked through the long, open hall. The throne room had long, long ago served as a vast mead hall, so now it seemed to be a gigantic waste of space. A great red carpet was rolled out from the main entrance right up to the steps that led to the throne, where the King sat proudly as he awaited their arrival.

Beside his throne stood the Prince, and it was all Amaya could do not to look at the little brat with hostility. At the foot of the stairs, she recognized Draegus Kataar, one of the King's personal guards and, so she had heard, father of the man who now possessed the powerful Sword of Dragons. He was a former Warrior himself, but had resigned his commission to join the King's Guard. Instead of a Warrior's tabard, he bore over his armor a tabard of Tal Kingdom, a black cloth with silver embroidery of a mountain guarded by two crossing longswords.

The King gave them his full attention. She felt hope at seeing him, and also honored. Never before had she earned the right to have an audience with him. Now she felt shameful that her first and probably only audience with him was in shackles. Idly she pulled her shackle's chain tight.

Once they reached the foot of the stairs, her Warriors lined up behind her, and the guards in front of them stepped to the side. Knowing all too well that her life, and the lives of those she once commanded, were now on the line, she knelt to one knee and bowed her head. Her Warriors behind her followed suit.

With only a moment of dramatic pause, the King slowly stood up and descended the stairs. The Prince remained standing by the throne, upon which he rested his hand. She knew he longed to sit in it again. "You may rise," King Beredis spoke in his deep, powerful voice.

When she stood, she noted that the King's skin was a touch darker than his son's. His age and wisdom showed powerfully in and around his brown eyes, and somehow she knew he was a good man. When he was at her level, she suddenly felt very self-conscious. She wore tattered rags for clothes, the same clothes she had worn the day she had been imprisoned. The King, on the other hand, wore very finely-threaded clothes beneath his black and white-trimmed robe. The bejeweled crown upon his head was made of gold, and showed none of its three thousand year age.

"You are Lieutenant Amaya Kenla," he said. It was not a question.

Never-the-less, she stood up as straight as she could and nodded. "Yes, sire."

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He nodded to the men and women behind her, “And these are the Warriors that were under your command when you were sent to raid the bandit camp.”

She craned her head back to look at them. Six men and women under her command, the ones she knew had been the most skilled in her unit, the ones she had personally chosen for the assignment.

Each of them nodded to her encouragingly. It was a sign of the utmost trust and respect – she had been the one to make the final decision that effectively had signed the order for their arrest. It didn’t matter if they had agreed with her decision or not. But they still stood resolute in their loyalty to her.

When she turned back to the King, she knew she could not fail them again. She *must* not. “Yes, sire. They acted under my orders alone.”

The King’s stern look surprised her. “I doubt that very much, Lieutenant. General Artula provided me with the full report.” He looked up at his son, who did not dare look into the eyes of his father. He turned his head down and away, which only added to his image as a spoiled child.

“Never-the-less,” King Beredis returned his gaze to her, “the law under which your orders were issued has since been rescinded.”

She really wanted to add more, and she almost gave into that impulse. Etiquette demanded that she remain as silent as possible, and only defend herself fully if given leeway to. So she held her tongue, and did not tell her King why she was justified in disobeying orders.

He seemed to understand her desire, since he remained silent for a moment and looked at her expectantly. What was he thinking? She believed he was a truly good, moral man, so why would he even hesitate to dismiss her case and free her and her Warriors?

Warriors...they weren’t even that any more. Neither was she. That title was stripped of them, likely forever.

Once again, he seemed to pierce her mind, as his next words echoed her thoughts. “You do not believe you can return to the Guild, do you?”

Taking that as giving her some leeway to speak, she shook her head curtly, “No, my Lord. No matter your decision today, we disobeyed orders. I do not believe the General would take us back into the Guild. And even if he did...” She hesitated and felt a well of pain and anger inside of her chest. It took every ounce of control she had not to give in to her desire to turn her anger on the Prince. All of her thoughts from the last two months were ready to spill out, directed not at the man before her, but at the Prince, and at Commander Din, the Warrior that had ordered her to wipe out the entire camp. Wipe out every single one of them.

Innocent family members included. Even the children.

Never before had her emotions boiled up like they did now. Never had she needed a moment to compose herself. Certainly not before a superior.

“I understand your anger, Lieutenant,” the King turned and walked to the foot of the steps. There he stood, his eyes fixed on his son, who continued to look away. This, she suddenly realized, was his punishment. It was also meant to teach him that his actions could have dire consequences on the people under his rule.

She balked at being used as an object lesson for the little devil. Wasn't she worth more than that to the King?

After another moment of barely controlled rage, the King turned to her again. “As you know, I have always held no tolerance for criminal activity. However,” he clasped his hands behind his back and shook his head, “that does not mean we should slaughter their families. Your former commander's orders were out of line, and I have conveyed my disapproval of said orders to General Artula.”

She respected the General, but somehow she had the feeling little would be done. Too many lives had been lost in the recent deadly war against Kailar and Klaralin, even if it had been short-lived.

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The General would be hard-pressed to find adequate replacements for every Commander and Lieutenant that had blindly followed, or even reveled in, the Prince's laws.

The sympathy in the King's eyes told her he knew this as well. "Lieutenant." He paused, and seemed to realize that she no longer held that rank. "Miss Kenla. It is with my deepest apologies for your hardship that I hereby acquit you of all criminal charges." Despite their uncertain future, she felt the very jubilation that her Warriors behind her shouted out in cheer.

The King raised an eyebrow at their outburst, which instantly silenced them. Then he looked her squarely in the eye. She didn't care what came next. Nothing could be worse than the two months they had spent in the dungeon.

She could feel more than hear the jibing and excited nudges the men and women behind her were giving each other, and as she often did, she wished she could join them. But it wasn't appropriate for her to do so. Not yet. Not so long as she stood as their leader before the King.

Soon, she would have such freedom. Unless she decided to try to regain her position within the Guild.

Would she?

Could she?

The hint of a smile cracked on the King's face, and that showed his humanity. It was that humanity, which he kept in check only when needed, which made him so popular, so loved by the people of Tal.

She had lost her faith in the throne thanks to the Prince. And for as long as the Prince remained the successor to the throne, she would always feel doubt. However, for now, she could at least have faith in the King.

A frown crossed the King's face when he suddenly looked over her shoulder. She turned to follow his gaze, and was surprised to see that their audience had been interrupted by one of the King's

guards. He had just entered the throne room, escorting a young man who looked even more disheveled than she felt. Still a teenager, she thought that his tunic and trousers appeared to belong to a miner, but those clothes were soiled with what looked like dried blood, some of which looked far more black than red.

Orc blood, she thought, never having seen it herself but knowing what it was based on her teachings in the Guild.

The King immediately recognized that there was a far more urgent matter at hand. Whatever apologies he would offer next, or questions, or words of encouragement, they would not get to hear it.

“My apologies,” he nodded to them. “You are dismissed. You two,” he nodded to the soldiers that had led them in, “Release them. See to it that they are given clean clothes. Take them from my personal wardrobe if necessary,” he smiled warmly at them. “And give them a gold piece each to start out with.”

It wasn't much, but it was more than she could have ever expected. The guards looked at each other in astonishment, and then at her and her company. “Yes, my Lord,” one spoke, and then motioned for them to exit one of the side doors.

As they walked out, she took one last look at the young man. His gaze was distant, and she suspected he hardly knew where he was. In his hands, he clutched a fine looking steel dagger, which shocked her. Civilians weren't generally allowed before royalty while armed.

Something terrible had happened to him.

As they were led out, her freedom suddenly was at the back of her mind, even if only for the moment. That was dried orc blood on his tunic, and covering his hands. It could not be coincidence that this came mere weeks after an attempted orc invasion of Archanon.

Something terrible had happened, and something in her gut told her that it was just the beginning.

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Cardin Kataar pulled his leather, fingerless gloves on with a feeling of both trepidation and excitement. It had been nearly a month since the Battle of Archanon. In that time, he had spent every spare moment training with his newest friend, the Wizard Dalin.

Training to gain greater power from the Sword of Dragons. When he finished pulling the gloves on, which were the final pieces of his leather armor, he absently reached back to grasp the black handle of the Sword, strapped to his back in an enchanted scabbard, and pulled it against his back. The weapon was as light as a dagger, so he barely felt its weight, and he had begun to almost ritually pull the blade against his back just to remind himself of its physical presence.

Its presence, however, could never go unnoticed for him. Not yet. Maybe there would come a day when the ever-increasing power and knowledge he gained from it would become normal to him, and he would not even think about it.

And maybe, just maybe, there would come a day when the awesome power it gave him would not weigh him down.

He stood in his home in Daruun prepared for battle, and ran his fingers over his cropped, nearly-black hair. The leather armor felt just right to him. He stood on the opposite side of the main room from the kitchen, where he and his family before him had always kept weapons and armor racks. The house itself was still in the same dilapidated state it had been before he had found the Sword, but no longer because he could not afford repairs. No, the payment he had received from Sal'fe for the Staff of Aliz job was more than enough to afford repairs.

Rather it was still in disrepair because he never had the time to repair it himself. He hadn't even had time to look for and hire someone to do the job. He, along with his friends Sira and Reis, had spent

much of the past month helping to rebuild Archanon, the Southwest quarter of it having been demolished by Klaralin's attack. When he wasn't working on repairs, he trained with Dalin.

All of that was about to end. The days of training were over, at least for the moment. Orcs had attacked the Relkin Mining Camp, and he and his friends had been tasked with scouting the incursion.

With that thought, he turned and walked quickly out the front door and into his home town. The sun was shining, it was a hot late-summer day, and he absently wished he didn't have to wear the stifling leather armor.

As he made his way towards the Warriors' Guild complex on the western side of the city, he felt a pang of guilt for his earlier excitement. Men and women had lost their lives in the orc attack. He had to remember that, remember what was at stake. The message that had been brought to them only a half an hour ago, brought to Daruun quickly by way of a Wizard's portal, had said that the lone survivor reported hundreds of orcs. If that was true, it indicated that the orcs were still assembled as an army, even without Klaralin's influence.

He wasn't sure he liked the implications of that fact.

The energetic bounce in his step turned to determination. He wouldn't let anything happen to anyone else. No more loss of innocent life.

Quickly he passed through the city until he entered the courtyard of the Guild complex. He was not surprised to find he was the last one to the party. Dalin, dressed in his usual dark-blue robes and wielding his oak staff, stood in the center of the courtyard, and watched silently as Cardin entered. In appearance, Dalin was in his late twenties or early thirties. But all one had to do was look into his eyes to know he was far older, and in fact Cardin knew he was over 250 years old, which explained the streaks of gray in his hair. Still young for a Wizard.

On either side of him were Cardin's oldest friends, Reis Kalind and Sira Reinar. Both wore light leather armor, prepared for a scouting mission rather than a full-on battle. Reis had the usual smirk on

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his face, though somewhat subdued today, and his long brown hair was pulled back into a tight pony tail. Sira, on the other hand, let her short almost-white hair hang loose around her ears. They faced away from him, but turned as Cardin entered.

“About time,” Reis sighed and tapped his foot mockingly.

As Cardin stepped up next to them, he shrugged, “Hey, I’m here, that’s what counts. And I’m ready to take down some orcs.”

Sira raised her eyebrows, and rather curtly said, “That’s not why we’re going, Cardin. The Allied Council decided to send you, send *us*, because of the obvious advantage you have in case we are caught.” She shook her head, looked at the others, and then back at him. “Don’t try to engage them.”

He nodded, and then smiled, “Yes, ma’am.”

She didn’t look amused, nor did the others. His smile faded, and suddenly he felt embarrassed. It was only then that he realized his attempt at humor was actually disrespectful towards Sira, and he felt his face grow warm.

Sira sighed, and looked very curtly at Cardin. “When the Council asked if you could work with us, specifically with me as your commanding officer, you said there would be no problem. Can I still count on you to be true to your word?”

His face burned even hotter, and he gulped, feeling for the first time in over a decade like a raw trainee again.

“Of course,” he nodded, his gaze fixed on her eyes to let her know he truly meant it. “I’ll follow your orders. I promise. You’re in charge.”

For what felt like forever, she stared with even, stolid eyes at him. Then her hard exterior cracked, and her face blossomed into a smile. “Yeah, I am. So here’s an object lesson in that fact.” She nodded to Reis, “Smack him for me.”

Cardin felt his jaw drop, and he felt too shocked to react as Reis sidled up next to him, and proceeded to slap the back of his head.

“Hey!” he held where Reis had hit him, and then glared at his friend.

Barely containing a chuckle, Reis shrugged and pointed at Sira, “Don’t blame me.”

Sira covered her smile and let out a low chuckle as well, and Cardin was about to retort. But then Dalin cleared his throat, stepping forward for emphasis. “I believe this is hardly an appropriate attitude, considering what has happened.”

Once again, Cardin had to sober himself up and turn his attention to the seriousness of the situation. He felt only minor comfort in the fact that it wasn’t just him that had to be reminded.

“Sorry.” Sira dropped her hands to her side, took in a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. “You’re right, of course. It’s just...”

After a pause, Reis finished for her, “We’re excited to all be working together again, the three of us,” Reis motioned to himself, Cardin, and Sira. “Almost like old times. Except this time, we have our friendly Wizard with us.”

Even Dalin couldn’t keep a smile from crossing his face at that remark. “Quite,” he nodded.

“Alright,” Sira placed her hands on her hips. “Let’s get this show on the road.” She looked at Cardin and motioned her head towards their Wizard friend, “Dalín and I already picked out a location about a half mile away from the camp to portal into. You ready?”

Once again, Cardin reached back to feel the Sword’s handle. This time, however, as he wrapped his hand around the blade, he willed the scabbard out of existence, and a moment later, the blood-red blade was free. The scabbard had been a gift from the Wizards when he had first obtained the Sword, and given the weapon’s unusual length, he was glad for it. At least as long as a claymore, it would have been awkward to attempt to pull out the ‘old-fashioned’ way.

“I’m ready,” he nodded.

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Sira smiled, and then nodded to Dalin. The Wizard turned on the spot and planted his staff firmly into the ground. There was a loud clap, like the sound of thunder, and a sudden rush of power. Cardin felt the currents of magic suddenly shift and change from a gentle flow to a sudden rush. The power gathered first into Dalin, and then through his staff gathered into a point directly in front of him. In a matter of seconds, a blue-white wall of light appeared, and the portal to the deep south of Tal kingdom was open to them.

Reis drew his bronze-dyed longsword, as Sira drew her white-dyed longsword, and prepared to enter the portal. It was always a point of pride for a Warrior, choosing the color they would dye their sword on the day they graduated from training and became a true Warrior. His friends had earned their colors.

Feeling overly protective, he stepped in front of them and faced the portal. Dalin, as the creator of the portal, would have to pass through last. But given the possible danger ahead of them, Cardin would not let his friends go first.

With only a cursory glance back at Sira, who nodded her approval, he stepped forward and passed through the portal.

As always, it was like passing through a door from one room to another. The moment he passed through to the other side, he felt relieved to find not a single orc was in view. He continued to walk forward to clear of the portal and took in his surroundings.

They stood in a forest, surrounded by a mixture of pine and aspen trees that reached high into the sky. He heard the sound of hooves on the ground, and twisted around to see that a nearby deer, previously frozen in place out of fear, took off running as fast as it could. Sira was already through the portal, and Reis quickly followed her, both ready for action.

Once Dalin was through, the portal closed behind him, and they relaxed, if only a little. Each took their time to examine their surroundings quietly, waiting for an ambush, or a scout to sound the alarm. Nothing happened.

Their arrival had gone unnoticed.

Using only hand motions, Sira ordered them to stay low, and to make their way east. The forest was so dense that Cardin could not see the nearby mountain, nor could he see exactly where the sun was. However, through the currents of magic, he was able to instantly get his cardinal bearings, and knew which way to go.

He was about to head that way ahead of the others, but then remembered he was *with* others. For so many years, he had been on his own, exploring the Daruun forest as his refuge from his life. Now he was part of a unit, even if that unit was only four-strong. With that in mind, he paused, and allowed their commander to step ahead and lead the way. However, knowing the army that was likely nearby, he kept very close to her.

At first, their trek through the forest was uneventful. There were no orcs on patrol, not this far out. But it wasn't long before Cardin, being their most skilled tracker, noticed signs of one.

He stopped the group by reaching out and placing a hand on Sira's shoulder. They crouched down, a position he noted that Dalin appeared unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with. As quietly as he could, he pointed to where he had spotted the tracks and whispered, "Looks like a regular patrol."

She looked to where he pointed, and then she nodded. "Not surprising," she whispered back. Reis looked around, but the bushes and low branches throughout the dense forest meant that they could not see very far, so the patrol could come upon them at any second, and without much warning if their adversaries were quiet.

"Maybe we should wait for nightfall," Cardin suggested.

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“Not a bad idea,” Sira nodded. “I told the messenger to go back and tell the Council we would report within a day.”

A day. So much had changed, now that the Wizards were returning to Halarite. Before, messenger travel between Daruun and Archanon took a minimum of four days. Now they could send messages in a matter of minutes. And what normally would have been a weeks long scouting mission could be completed in a day.

It was a new normal that he felt he could get used to.

“Well I’m the best scout,” Reis shrugged. “Let me go on ahead, see what I can see.”

At first Cardin wanted to object. He knew Reis had been good at sneaking around when they were trainees, but this was a far cry from those days.

Then again, Cardin realized that Reis had had plenty of time since then to get better. But then he almost objected because it was his friend, and he feared for his friend’s life. It didn’t matter that they were Warriors and it came with the job, he had only just begun to rebuild his friendship with Reis. He didn’t want that friendship to end at the edge of an orc’s blade.

But again, Sira was in charge, and he had to get used to working under that condition. So when she nodded her approval, he had to trust her judgment. “Alright,” she whispered. “But if there is even a hint of fear of being caught, get back here. We’ll fall back a hundred paces to stay out of sight of the patrol. Be swift.”

Without waiting a moment longer, Reis took off further east. Within moments, he disappeared into the underbrush, amazingly silent.

Who was Reis kidding? He was a scout, but this was unlike anything he'd ever done before. Sneaking up on a mining camp that might have hundreds of armed, crazy orcs in it? What in the name of the Six had possessed him to volunteer?

Of course, there was no turning back now. He would never let his friends know that he was afraid. Not in these situations.

He hoped his plan would pan out. Trying to sneak up on the camp from the sides was suicide, and wouldn't give him much of a view. No, he needed a birds-eye view. And while the trees in general were tall, he needed to see *over* the majority of them, so climbing just any tree wouldn't do.

That's why he had made his way further north, to circle around and come at the mine from the high ground, the base of the mountain. He didn't know if he was as good of a tracker as Cardin was, but he could still readily see the regular paths the orcs took on their patrols through the forest. Each time he came upon one, he hid in the underbrush, and waited and listened.

Only once had a pair of orcs passed while he waited. The stench was as bad as he remembered it from that night in Archanon, when Kailar and Klaralin had led the orcs on a charge into the city. One thing was for sure, orcs would never be able to sneak up on them, not unless they were downwind. And it would have to be a very strong wind.

Even from where he was, however many hundreds of feet away he was from the camp, the noise that came from it told him the camp was occupied by a great number. The grunts and growls, the sound of hammers and pick axes smashing into rock. Was there exposed ore outside of the mine for them to work on?

At one point, he had snuck in close enough, and there was enough of a break in the forest underbrush, that he could just barely see movement down the tree-covered mountain side. He didn't dare go any closer. Instead, he looked up and around, looking at how tall each of the many trees were, and how easy they might be to climb.

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Of course, none of the ones right near him were suitable. So he had to do a bit of searching, and ended up moving further away from the camp before he found one with branches low enough that he could get a start.

Knowing it would be impossible to climb with his sword, he unstrapped the sheath, laid it down on the ground, and brushed fallen leaves, branches, anything he could to cover it up.

He took a long moment to pause and look around, his pulse quickening. What he was about to do might be considered stupid and dangerous. No, scratch that, it *was* stupid and dangerous. But he had to do this. He had to contribute to the mission.

When he could neither see nor hear any approaching orcs, he leapt up to the branch, grabbed hold, and used another low branch to leverage himself up.

As a young teen, he had spent a lot of time with Cardin and Sira in the edge of the Daruun forest, despite knowing they would have gotten in big trouble if their parents had ever found out they'd left the city. In that time, he had climbed many, many trees. He was a bit rusty now, and actually almost fell out of the tree twice, but he still quickly made his way up, and managed to keep the broad trunk of the tree between him and the camp enough that, as he climbed higher, they could not see him.

Then he froze when he realized that they might be able to see the tree swaying with his movements. He looked up at the top, and saw that the top of the tree was, indeed, beginning to sway the higher up he went.

He peeked around the trunk, and saw that the tops of the trees further downhill were just barely blocking his view. "Great," he whispered to himself.

Then the wind came, a strong blast from the mountain down towards the camp. He held on as the tree swayed and groaned beneath his grasp. "No, no, no, please don't blow me off," he mumbled, clutching the trunk and hoping it wasn't an oncoming storm.

Almost too afraid to look, he craned his neck around to look up the mountain, but there were no signs of storm clouds. It was just a blast of wind.

It was also his chance, he realized. All of the trees swayed. As quickly as he could, he started climbing upwards again. The branches were getting thinner, and at that very moment, he made the mistake of looking down, not realizing until now just how high up he had climbed.

Oh gods, he thought, clenching his eyes shut. *Damn you and your need to prove yourself, Reis.*

Forcing his eyes open, he stared face-to-face with the trunk, and realized he could go no higher, not without his body becoming visible to the orcs, if they looked hard enough.

The wind blew again, and the top of the tree felt like it swayed violently with his weight near the top. He hoped that was just his perception, and that to anyone else, it swayed no more than any other treetop.

Slowly, as carefully as he could, he maneuvered so that he could start to peak around the trunk southward. And then he truly felt his veins turn to ice, and his heart sank.

The boy's description had been wrong, very wrong. It wasn't just a couple hundred orcs. It was an army.

The human camp was gone. Having visited a couple of mining camps during patrols, Reis knew what they generally looked like, tents and a few hastily-constructed wooden shacks, with camp fires lit throughout. The bigger ones, like the Relkin camp had been, even took the time and effort to setup a small forge and woodworking bench so they could repair broken mining tools.

The forge was the only thing left. The orcs had trampled, torn apart, and generally destroyed everything else, and had begun constructing their own camp. Only this one had walls. It was a good thing Reis hadn't come from the western side. The orcs were actively cutting down trees to the west and carving them up for construction materials to build a wooden wall surrounding the entire camp.

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They also had begun construction on several makeshift huts. Through sheer numbers, they were making insanely fast progress.

There were at least a thousand. Two thousand. Off to the south, their numbers actually stretched far into the tree line. Campfires blazed, the smoke filtered through the tree tops and created a gray-white haze above. If the wind had blown in the opposite direction, Reis had no doubt he would have choked on the smoke.

He also noticed that while most of the orcs he saw wore makeshift leather armor, and those that were still armed had poorly-constructed weapons, there were pockets of them that wore the same dark metal armor as the army that had attacked Archanon less than a month ago. The longer he watched, the more he suspected that those orcs led the others.

It was an invasion. Thousands of orcs. Maybe more, who knew how far into the forest they occupied. This *was* the closest mine to the Wastelands. If they were going to invade Tal, this would be where they would start.

Not to mention an iron mine gave them materials to forge more weapons of war.

Reis took in a deep breath, and then slowly let it out. He had to report back. Archanon had to know this. The new Allied Council had to hear about it.

Without thinking further about it, he began to climb down, as quickly as he could. With that many orcs bumbling about, there was no telling how far they might decide to explore west. They might run into Sira and the others very soon.

He didn't even let himself get to the bottom branch, he jumped down from as high as he dared, and then grunted loudly on impact, his stomach jostling.

Then he heard a surprised grunt. And he knew it hadn't come from himself.

Slowly, he looked up from the ground, and saw only a dozen feet away a small group of orcs. And they stared right at him. They didn't move at first, probably too stunned. So was he. But then he

remembered he didn't have his sword. It was only a foot away from his right hand. Of course, he knew the moment he reached for it, they would charge him.

One, two, three...seven orcs. Nope, no way he could take them on by himself. No matter what, they were going to attack. So he needed to move. Now.

As quickly as he could, he hopped over and grabbed the buried handle of his sword. And the orcs roared.

Dalin felt it before he heard it. A slight stirring of magic not far off, a disruption in the flow of energy that he had come to associate with the discharging of enchanted weapons. Cardin's head snapped in the direction that Dalin felt it from. *Interesting*, he thought. *Mages cannot sense such distant changes.*

Forgetting Cardin's growing power for the moment, he stood up. Sira looked shocked and surprised, and whispered loudly, "Get down!"

Then they all heard the roars, and shortly after heard and *felt* the pounding feet coming towards them. Sira and Cardin both stood up as well, and looked east.

"Oh, great," Cardin shook his head.

As if on cue, Reis came barreling out of the underbrush, scratching his face on a branch as he did so. It wasn't the only scratch he had.

The moment he saw them, he waved his free hand, the other carried his sword, covered in black-red orc blood. "Go!" he shouted. "Get a portal open, now!"

There was no time. Reis was on top of them, and a moment later, several orcs burst into view. Followed by more. And more.

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“Run,” Dalin said, quietly at first. When Reis flew past them, he shouted, “Run!” and followed after the Warrior. Sira turned and dashed into a full run. Dalin felt a sudden surge of power, and knew that Cardin fired a blast of pure energy at the orcs. Based on how the ground shook and the sound of an explosion, he knew Cardin had fired at their feet to distract them, and then followed after the group.

Reis outran Dalin. His feet were quick, and he seemed to have no trouble navigating through the forest.

He needed at least a couple of seconds to spare, and a clear spot to create a portal. Right now if he stopped, the orcs would overtake them before everyone could get through the portal.

“Back to the clearing,” he shouted ahead to Reis. The Warrior stopped only a moment to get his bearings, then only had to change his path a little bit to get them going where they needed to.

He felt and saw shards of ice suddenly fly through the forest around them, impaling several trees or glancing off of their trunks. Even if they made it to the clearing, there simply wouldn't be enough time. Was he powerful enough to both raise a shield and create a portal? He'd never done anything like that before. The portal alone would be difficult under the circumstances, he had to concentrate hard to create one.

It didn't take them long to backtrack, and very quickly they burst out into the clearing. The sun still shone bright in the sky, but was now beginning to creep behind the trees as evening approached.

Reis stopped and turned, and Dalin very nearly plowed into him before he too stopped. Cardin and Sira stopped right behind them.

Two more shards of ice whistled by their ears. Dalin pushed Cardin aside, and then pointed his staff in the direction of the orcs. A moment later, another ice shard shattered against the shield. He felt the impacts as much as he saw them, barely straining his concentration or disrupting the flow of energy within him.

Then he turned around, keeping at least part of his mind focused on the shield. He planted his staff firmly in the grass, and quickly summoned as much energy into him as he could before he focused it through the blue crystal on top of his staff, and out into the world before him. His mind was focused on the canyon west of Archanon.

Normally he could summon a portal in a couple of seconds. But with the strain of the orc attacks, it took him longer to focus the needed amount of energy, and he immediately felt fatigued.

Finally, he did it. The portal flashed open before him, and stabilized.

Without needing to be told, Reis jumped through the portal. Sira and Cardin maneuvered around Dalin, who felt a greater strain as several more blasts of ice shattered against his shield. It was about to fail, if he wanted to keep the portal open.

They both turned to look behind Dalin, who likewise craned his neck around. The orcs burst out of the forest, and were about to overtake the shield. He could not keep it up against a physical attack *and* the ice attacks.

He turned and shouted at them, "Go now!"

They glanced at each other, and then fled through, one after another.

The shield failed from another ice attack. Dalin felt his heart pounding in his chest, and felt himself grow dizzy. The portal fluctuated for a moment, and the flow of power from his body, to his staff, and then to the portal began to wane.

He stumbled forward, leaning heavily on his staff. The portal was only a couple feet away, he had to get through it. It almost winked out of existence...

And then he was through. He nearly collapsed on the other side, but he immediately felt the release of his hold on the portal, and it closed behind him. Sira and Cardin caught him with their free hands and helped steady him.

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He turned to where the portal had been, and sighed. Not one orc had made it through after them.

With a huge sigh of relief, he stood up tall and nodded for Cardin and Sira to release him. When he looked ahead, he saw the gates of Archanon, welcoming them in.

Then he glared at Reis. "Did you really have to bring the entire enemy force down upon us?"

Reis used a cloth to clean the blackened blood from his sword. He glanced at the Wizard and shrugged. "What? It's not my fault."

Dalin rolled his eyes, and mumbled, "Best scout, indeed."

Cardin and Sira sheathed their weapons, and then turned to Reis. "Well?" Sira asked. "What did you see?"

The innocent grin on Reis's face faded, and for the first time since Dalin had met the Warrior, he looked completely serious. "It's worse than we feared." He looked at each of them, and then focused again on Sira. "There are thousands of them. It's an invasion army, and the Relkin Mine is their beachhead."

Dalin felt his heart sink. He exchanged worried looks with both Cardin and Sira. She grimaced and looked at Archanon. "Then they are in the perfect position to march upon Archanon."

Cardin nodded. "It sounds like a new Orc War is about to start."

Amaya hefted her new backpack onto her shoulder, and felt the weight pull on her. She had tried to keep up her strength while imprisoned in the dungeon, but they hadn't been fed well, and she could feel that she was weaker. It would take her time to get back to the level of fitness she had been in at the peak of her career as a Warrior.

She and the other six from her former team were at the edge of Archanon. Known as the First City, it was now easily the largest home of people on all of Halarite. The outer wall, at almost fifty feet tall, encircled almost the entire city, broken only by the cliffs it ran into which helped form natural barriers. For miles the city stretched east of the main entrance.

They had been invited to stay in the castle guest quarters over night, which they had gratefully taken advantage of, but they had left before the sun had started to rise. Her team wanted to get home as quickly as possible.

As soon as the first shops opened on the main avenue of Archanon, they had each purchased packs and supplies for the three day journey ahead.

As they approached the western gate, the iron doors began to slowly creak open, right on schedule as the sun edged over the mountain peaks to the east.

Beside her strode one of her former teammates, Elic Morgin, while the others walked behind them. Their entire group was silent. They were excited that they could go home and see their friends, and for most of her unit, their families. However, it would also be a bittersweet reunion. None of them had made a decision yet whether they would try to regain entry into the Warriors' Guild. She also suspected that Din still commanded her hometown's Guild. He would not be kind to them.

Home. The largest town at the southwest corner of the kingdom, named Everlin. Where she had lived, trained, and fought for her entire life. The day she had been promoted to Lieutenant had been the proudest day of her life.

Had it all been for nothing? Had her life up to this point been meaningless?

She shook her head, and then looked out at the road ahead. It didn't matter. What mattered today was the journey.

But before they could make it to the gates, a familiar figure stepped out from the side and blocked their path. They stopped and stared at Draegus Kataar.

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Amaya exchanged glances with Elic, and then looked him again. "Is there something we can help you with?"

Draegus nodded. "I know you are anxious to leave for home," he stepped a little closer, "But I have a message from the king for all of you, if you'll permit me a moment of your time."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise, and then crossed her arms in front of her. "Oh? Something you couldn't have told us yesterday?"

The guard eyed her curiously, and she wondered if she had been a bit too harsh. He wasn't a Warrior, not anymore. He never had served under Din. However, for all she knew, he had served the Prince as loyally as he had the King.

"His Majesty the King wished to speak to you about it in the throne room," Draegus continued evenly. "However, the appearance of that boy took precedent, especially once we found out what had happened."

She nodded once, "Orcs."

Draegus looked quite surprised, "Yes. How did you...?"

"The blood on his tunic and his hands," Elic said before she could say more. His voice was strong and steady, a characteristic she had always counted on with him. "We all saw it."

"Yeah, I guess that is a give away," Draegus nodded thoughtfully. "What you don't know is that we sent scouts to that boy's mining camp. What no one else knows," he stopped and looked around to make sure no one else was close enough to listen. He stepped closer to them, and the rest of her team crowded in around to hear.

"The King will be making the announcement shortly, and the Allied Council is convening today in an emergency session," he spoke quietly. "It wasn't just a small band of orcs that attacked his camp, it was an invasion army."

She felt her stomach twist when she heard that. She had never fought an orc before, had never seen one. Like every other Warrior, however, she had read all about them in training. She had heard stories of how even now, the city of Freemount, which stood at the borders of Tal Kingdom, Saran Kingdom, the Wastelands, and the Desert of Ca'aluun, often had to keep the orcs from attacking their caravans.

They were vicious, monstrous, terrifying, strong, and she had always hoped never to have to face them in battle.

"Which means," Draegus said a little louder after a dramatic pause, "we're about to go to war, again. Only this time, they won't have a central leader like Klaralin through which we can defeat them. We'll need Warriors. And we'll need soldiers. That means that what the King was about to offer you in sincerity he now also asks for in earnest."

Draegus stepped back and looked at each of them. "He would like you to join his personal guard. As would I."

She immediately balked at the idea, "Guards?" She laughed and exchanged similar looks with her companions. "We are not guards, sir. We are Warriors. We belong on the front lines, not protecting the King and his," she scowled, "son."

"You don't understand," he shook his head, his voice quiet once again. "I do not mean as a protector of the throne. I mean as a member of the Tal elite. I know you have heard rumor of what I speak."

Her feelings of insult suddenly gave way to surprise, shock even. "Are you saying the Guardians are real?"

He raised a finger to his mouth to quiet her, and then stepped close again. "These are unusual circumstances. We should not be speaking in public about this matter." He hesitated a moment longer, and then nodded. "You and your team would serve as a special unit that reports directly to the King.

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The assignments you will be given may be highly dangerous, but,” he shook his head, “I think that is something your team would revel in.”

She looked back at the others, men and women she had commanded for only a few years, but were the ones she could always count on in any situation. They were the best that Everlin had produced, and their imprisonment, she had no doubt, was to the detriment of the Everlin Warriors.

They looked at her, but none of them seemed certain about the orders. Had their spirit been broken in the dungeons? Had hers?

She had no weapons, no armor. Suddenly she also realized that, without a spouse to take ownership, her home in Everlin had likely been sold off during her imprisonment. After all, she had been charged with treason.

However, that was her. Elic had a wife. Idalia had a husband. Peren had a daughter. And she knew Vin had parents in Everlin, though he hadn't spoken to them in years. She couldn't ask them to stay, she certainly couldn't order them to, not simply because she had nothing waiting for her in Everlin.

So it would be up to each of them. There was no unit without them, but this was their decision to make. “What do you all think?”

At first, none of them replied. They simply looked to one another, and she felt her heart beat hard in her chest.

She wanted it. It was a way for her to continue to serve, to put her skills to use. Would they?

Vin was the first to speak up, a surprise to them all. He was usually the quiet one of the group. He was a good Warrior, strong with a sword and shield, but he often preferred daggers, and he was quick on his feet. “Can we at least have a chance to go tell our families we're safe? Or, well,” he blushed and corrected himself, “at least that we aren't prisoners anymore?”

Draegus hesitated. "It would be up to the King, and time is short, now that war is upon us." Then a look of realization crossed his face, and a grin followed. "However, we *are* now allies with the Wizards. We could arrange a portal, if the King is willing to request it of the Wizards."

"What about weapons?" Idalia asked, her voice strong and determined as it ever was. "Armor? Ours were all taken from us."

"That too will be provided," Draegus replied. "You will want for nothing, except perhaps rest."

Amaya felt her face start to blossom into a smile. They were thinking about it. All of them were considering actually doing it.

Elic glanced at her, and then did a double-take. "Well I think we know where your desires lie."

Her stomach leapt, and she gulped and nodded. "Well, yes. But I don't have families, loved ones to go back to. You all do."

They grew silent at that, and nodded to one another. All except Gell, the only other member of their team who had no family back in Everlin. He just looked down at the ground and remained silent.

Then something she did not expect happened. Peren looked up, and asked, "Why are we even having to think about this? Orcs are invading. That puts all of our families in danger." The look of realization on everyone's face, including Amaya's, was almost amusing, if it weren't for the circumstances.

After only another short pause, Elic nodded. "He's right. This will give us the chance to protect them."

Everyone began nodding and generally agreeing. She didn't hear any dissent, but she wanted to be sure, so she raised a hand to stop and silence them all. "Let's make sure we're all clear about this. This means that we only get to go home this one time, and even that is not a certainty. After that, we're here, under the King's command, doing what needs to be done. So without any question or hesitation, each of you say yes, or no."

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She started with Elic, and went down the line. Not one of them hesitated, every one of them said yes. And so it came down to her. Even though she was not their leader, they still looked to her as such.

With a united team behind her, she turned back to Draegus. "We'll do it," she nodded.

Smiling with relief, Draegus Kataar nodded. "I'm glad to hear that. Now come," he stepped past them, "The King is waiting for you."

As the others turned to leave, Amaya looked out of the open gates, out into the world beyond. Very briefly she wondered if she had just made a mistake. Out there was her freedom.

Then she remembered that she was a soldier, she always had been. This was the life she had always wanted. Fighting to protect her kingdom.

This was her purpose.