

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 6 “Crossroads”

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The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Try as he might, there was no chance that Zerek's smile was going to fade, even when faced with a disgruntled Warrior lieutenant. He stood in the courtyard of the Warrior's Guild complex in Archanon, the very place Zerek had tried and failed miserably to break into a few weeks ago. Only this time, he was there on official business in the middle of the day.

The Lieutenant before him, Daisha Melin, scowled down at the letter he had just delivered to her. He never knew the contents of the sealed letters, he just knew that he had once again been trusted with a letter bearing the seal of the King of Tal.

As Daisha continued to read, another Warrior walked by on patrol, his full set of armor no doubt keeping him warm against the cool weather. Fall was in full swing, and unlike his previous visit, Zerek was able to enjoy the beauty of the Guild compound. Every tree, including the one he'd meant to climb to meet Laira, was a myriad of reds, oranges, and yellows, their leaves just starting to fall.

In fact the courtyard was littered with dead or dying leaves, and he was glad he didn't need to try to climb the tower now. He stole a look at that tower, the sun glaring down at him from just above it. Closing his eyes, he let the warmth of the sun wash over his face, and his smile grew only wider.

"You're in good cheer today, kid," the Lieutenant said, bemusement in her voice. Opening his eyes, he looked at her to see a small grin. Zerek's face suddenly felt very warm, despite the cool breeze that caressed his cheeks.

That only made Daisha's grin turn into a full blown smile. "Oh my. Look at you, little one." This wasn't his first time meeting the Lieutenant, and every time she used one of her nicknames for him, he

Jon Wasik

felt embarrassed. That coupled with his thoughts of Laira, the girl who had stolen his heart, made his face burn ever brighter. “You’re in love!”

“Umm, I...” He shook his head, but she just started laughing, the letter hanging from her hand. He looked down and away, not sure how to react, not sure what to say. He wanted to deny it, but he didn’t even know why. And it wasn’t love. Was it? Could it be? After only knowing her for a few weeks?

Daisha stepped closer and clasped a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay kid. It happens to us all, and that’s not a bad thing.” She looked to the side and frowned for a brief moment, “Well, not always.” Then the smile returned. “What’s her name?”

Zerek looked dead center at the Warrior, but his mind suddenly went blank. He knew her name, he’d committed to memory, that wasn’t what made him feel a sinking sensation in his stomach. No, he was actually afraid to say. What if Daisha recognized the name? What if she realized that Zerek was spending time with a thief? Worse still...what if it led to Laira getting arrested?

His hesitation registered on Daisha, and she shook her head. “It’s okay, if you’re too embarrassed to tell me about your girlfriend, you don’t have to.” Her eyes shone as she looked at him. “But I’m happy for you. Really. After everything you’ve been through...”

The sinking sensation he’d felt earlier turned into a giant lump, and his voice caught in his throat. It still hurt every time he thought of the Relkin Mining Camp. When he remembered his father, Elina, and everyone else.

He could only imagine what his face looked like now, and Daisha’s smile quickly diminished. “Hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t meant to bring up the memories.”

“It’s okay,” he lied. “Really. I just need to be going. Is there anything you need me to return to the castle?”

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

She shook her head, “No, not at the moment. But thank you.” She squeezed his shoulder, and then released her grasp on him. “Now go on. I get the feeling there’s somewhere you want to go before you go home.”

His grin returned, even if it was a weak one, and he nodded. “Thanks.”

When he turned to walk off, she added, “And hey. Take care, okay? You’re a tough kid, but...”

Zerek stopped long enough to look over his shoulder and give her his best fake smile. “I will.”

With that, he left Daisha and the Warriors’ Guild behind him. The memories still hung in his chest like a great weight, one that never quite left him. How long had it been? A month? Month and a half? He wasn’t quite sure. So many of the days following the attack were a haze in his mind.

A haze that seemed to be lifted by only one thing. One person. He needed to see Laira. He needed to see that light smile, her deep brown eyes, hear her laugh. Even if only for a second.

There was no telling where she was, of course. But she always seemed to find him. Anytime he asked her how, she side-stepped the question with a light-hearted joke, but he had his suspicions. They always started with the beggars in the alleys, and the thieves that no doubt roamed the city. He’d begun to see the signs of a vast network, and he wondered if they kept track of the habits of every single person in the city.

It certainly would make stealing from people easier.

All Zerek could do was wander aimlessly through the streets, although he did move in the general direction of the river. They always ended up there, at that landing by the wall. Where he’d been given the first kiss of his life.

The warmth on his face returned, and so did the smile. He’d never known something could excite and terrify him so much in just a split second. Never in his life could he have imagined such elation.

Jon Wasik

He let that memory fill every fiber of his being, his steps no longer his own. He simply walked wherever the tide of people took him. The city was massive, and he still hadn't been down every street or alley. In fact he was sure he could spend a lifetime wandering the streets and never find every single nook and cranny.

Then he heard the clearing of a throat off to his right. "Hey, lover-boy."

A full smile blossomed across his face, and he turned to see Laira standing in the middle of an open door into a shop. His thoughts faltered for only a moment when he wondered why she was openly standing in a shop's door, but he banished any dark thoughts he had about her, and he rushed forward to embrace her in a hug.

But she didn't let him. The moment he moved towards her, she suddenly ran down the street away from him. "Catch me if you can!"

And just as it always did when they met, a chase ensued. Laira loved to run! Everywhere they went, they ran, and it had done wonders for his stamina. He could keep up with her now, even when she was at a full run. In fact, he was sure this time he would actually catch her.

Through the streets, around people, under outstretched arms, hopping over crates, they moved with a fluidity that she had begun to teach him. Every now and then, Zerek still stumbled, but he never fell anymore, and he never gave up.

Closer and closer he drew to her. She turned down one avenue that was very busy, and as he stumbled between a couple of larger men, he wished she would have taken them up onto the rooftops again. Unfortunately, it was a little more dangerous to do so during the day, since city guards would often spot them and shout after them. The last thing he needed was to be recognized and reported back to the castle, back to the steward.

Laira moved faster than he did through the crowds, but once they broke through and she ran down another smaller street, he started to catch up again. However, it was too late. When he was only

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

a few feet behind her, she burst out onto the street that travelled along the river. It was their unsaid finish line, and as always, she had beaten him there.

He was out of breath, but he felt some comfort in the fact that she was too. Despite how long she'd been doing this, she had to run faster now just to stay ahead of him, and as they leaned against the stone railing overlooking the river, she laughed. "I'm going to have to start cheating if I'm going to win."

Huffing, he laughed, "How do you cheat in a race like that?"

"Like this," she suddenly pushed him away, giggling.

"Hey!"

And suddenly she was running again, down-river towards their spot. Shaking his head, Zerek chased after her again. They almost ran into a pair of city soldiers along the way, the soldiers telling them to watch it.

She managed to stay ahead of him, and right when they reached the wall, she came to a quick halt and turned to face him, reaching a hand out to the stone rail and leaning against it. A second later, he skidded to a halt right by her, and she shook her head. "Took you long enough."

His face burning, he laughed and said, "Well if you hadn't cheated..."

Smiling, she reached out her other hand, grabbed him by his tunic, and pulled him in for a sudden, deep kiss. Light exploded across his soul! His lips, and for that matter his entire face tingled. Then as quickly as she had pulled him in, she pushed him away and hopped over the edge to the landing below.

He looked over the edge, his heart ready to beat out of his chest, and saw her casually walking away, as if their run had actually been an easy walk for her. Glancing around to make sure no one would yell at him for hopping down to the river, where it was 'dangerous,' he planted his hands on the stone and jumped over.

Jon Wasik

His landings were getting lighter. Thanks to Laira, he knew now to land on the front of his feet, turning them into springs that helped prevent his feet from clomping down. He walked along to join her at the edge of the landing.

The river was lower than it had been on the night that they first kissed, so when they both sat down and dangled their feet, they no longer touched the water. That was fine, the first snows had already blanketed the tops of the mountain, and the river was freezing cold.

After only a moment, she leaned in closer to him so that they could wrap their arms around each other.

He reveled in the warmth they shared, even if the weather wasn't freezing yet. Just being with her made him feel like the world couldn't be better. Listening to the river waltz on by like a flow of dancers, glistening with sunlight. Watching farmers tend to their fields or livestock across the river. The couple looked up and watched a flock of birds flying in a giant V formation headed south.

It was perfect.

It was also the perfect moment to ask the question he knew he needed to ask her today. A question he had wanted to ask her for days, but he'd never worked up the courage. He wasn't even sure why he was afraid to ask her.

What if she said no? What if she freaked out about it? What if...

"What's wrong?" she pulled away just enough to look into his eyes. "You're shaking, Zerek."

Feeling like a child caught with the cookie jar in hand, Zerek's face blushed for probably the hundredth time that day. But instead of trying to deny anything, as he had with Daisha earlier, he just blurted it out.

"You should come live and work in the castle."

Her face grew pale, and she slowly drew away from him, eyes widening with shock. "Live in the...Zerek, are you serious?"

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Her reaction wasn't at all what he expected, and he felt as if his soul had just dropped out from his stomach. "Yeah," he said, hesitant. "I mean, you wouldn't have to live on the streets anymore, or steal or eat scraps. You'd have a roof over your head. And, well, we could be together in the open. Not have to hide."

The more he talked, the more she drew away from him. He couldn't tell if it was because she was appalled by the idea or surprised, but he already feared the worst. Should he recant, tell her not to think about it? But if he did that, nothing would change, and all they could ever do was chase each other around the city, hiding from anyone who might recognize him and report to Kai that he was following a thief around. That he was falling in love with the very thief that had stolen his first charge.

"Zerek, I can't live in the castle," she shook her head. "They would never take me."

"They would if I told them you were a good person," he quickly countered, feeling an uncomfortable sensation rising in his chest. "That you would be a hard and honest worker."

She outright laughed, "Are you kidding me? I'm a thief, Zerek, I'm hardly an honest worker."

He felt a wave of an unfamiliar sensation roll across his face, but it wasn't the heat of embarrassment. This was something different. It moved down into his chest, his stomach, made him feel like something had just stamped on his heart.

"But you don't have to be a thief anymore. You can stop stealing, stop lying." He twisted his body, brought up one leg to sit on it, so that he could face her. "And then we can be together, and..."

"Stop," she stood up, backing away from him. "Zerek, I don't want to live in the castle. I can't. You...you wouldn't understand." Laira looked ready to turn and run, but all she did was stop, fold her arms, and look down at the landing, her face a contortion of emotions.

Slowly, Zerek stood up, feeling like the world had grown much darker, much colder in the seconds that had just passed. She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't say anything to him, and she looked positively outraged. What had he done wrong? What was so wrong with what he was asking?

Jon Wasik

“There’s so much you don’t know about me,” she said, looking at him through angry eyes.

“About who I am. About my past.”

“Then tell me,” he begged, stepping closer to her. She backed away in response, lowering her arms.

“I can’t,” her voice trembled. “You...you’ve been incredibly kind to me, and I know you’re head over heels for me. But I just can’t, Zerek. I’ll never live in the castle. I’ll never be an upstanding citizen of the kingdom. Not while it...” She trailed off and once more looked away from him.

Zerek didn’t know what to say, or how to react. He wanted to shout that it wasn’t fair. He’d found something to make him happy in life, and now...now he felt like he was losing it. Losing her. All because she wouldn’t tell him what was going on. It wasn’t fair.

When he was finally ready to say as much, she looked up at him again, the anger having faded to regret and uncertainty. “You’ve been kind to me up to this point, Zerek, even knowing I’m a criminal. I’ve loved that about you. And I know you just don’t know any better. I’ve taken advantage of that fact,” she looked down, her face turning bright red. “I’ve taken advantage of you. I can’t do that anymore.”

Before he could ask her what she meant, she turned on her heels and ran up the stairs along the wall, back to the street level. He was too stunned at first to follow, but when he finally realized what was happening, he ran up to chase after her.

Only this time, when he made it to street level, she was nowhere to be seen.

Leaving him alone again.

By all rights, Amaya should have been in high spirits. The weather was beautiful for fall, just a hint of cold in the breeze. The sun shone down upon her body, stretched out upon a stone bench in the courtyard of Archanon Castle, keeping her warm. It was one of those rare moments when she was out

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

of uniform, and instead wore a simple blue tunic, brown trousers, and a brown cloak, which lay open around her.

Yet she couldn't keep her mind quiet. She couldn't relax. As she stared at a small cloud passing by, all she could do was seethe. Rage. Anger.

She caught herself grinding her teeth, and forced her jaw to relax. What was she doing? Why was she out here, away from her team, alone?

Alone.

Always alone, now. It wasn't quite what she expected her life to be like. Or at least, not what she expected it to feel like.

The conversation with Trebor Tem in the Valaras dungeon played in her mind again. How she felt. What she thought. Everything. Over and over and over again.

Her jaw was clenched again, as were her fists. "Dammit," she grumbled, sitting up and staring down at her feet. "What is wrong with me?"

It was a question she had asked herself so many times in the past few weeks. And every time, she came up with more questions than answers. Her thoughts dwelled on Trebor, and on his failed marriage. On Din, and how her relationship with him had ended.

This wasn't who she was. She was once a Warrior, and now a Guardian of Tal. She was strong. The past shouldn't be boiling up within her!

And her nightmares. Gods, the nightmares. Where she took her anger out on Trebor. Of all people, on Trebor Tem, a weak, defeated barkeep sentenced to a life in the dungeons, surrounded by enraged orcs. He could do no harm to her. No one could. Yet in her dreams...

Shaking her head furiously, she stood up and started walking towards the gates to leave the Castle District. This wouldn't do, sitting around seething. She needed to walk it off.

Jon Wasik

Her head was bowed low as she walked, so she only saw in her peripheral a group of people exiting the castle, marching out onto the same road she was heading for. If she had noticed them earlier and looked up, she would have immediately turned around.

A dreadful voice spoke up and turned her veins to ice. "Amaya," Din called out.

She stopped short, her fists automatically balling up. When she looked at him, he also came to a stop, his blue eyes piercing hers. She wanted to tear his head off. Instead, she bowed, as little as necessary for etiquette. "Commander Din." What in the name of the Six was he doing in Archanon?

Leaving behind his entourage of Warriors, all of whom she recognized from her hometown of Everlin, he approached her, a grin on his face. "Well, isn't this a coincidence. I had hoped to see you today."

Could she say what she wanted to? Was it permissible? He was no longer her Commander, after all, she reported to Draegus Kataar. But she also knew the importance of maintaining good relations between the throne and the Warriors' Guild. It was, after all, the Warriors' Guild on the front lines right now, not Tal soldiers.

So as much as she wanted to tell him where to stick it, she couldn't. Nor could she tell him that the feelings were not mutual. She had to remain diplomatic, if at all possible.

"What may I do for you, Commander?" she asked in her best stoic tone.

He came to a stop only a dozen feet from her, and frowned. "Still angry at me, I see."

Dammit, she thought to herself. There was no hiding her emotions from him. She never could, he knew her too well.

"My apologies," she gave another small bow. She should have called him sir, but she couldn't bring herself to. Never again.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Raising a curious eyebrow, Din shook his head. “You’re going to have to get over our past, my dear.” Her fists twitched when he called her ‘dear.’ “After all, we’re going to have to get used to working together again.”

All feeling drained from her arms and legs, her face going cold. “...What?”

“Yeah,” he jabbed a thumb back at the castle. “Why do you think I was here? We’re outnumbered by the orcs a hundred to one, we need more Warriors. So I came to barter for you and your team to return to the Warriors.” Something snapped inside of her head, like a leather belt breaking from too much pressure. “Under my command, of course.”

“You...” she started moving towards him, “Son of a...”

Before she could lay a hand on him, a pair of hands grabbed her by the shoulders and held her back. “Amaya, no!” Elic’s voice was strong, and brought the light back to the darkest recesses of her soul.

Din had taken a step back, fear clear in his eyes. She’d never seen that in him before, genuine fear. Fear of her. Fear of the look in her eyes. The rage no doubt pouring from her soul, such that any Mage or Wizard nearby could feel.

His reaction coupled with Elic’s strength smothered the anger, and turned it to something worse. Something insipid, and dark.

“Commander, please leave,” Elic commanded. When Din did not reply or look away from Elic, her friend took a step closer to the Warrior Commander. “Please don’t make me order it.”

Din scoffed at that and looked at Elic for the first time, but then he noticed the uniform and tabard Elic wore: a castle guard’s uniform, but with the kingdom’s symbol on the tabard embroidered in silver, not white, distinguishing him from the common Tal soldier. He also held his left hand out so that Din could see the mark of the Guardians on it.

Scowling, Din spun around, his cloak flowing around behind him, and stalked off. His entourage was quick to follow.

All of this Amaya barely noticed. Her thoughts were turned inward, her eyes downturned. *The look on his face*, she thought, numb but for the horror she began to feel in her heart. *My gods, his face...*

Feeling a light pressure on her shoulder, Amaya turned to see Elic, his brow furrowed and his dark eyes searching hers. She wanted nothing more than to allow her friend to wrap his arms around her, embrace her and let her cry into his chest.

But she couldn't. She was his Lieutenant. It was already bad enough, him seeing her almost assault a Warrior Commander. He was her friend, yes, but she still had to maintain some distance, some semblance of leadership.

Steeling herself, she pushed the anger away, the darkness, the hatred, all of it. She pushed it deep down into herself, into the very lowest reaches until it was nothing but a trickle of annoyance. *I am a Guardian. I must act like it.*

"Thank you," she managed to say without any emotion. Looking back to the castle, she decided she needed to find her bunk, and fast, before she lost control again. "Please excuse me..."

Elic didn't let her go. His hand became firm on her shoulder, and the look he gave her was one of annoyance and determination. "Come with me," he stated, not leaving room for debate.

She was about to object, to remind him who commanded whom, but he simply turned on the spot and walked away. Curious at his newfound disobedience, and even fearful of everything he had seen in Everlin and just now, she decided to follow him.

To her surprise, he led her right back to the bench she had sat on only minutes ago. When he sat down, he motioned to the spot next to him and said, "I think it's time we had a talk."

"My, aren't we brash today," she frowned, folding her arms and refusing to sit.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

He remained motionless for a while longer, but when it became clear she wasn't going to join him, he sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. After some thought, he looked up at her, genuine concern on his face.

"Alright. I know you've never had a second in command, not officially, but the others look up to me as such."

She felt something stir inside of her, apprehension at where he was going to take the conversation, and anger at herself for allowing it to come to this.

"You managed to keep it under wraps, but ever since Ironwood, and especially ever since Valaras..." Elic trailed off, his face betraying his uncertainty at how far he should go. "I know you and Din had a relationship. I know that it must have hurt you far more than it ever did us when he betrayed our team. Amaya..."

Feeling like she had lost control of the situation, of herself, of her subordinate, Amaya very nearly lashed out at him verbally to remind him who she was and that it was not his place to lecture her. Until she realized she had no one else to talk to. No one else who cared about her. No one else she could truly call 'friend.'

"Something set you off this time," he continued, sitting up straight. "I didn't hear what, but something did. If you won't tell me what happened in the past, then at least tell me what he said."

Turning her head down and away from him, she once more found her fists clenched. Unfolding her arms and forcing her hands to relax, she decided to sit on the bench, and then with considerable effort, managed to look Elic straight in the face.

"He is here to convince the King to release us back into the service of the Warriors."

Elic couldn't have looked more stunned. "What?!"

She shook her head and massaged her nose bridge forcefully. "The son of a whore thinks we're still his to command!"

Even Elic was at a loss for words at hearing this news. Some of the color in his face drained, and he covered his mouth with his hand.

“The Warriors are spread too thin,” she continued. “They need reinforcements.”

Pulling his hand away from his mouth, Elic asked, “Do you think he actually has a chance?”

“If he pulls the ‘we need every sword to win this war’ card, then yes,” she shook her head.

“We’re winning the war now, we’ve just about driven the orcs back to the Wastelands. But scouts have already confirmed the orcs are retreating into another army. They’ll have fresh troops to hold the line just south of the border.”

Elic closed his eyes in silent resignation. “And if we want to end the war, we need the numbers to overwhelm them.”

“Precisely,” she folded her arms. “He said he came to barter, and you know the kingdom’s gold reserves are dangerously low. Any concessions the Warriors give on how much they charge the King for fighting this war will be welcome.”

Elic shook his head, stared at her, his eyes betraying the emptiness he felt even when his words spoke of hope. “We’re Guardians.” He pulled back his sleeve to show the brand. “There’s no coming back from that, Draegus warned us of that fact.”

She shrugged, feeling the anger seethe and writhe in her stomach, threatening to burst forth again. “Desperate times, remember?” It was true that their numbers were constantly being bolstered by the Wizard Sal’fe using his staff to resurrect fallen Warriors, but every time he did, he rightfully charged the kingdoms a fee, to help his kingdom pay for their recovery from Kailar’s occupation, and the war effort. That only hurt Tal’s dwindling gold reserves more.

The kingdom needed relief. It needed every edge it could get.

“What are we going to do?” Elic asked, his voice strong, but with an edge that made her hairs stand up on end.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Searching inside of herself for answers, Amaya wished, even prayed for something. Some hope. Some way to make her feel like the world wasn't about to end.

But nothing presented itself. Her mind was blank.

"I don't know," she whispered.

"In what realm did anyone think this would be a good idea?" Tezarik grumbled, his darksteel armor rattling from his shivering. Arkad growled a warning against the young orc's statement, but found that he couldn't help but agree. Then again, nothing could compare to their home. Not even the Wastelands.

He and the surviving darksteel orcs from Valaras were huddled together, their energy spent, their spirits broken. Even orcs had a limit to how long they could run at full steam. Now they huddled in a small clearing surrounded by a dense cluster of trees in the Ilari mountains, their destination finally within reach.

"It does not matter," Arkad, trying to kneel in his plate armor, replied. The armor pinched and poked in very awkward places at the joints, and was definitely never designed for stealth. "We will return to the Wastelands soon, where it is warm even in this land's winter."

"We won't survive long enough," he heard someone whisper.

Arkad jerked his head to the right to see who spoke, but whomever had spoken was not brave enough to do so again. It was enough to worry him, these were not the downtrodden orcs that had been born and raised in the Wastelands. They, like him, were once residents of the great city of Akaida, and their spirits had not been broken by thousands of years of mistreatment at the hands of the humans.

If they were losing their spirit, he realized the situation was far worse than he realized.

Jon Wasik

“We will survive,” he looked around, making eye contact with every orc that he could. More than two dozen had survived the battle and retreated with him, each wearing enchanted armor and wielding powerful weapons. “We are strong, and cunning. We are not the common rabble, and we are far more than foot soldiers.”

“Which is why we should not have diverted,” another orc, Telark, piped in. When Arkad glared at him, a sight that usually made even the toughest orc cower, Telark continued, “Forgive me for saying so, General, but the Wastelands rabble need all of the help they can get.”

Something in Arkad began to rise up, and he was ready to beat his subordinate down for questioning his orders. In fact, in days past that was exactly what he would have done. That was how he had always commanded his troops, it was what he had been taught by his former master.

Then he realized what he was asking his troops to do. Archanon was one of the most well-defended cities he had ever heard of, and he wanted them to attack it. Two dozen orcs, even in darksteel, would not likely breach the wall. Was he, in fact, asking them to do something hopeless?

Was it worth it? Worth the sacrifice? If that question was on his mind, then it must be on theirs. He realized that they needed convincing. And so did he.

“You’re right,” he nodded to Telark. “They do need our help. Two armies of our kin are running for their lives right now, and they need our help. Did you see how organized the humans were? How quickly they rallied, how efficiently they formed up against us through portals?”

Arkad’s second in command, Kilack, nodded, “Only once before have I seen such effective use of portals for battle.”

The memory Kilack had just conjured made Arkad shiver, his heart feeling empty. The day he had been forced from his home.

No, he inwardly yelled at himself. Do not dwell!

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Banishing the thoughts, he focused on what was before him. His kin. His people. The future of the orcs.

“Even now,” he continued on, “the humans are harassing our armies as they retreat. They need at least another week, maybe two, to make it back to our lines in the Wastelands. But the longer they run, the more will be lost to the harassment of our enemy.”

Pointing northwest, and almost taking Telark’s head off in the process, he raised his voice, “We can do something about that here and now. The humans think they can walk all over us without fear of reprisal. They think they have us outmaneuvered. So now we will make them pay for their arrogance.” He stood up, towering above his orcs. “If we attack their capitol now, they will fear how many more of us are out there, ready to strike at their heart. They will pull back. And our armies will be able to make it back to the Wastelands in far greater numbers.”

“He’s right,” Kilack also raised his voice. “We can make a difference, right here, today.”

Another thought occurred to Arkad, and while he did not wish to lose the momentum he had just begun to build, as he could see and feel the life returning to his orcs, he knew that they couldn’t just flat-out attack the capitol. They needed a plan.

So he looked at Tezarik. The young orc had impressed him at Valaras, and he had survived the first Battle of Archanon when Klaralin had ordered them to attack. “You know the lay of the land better than any of us,” he narrowed his eyes. “Is there a weakness we can exploit?”

Tezarik turned his dark green eyes down and searched his memory. Over a thousand orcs had died that night, so Arkad did not envy the young orc having to return to those memories. Like he always did, Arkad wondered if the battle would have turned out differently if he had been present to lead the troops.

If only he had made it to Halarite sooner.

“Yes,” Tezarik’s eyes opened wide. “Yes, there is! I fought along the far right flank, the northern flank. North of the gate, there is a great river, and that river flows into and out of the city. I remember seeing a grate there, it looked to be nothing more than iron or steel.” A wicked smile crossed Tezarik’s face. “If we could sneak up to that point, past the river docks, we could use our weapons to breach into the city.”

Arkad felt his own face twist into a smile. “Then that is our target.” He nodded to Tezarik, “When night falls, you will lead the way.”

Standing tall, Arkad looked north, feeling his chest swell and his spirits rise for the first time in weeks. “Tonight, we will strike at the heart of the humans.

“Tonight, we will make the humans fear us again.”

With barely contained rage and absolute determination, Amaya stormed through the castle towards the Allied Council chambers. She would not falter, not this time.

Twice already she had sought out King Beredis, ready to do and say whatever was necessary to convince him to not transfer her back to the Warriors’ Guild. Back under Din’s command. Each time, her courage faltered, and she stopped short of entering his wardroom. She had missed her opportunity then, the two hour long lunch break in the ongoing sessions between the four kingdoms, the Wizards’ Guild, and the Covenant.

Now it was just past the usual dinner time, and she knew the Allies would break session for the evening. For as much work as they needed to do, royalty did not like to miss their meals.

When she came around the final corner and saw one of the doors that led into the council chambers, her courage once again faltered, and so did she in her steps. Two of the King’s personal guards bracketed the door, resplendent in their black and silver Tal tabards, and they looked at her curiously, even cautiously.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

She was well known by all of the King's guards by now, but she could only imagine what she looked like, barreling around the corner in her civilian clothes, a dagger strapped to her left boot in plain sight.

It suddenly occurred to her that she should have changed into her guard uniform. She might otherwise stick out when the Allied leadership emerged from within. Unsure just how long she had before the doors would open, she looked around, and found a bench in a recess just down the hall.

Glancing again at the guards, she nodded and waved awkwardly, and then sat down on the bench, resting her elbows on her knees. Hopefully she would look like nothing more than a castle servant waiting to serve her master. Except for the dagger strapped to her boot...

The minutes ticked by, and she grew impatient and anxious. She almost stood up to start pacing, but managed to control herself. She had to do this, she had to make her case and convince the King that she served him better as a Guardian.

This was where she belonged. Not with the Warriors. Even if she could be assigned to another city, under another commander, she realized she didn't want to return to the Guild.

That realization surprised her. There was a time when she never could have imagined being anything other than a Warrior. It had been her dream for as long as she could remember, it was the only life she knew.

The Guild was too restrictive, she realized. As a Guardian, she could wear whatever armor she wanted, wield any weapon, and she was given a great amount of latitude in how she accomplished her missions. She reported to no one but the King and Draegus Kataar.

No, she could not go back to the Guild. Never.

She jumped when the doors suddenly clunked open. The two guards stood aside, and from within, a stream of servants, royalty, and dignitaries streamed forth. It was only half of the membership, the others exited through the other door.

The Allied Council Chambers was once the strategic command center from which the King would plan strategy and command the Tal armies in wartime. What was once a seat of war was now where peace was brokered. No, not brokered, fought and struggled for on a daily basis.

Queen Leian and her entourage walked by, and while she looked gorgeous in her navy-blue court dress and with her white crown, she appeared exhausted. Amaya couldn't begin to imagine the stresses of creating an alliance between the four kingdoms when there was so much bloody history between them.

She looked anxiously for the King, knowing that he often came through this exit, but neither he nor Draegus appeared. When the stream of people, paying little or no attention to her, were past, she stood up excitedly. The guards looked in, and then remained at attention, still glancing at her nervously.

Realizing she had once again clenched her hands into fists, she forced them to relax, and then did her best to walk casually towards the doors. If the guards hadn't closed the door or left their post, it meant King Beredis was still inside.

The guards did not attempt to intercede as she passed through into the chamber, and she was relieved to find the King and Draegus alone. She very nearly turned around and left, but the moment she entered, Draegus looked up to see her.

"Lieutenant," he looked at her wide-eyed. He and the King were hunched over their table, reading a piece of parchment.

The King also looked up, a frown upon his face. She felt her face turn bright red, and suddenly she didn't know what to say. The three of them stood still for what felt like ages, her eyes darting back and forth between them.

Finally, King Beredis stood up straight and folded his arms. "Is there something you need, Lieutenant?"

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Before she could stop herself, she suddenly blurted out, “I am one of your most loyal and effective servants, Your Majesty!” Without realizing what she was doing, she began pacing back and forth on the other side of the table, her hands thrusting about in emphasis as she spoke. “Surely I have proven that to you, and proven my worth to you. My team has defeated more orcs than any single unit of Warriors or soldiers. We’ve followed your orders, we’re loyal to you, I am loyal to you, absolutely and without question. You’ll never find a more loyal Guardian, that I can tell you. Uh...” She looked at Draegus sheepishly. “Present company excepted.”

Draegus raised an eyebrow at that, but did not interrupt her. She stopped her pacing and slapped her palms onto the tabletop. “I belong here, Sire! I belong under your command, I belong with the Guardians, we all do. And I swear to you, we will make you proud, and I will never, ever fail you!”

Her pulse was racing, and she started to feel lightheaded. She had just shouted at her King! Hadn’t she?

Suddenly she wasn’t sure just how loudly she had spoken. No doubt slapping her palms on the table had drawn the attention of the guards. The King frowned at her, exchanged confused glances with Draegus, and then nodded to her. “Good,” he spoke in his court voice, louder than casual conversation and with authority. “Why do you think I chose you to be a Guardian? Now would you mind telling me what has you so riled up?”

“Din!” she almost shouted at him. Catching herself, she stood up straight, doing everything she could to keep her hands open. “Commander Din, I mean. He came here to convince you to return us to the Guild to bolster our forces on the front.”

The King’s mouth hung open for a second, and he frowned deeply. “Commander Din came to report on another orc incursion into Ironwood. Your name never came up during the briefing.”

Jon Wasik

Amaya's heart skipped a beat, and the edges of her vision blurred, tunnel vision setting in as she stared, horrified, at her leaders. "O...oh. I see." Slowly she backed away. "I am so sorry, my Lord. I didn't...I shouldn't have barged in here like this."

A small grin suddenly tugged at Draegus's face, and he brought a hand up to cover his face. The King, on the other hand, raised his eyebrows. "Indeed, you shouldn't have. And if you were anyone else, I would have you sent to the dungeon for your outburst."

Color had drained from her face, but now it returned in full force. "I, um, should go."

She started to turn to leave, but King Beredis raised a hand to stop her. Feeling like a child being lectured by her parents, she clasped her hands behind her back and remained, feeling utter shame at what she had done. More than that, however, she had to fight back a building rage inside of her. *Din*, she thought, the name seething inside of her head. *This was another one of his games.*

"Lieutenant, do not for one moment underestimate your value to me," the King spoke carefully, each word enunciated clearly. "You do not know who all of the other members of the Guardians are, but every single one of them works alone." Her thoughts of disdain for her former Commander suddenly ceased, the surprise at her King's statement taking her off guard. "Yours is the first *team* of Guardians I have brought into the fold, and I have done so because of your decision not to followed Commander Din's orders."

She frowned at that statement, recalling that the King had openly disapproved of Din's orders and actions, but had taken no further action on the matter. She also didn't think it had any bearing on their induction into the Guardians. Not knowing what to say, all she could do was hesitantly ask, "Sire?"

Beredis smiled at her, his eyes gleaming like a proud parent's. "Amaya, I saw a spark in you the very moment you stood before my throne. And I saw it in your team too. Every day since then, you have shown me that I was not wrong." He shook his head slowly and began to walk around the table to

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

stand in front of her. “I promise you, here and now, that I will never make you leave. I will never let the Guild take you back. You are a Guardian now, and that is a life-long commitment.”

Once he was before her, he reached out a hand and clasped it on her shoulder reassuringly. “And by that, I mean a commitment on both sides. You serve me, and I take care of you. For the rest of our lives.”

Something inside of her broke, but not in a bad way. Something she hadn’t realized she had been holding on to, and for that moment in time, the rage was calmed by a wave of soothing warmth.

Knowing that she was breaking every rule in the book, she reached her hand up to clasp his. Something welled in her chest, and her vision blurred with barely contained tears. “Thank...thank you.” As an embarrassed afterthought, she added, “My King.”

His smile grew only larger, but then his own sense of propriety took over. He stepped back, slipping his hand out of her grip, and nodded. “Now go and rest, while you still can,” he smirked. “It won’t be long before I call upon your team for another mission.”

The moment was gone, but the calming effect of the encounter was not. With the deepest bow that she could manage, she said her farewell to the King and to Draegus, and then made her exit. The guards watched her go cautiously, no doubt still uncertain about her after her outbursts. She didn’t care.

As she aimlessly walked the corridors of the castle, she began to realize why King Beredis was the most loved ruler of Tal in generations. She also realized that he was beginning to treat her like he might have treated a daughter, if one had been born before the Queen had passed away.

Suddenly she realized why she wanted to stay so badly. For all of the danger she was faced with on every mission, this was the first time in her life that she did not feel afraid.

This was the first time she felt safe.

The sewers of Archanon always stank, and given what flowed through its canals, Laira knew why. It was a smell she had grown accustomed to in her brief life, but it was also one that kept many other people away. Thankfully she did not have to travel far through the smell to get to her destination, where the smell was kept at bay through pressure differential created naturally by air flow and water. After all, it would be hard to be a thief if people could smell her a mile away.

Passing through a tunnel with high winds, which made her cloak billow out around her, she paused, letting the wind wash over her. The water that passed through the tunnel was clean water diverted from the river, not sewage, and it made all the difference in the world.

She paused there, on top of a stone bridge that crossed the underground canal. Everlasting torches, stolen over time from various districts on the surface, provided ample, if varying light. Her stomach twisted as she considered what she was thinking.

That Zerek was actually so infatuated with her that he would want her to leave the dregs and live in the castle...

She never could, of course. That would be akin to slavery, and she would rather live poor and free than under the thumb of a failing monarchy. But still, he really had started to fall desperately for her.

Something inside of her twisted her stomach into a knot. A feeling she hadn't felt in such a long time. A feeling that made her want to never talk to Zerek again, not out of spite, but out of caring. Out of regret. Out of guilt.

Could she do it anymore?

Steeling herself for the conversation to come, she crossed the bridge, which came directly to a sealed, steel door. She banged twice, slapped three times, and waited a moment before giving one final knock. Slowly the door groaned open, revealing a man dressed in rags as tattered as hers on the other side.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

“Laura,” he spoke in a deep, grumbling voice. “So good to see you again,” he grinned, a sloppy smirk with half of his teeth missing.

As she always did, she tousled the man’s hair as she walked past, “You too, Mekan.”

He beamed at her action, and closed the door behind her, leaving her to enter the Thieves’ Sanctuary. Within was a wide-open massive chamber that crisscrossed with aqueducts deeper under the city. It was quite literally on the opposite side of the city from the fabled Tomb of the Ascended, and seemed utterly redundant and useless, stretching deep into the ground but providing no actual water to the city above.

The chamber seemed to have been long forgotten by the rest of the city, and with only a couple of sealed off entrances within the sewers, it made for an excellent hiding place for the thieves, and a sanctuary for the city’s homeless during the worst of the winters. Or at least, those whom Sorin deemed friends of the thieves.

That was whom she needed to find. He’d been the de-facto leader of their little faction for years, and no one seemed anxious to step up to challenge him. Which was fine, he actually had helped them organize well. They were no longer a disjointed coalition of thieves. Rules of conduct had been established, most of which she rather liked, such as never to steal from someone who clearly had to struggle to make ends meet.

Laura checked all of Sorin’s usual spots. The first place she looked was in a little walled-off section he had built, to act as his own quarters and an office, but he wasn’t there. Nor was he eating at the community kitchen. He also wasn’t in the map room, which wasn’t exactly a room as it was just a little alcove where city maps had been nailed into the ancient stone walls marking homes and businesses that were off-limits to the thieves.

Jon Wasik

Beginning to suspect that Sorin was still out in the city, Laira felt relieved. Already she was feeling apprehensive about what she came to tell him, to ask of him. For as young as she was, she'd earned his respect long ago, and she didn't want to lose that by appearing weak.

Then she heard him call to her, "Hey, Laira!"

She had just left the map room and was ready to go to her alcove to sleep, but now she cringed at hearing his voice, and slowly turned to face him. With two of his friends, Dak and Emira, in tow, Sorin appeared in good cheer as he made his way from the entrance to the map room.

Trying to smile and look pleased to see him, Laira nodded, "Sorin."

When she tried to keep going, to not have to speak with him, he suddenly jumped in front of her, "Hey, wait a moment." He pushed a lock of his black hair behind an ear and frowned at her, "What's wrong?"

Feeling herself blush, she tried to push past him, but knew that was a futile effort. "It's nothing," she shook her head. Now she *knew* she couldn't tell him. But she also knew he had a way of getting her to tell him everything. He had that affect on everyone.

For a moment, he stared into her eyes, searching them for a clue. Then the edges of his lips pulled down into a grimace. "Give us a minute," he spoke to his friends. They looked at each other, then at Laira, before they turned and headed for the kitchen.

There wasn't much in the way of privacy in the Thieves' Sanctuary, but the little alcove of the map room helped them watch for prying eyes. Resigned to her fate, Laira walked back in with Sorin. Two blue-white everlasting torches illuminated the alcove with a ghostly glow, and did little to hide the concern on Sorin's face.

Gently placing a hand on her shoulder, he said, "It's something to do with Zerek, isn't it?"

Once again she felt her face burn, and knew that he could see it even in the blue light. She couldn't look into his eyes, knowing the guilt she would feel. "Yes..."

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Sighing, he released her shoulder and leaned against a wall, folding his arms and nodding.

“What happened?”

Looking everywhere but at him, she shook her head, trying to fight the urge to tell him everything. But before she knew what she was doing, she just blurted it out, “Zerek wants to bring me into the castle.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sorin’s eyebrows rise in surprise. “Wants me to leave this life behind and become a castle servant. Says he could help get me in.”

When she did finally look at Sorin’s face, his face went from surprise to concern. “Do you think he’s told anyone on the inside about you, or who you are?”

“I doubt it,” she shook her head. “He’s talked about the castle’s attempts to counter the increase in thievery, especially of castle personnel. I think he’s afraid that if he tells anyone that he’s involved with someone like me, they’ll punish him or tell him he can’t see me again.”

Sorin drew his lips into a thin line and nodded. “At least there’s that, then. What did you say to him?”

Once more, she just blurted it all out, “We got into a fight over it, and I told him that I’ve taken advantage of his kindness, and that I can’t do that to him anymore.”

Drawing her eyes down, she shook her head. Her stomach twisted, and her thoughts ran back and forth between her guilt over leading Zerek on, and failing Sorin. Failing the thieves. Failing the city. All over a damned boy.

For a long while, Sorin was quiet. He stared at her at first, but then he looked down, his brow furrowed deeply. Finally, he pushed off of the wall, approached her, and gently touched her shoulder. When she looked into his eyes, she could see a mixture of disappointment and kindness in his eyes. “You’re in love with him.”

Butterflies exploded in her chest, and she felt her cheeks flush. “He’s just a boy,” she turned around and walked to the other side of the alcove.

Jon Wasik

She heard Sorin chuckle. "He's only two years younger than you, Laira."

"You know what I mean," she scowled over her shoulder. "I can't relate to him, he's lived a normal life."

"Has he, now?" Sorin asked. "Then it's normal to have your entire family slaughtered before your eyes?"

A renewed pang worked its way into her inner being, and pain long-forgotten returned to her chest. Laira wrapped her arms around herself, willing the pain to go away, and doing everything she could to keep the memories at bay.

She turned to look at him, her eyes opening as she took in the image of him. The only father figure she knew now.

His face relaxed into realization, and he smirked, "You haven't told him about your parents, have you?"

Laira shook her head. "No."

Sorin brought his hand up to slowly stroke his stubble of a beard. "I see. So it isn't just that you've fallen in love with him. He has fallen in love with you, even without you using your past to grow closer to him."

"I thought it would make me feel less guilty." She threw her arms up in exasperation, "You don't know what he's like, Sorin. He's..." She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw, frustration mixing with affection for Zerek. "He's so kind to me. He doesn't see a thief. And he is so damn naïve about the way the world works here."

"Laira, he lost his innocence the day the orcs attacked," Sorin said, shaking his head. "He's not the innocent boy you think he is, not anymore."

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Scoffing, she walked to the back wall and stared at the city's map. She looked at the Merchant's District, where she first met him, quite by accident. She looked at the river, where he had chased her to. To the Warriors' Guild. To the landing on the river.

Sorin was right. She had fallen in love with Zerek, and that was going to make everything complicated from here on out.

"I don't know what to do," she closed her eyes, tears of frustrating threatening to come out. She pushed them back, like she would push on a door to keep it closed against a horrible monster. She couldn't show anymore weakness. Not today.

Sorin was quiet for a long time, and she felt like punching the wall, even though she knew it would only hurt her more than help. She wanted to punch Sorin. To slap Zerek. She didn't want to feel this way anymore.

"He loves you," Sorin stated flatly. "So he'll come find you again. Make sure he finds you."

Laira turned to object, but the look on Sorin's face told her it wasn't a request. "You know how important it is that we get someone in on the inside. Keep working him, Laira. Put your feelings aside. He's a mark, remember?"

Could she ever do that? Ignore her feelings and use him further? She doubted it.

The doubt must have shown on her face, because Sorin stepped forward and clasped his hands on both of her shoulders, this time firmly. "Our kingdom is lying to us, Laira. Our own people on the inside don't have the access that Zerek has or will have to sensitive documents. We need him. Which means," he crouched to force her to look into his eyes, "we need you. You're the one he's fallen in love with. You're the only one who can do this."

She clenched her jaw, and used that same image of a door in her mind to push her feelings back, to keep them away. He was right. Something was very wrong in Tal, and a lot of people were counting on her.

“Alright,” she nodded. Looking into Sorin’s eyes, pushing the guilt she felt away, she sighed, resigned to her job. “You’re right.”

Slapping her shoulder encouragingly, Sorin smiled, “There she is.”

Frowning, she asked, “There who is?”

“The tough woman I always knew you were,” he pulled away. “Now go on. You know what to do.”

With a single nod, she turned away from him and walked out, her head held high. Not because she felt confident, but because she had to make a show of it. Dak and Emira watched from across the open hole that delved deeper into Halarite than she thought possible. It mirrored the hole that kept threatening to form in her stomach. If they saw hesitation on her face, the hesitation she truthfully held within her, they would report it to Sorin, and he might pull her off of the task. Who knew what they might do to Zerek.

Sorin had, in fact, inspired her. But not in the way he thought. He was right. She could do this. She could do what needed to be done.

What was right.

Night had fallen, and Zerek’s tasks for the day had all been finished with time to spare. He wanted more to do, *anything* to keep his mind off of what had happened earlier. He didn’t want to think about it.

Yet that’s all he did now, sitting on his bunk, legs pulled up to his chest. What had been so wrong with what he’d said? With what he’d asked? Why had Laira reacted the way she did?

Had he lost her forever? He had, hadn’t he? Somehow he had messed up so badly that she ran off, and he’d never see her again.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Why was asking her to live in the castle so bad? She lived on the streets, and even faintly smelled of the sewers, though he never told her that. He was offering to help her get off of the streets. Why would anyone choose that life?

He sighed, resigned to his loss, resigned to all of his losses. Everything he ever cared about, everyone, it just kept getting taken away from him. He should have known better than to grow close to her.

As lonely as he was, as isolated as he suddenly felt, he was annoyed when Endel entered the room and immediately came over to him. They shared the bunks, with Zerek on the top bunk, so it was expected, but he wished his friend didn't talk to him. He hoped Endel would only get into the bottom bunk and go to bed.

Of course, Endel never did that, he was always too full of energy. Zerek also wasn't exactly hiding his foul mood, so before he knew it, Endel had climbed up on the bed and sat across from Zerek, his brow furrowed in concern.

"Okay, what's going on?" Endel asked after several moments of silence passed.

Zerek's cheeks burned a little. His friend had been so encouraging and supportive of his pursuit of Laira, and suddenly he felt like he had failed Endel. He averted his eyes at first, but then sighed heavily, scratching his head.

"Something happened today," he spoke quietly so that no one else could hear him. Several other male servants were in the room too, either in their bunks or enjoying a late dinner at the common table.

Endel's eyebrows turned upwards. "With Laira?"

Zerek nodded. "Yeah. I, umm...asked her to become a castle servant. Told her I could help her get in to become one, put in a good word, you know?"

Endel's face turned downward, and Zerek could almost see the sinking sensation that his friend felt. "You...wow." He shook his head, looking downward. "I...why did you do that?"

Zerek frowned, "Because I want to help her get off of the street. And I don't want to have to hide my involvement with her from Kai or anyone else anymore. I want us to be together in the open. I want..." The darkness he had felt in his stomach returned, and he rested his head on his knees. "I wanted something I was stupid to think I could ever have."

Endel frowned, his head jerking up and to one side. "What do you mean something you could never have?"

He was about to say companionship, but then he felt guilty for not considering Endel a companion. No one else had stepped forward to become his friend in the servants' quarters. Most others were friendly, sure, but Endel had been a *true* friend.

"It doesn't matter," he sighed, leaning back against the wall. "It's over now."

"Oh?" Endel looked at him with a smirk. "Giving up so easily, are we? After how desperately you pursued her before?"

Zerek shook his head, "You should have seen the look on her face. She was so mad that I wanted..." Just as he was about to say it, he realized his mistake. "That I wanted her to change her ways. To change her life, for me. Oh gods, Endel, I'm such a fool."

Stretching out a leg to fake-kick Zerek, he nodded vigorously, "Yeah, you are. But not for the reason you think."

He frowned and looked at his younger friend. "What do you mean?"

Shrugging, Endel replied, "Hey I may just be a kid, but I know a thing or two about love. And trust me, she's in love with you. So this isn't the end. In fact," he looked around, and then grimaced. "Well, when the night shift is gone and everyone else has gone to bed, you should get out there and find her."

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Shaking his head, Zerek said, “I couldn’t find her if I wanted to. I never know where she goes, she always finds me.”

“I know,” Endel nodded. “And I guarantee you, she’ll be out there looking for you right now.” Turning to the side, he prepared to jump off of Zerek’s bed, but then paused. “Seriously. Don’t leave her waiting tonight.”

The earnestness in Endel’s voice was curious, but it was enough to make him think that his friend was on to something. It would be at least another couple of hours before he would have a chance to sneak out, and that frustrated him.

Endel jumped down, and then started getting ready for bed. All Zerek could do was wonder. Wonder if his friend was right, and if it wasn’t over. Could he hope? Should he hope? Or had he really lost her?

Slowly, Zerek lay down under the covers, and then reached for the dagger under his pillow, where he always put it before he went to bed at night. He felt the cold steel handle wrapped by leather. And every time he did, he swore he could feel Elina’s soul. Like she was still with him.

It was a lie, he knew it. She was gone. So was his father. But it still comforted him, in the worst nights when he cried silently into his pillow.

He didn’t want to lose anyone else. Not again.

Not this time.

Despising how cold it was, Arkad scowled as he kneeled down in the shadows of the night by the forest by Archanon. The river was only a hundred feet away, and a few thousand feet further up river was the great wall of Archanon.

He felt bile rise in the back of his throat at the thought that this world was all they had to look forward to. Part of him even considered whether or not the Wastelands were so bad. If drinkable water

wasn't so scarce, and so many deadly creatures prowled the night, he would have been content to simply setup defenses along the Wastelands' borders.

Realizing that possibility was yet before them, he inwardly sighed, trying not to let the troops that knelt beside and behind him see his disheartened state. He could not afford to let them see his despair.

Between them and the wall was an open field that would make them easier to spot, but their darksteel armor would hide them well. Furthermore, they would approach from the lowest ground possible, from the river itself.

From their vantage, they could see the torches lit upon the river dock. While the river was wide and deep, only small boats and rafts could navigate it, especially as low as it was now, so the dock did not look busy, and what he supposed were normal operations had been shut down for the evening. There were only two small river boats docked, one on either bank.

Several guards were visible, city guards, not the more elite Warriors he had fought previously. They would be easy enough to sneak up to and subdue. From there, he could see where the river emerged from within, and through the iron grating, he could see pale green light from within.

Was this really necessary? Would they truly accomplish what he wanted with this raid upon the humans' First City?

Was it worth the lives of his men?

He looked to his right, at his friend and trusted lieutenant, Kilack. Was this worth sacrificing his life? Or the life of young Tezarik to his left?

They had failed so miserably. The war had gone horribly wrong, and he was about to send them to their deaths. He didn't want to watch more orcs die. So many had been slain back home, and so many had already died by human hands.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

He sighed, remembering that they needed to make the humans think twice about harassing their retreating troops. Now more than ever, he had to believe in his own words. He had to lead his people to victory, or at the very least, survival.

But he still wanted his men to live. “Remember,” he whispered. “We do not need to sacrifice ourselves here. The goal is to get in, raise the alarm, and show them that we are strong and that they should fear us. Make them think twice about leaving their cities unprotected.” He looked specifically at Kilack. “Do not throw away your lives needlessly. Inflict casualties, destroy their buildings, and then retreat back into the wilderness.”

Kilack nodded, “Yes, General.”

“And if we are separated,” he continued, “make for the Wastelands after the battle.” He turned back to the towering wall before them. With a bitter taste in his mouth, he finished with, “Return home. And defend it at all costs.”

Without another word, he motioned for his men to follow, and he made his way to the river, keeping low so as not to be detected by any sentries on the wall.

They made it across the open hundred feet to the water’s edge, and as carefully and quietly as he could, he crawled into the waters. The cold bit at his skin, flooding into his armor and instantly chilling him to his very core.

As he carefully waded deeper and deeper into the river, fighting against its current, he pulled his double-edged axe from his back and held it below the surface. Glancing behind him, he saw his men follow suit.

When he could stand upright with only his head above the water, he began to slowly walk against the current, trying to ignore the awful bite of the cold. His muscles quickly began to ache, and he felt fatigued as his heart beat faster and faster in his chest. He tried to keep a steady, slow pace so as not to alert the guards, but it was not easy.

None of the enemy watched the river, or at least they didn't look down at its dark, glassy surface. They looked for boats coming up river, as unlikely as that was, or for travelers who walked along its banks. They never saw the shadows beneath their feet.

Already having divided his troops into two units before they had arrived, the orcs split up, one group crossing to the other side, and spread out along the stone docks, made of the same stone as the wall, he realized.

Two of the city guards conversed not ten feet from the edge where Arkad waded. He could not use magic, nor could any of the others in his troupe. Not if they wanted to have enough time to burn through the grating. So they would have to climb up and use their weapons.

The torches that illuminated the docks did not illuminate below the edge, so he knew they were all hidden in shadow. There was only one thing he could think to do. Cautiously he reached a hand out of the water, fearful of even the slightest sounds he made, and grasped onto the edge of the dock, his companions nearest him doing the same. Then he whistled, not so loud as to completely startle the guards, but enough to alert them that something was amiss.

The two guards that conversed nearest to him stopped talking, and he heard their heavy boots clomping towards him. His heart raced even faster, his fatigued muscles forgotten for a moment as the blood rage began to build. He let that feeling grow, let it give him strength.

He heard the thump of a weapon striking a body. An alarmed shout, and another thump. A moment later, the guards nearest him were at the edge, looking across the river to where the shout had come from.

With all of his strength, Arkad pulled up and swung his axe, cutting straight through the guard's chest piece, obliterating his heart. Another of his troops hauled up and stabbed his sword through the other guard's armor.

Yanking on his axe, the guard tumbled over and fell into the water.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

And it was over, as fast as that. There hadn't been many guards, and no workers were on duty. He heard the sound of more guards being slaughtered moments after his kill, but that was it.

The way was clear. They could sneak up to the grate, and use their enchanted weapons to break through. He would taste human blood once again!

Gathering her cloak about her to stave off the cold night, Amaya wandered down one of Archanon's countless narrow streets. Her mind wandered, her thoughts dwelling on Din, on the anger she felt, the frustration.

How many months since his betrayal? Since she had been imprisoned? Yet he still knew exactly what to say to throw her off, to anger her, to unhinge her. By all rights, how she had barged in and practically shouted at her King, she should have been thrown back into the dungeon. If he hadn't been so patient and understanding...

What was wrong with her? She was strong, wasn't she? She had fought in countless battles, witnessed horrible atrocities, taken the lives of monsters and humans alike. She had felt the guilt, overcome it, found ways to deal with it so that she could mostly sleep at night. Yet this one man, a man who wasn't even a part of her life anymore, continued to tear her apart.

Amaya felt the rage and frustration boil up within her, her hands clenching and unclenching in fists. Her pace increased rapidly, but she paid no attention to where she walked. She could see Din's face, imagined smashing it to a pulp. Imagined throwing her most powerful spell at him, wanting to feel satisfaction for it, but it wasn't enough. In her mind's eye, she imagined smashing him again and again, with fists, with magic, with the flat of her sword, until she imagined thrusting her blade straight through him, lifting him up, her anger giving her unreal strength, and throwing him across the street to slam into a wall...

In that moment, she realized that the darkness was consuming her, and her stomach sank to the lowest depths of her being. She stopped, blinking, feeling guilt and a terrible void open up in her chest. An emptiness. No...fear. Intense fear. Not of Din. She no longer feared him.

She feared herself.

Whether from the cold or from her frozen soul, she suddenly shivered. Looking around, she realized she had somehow wandered all the way down to the river.

Looking by the stone wall bordering the river, she sighed, the sound of flowing water almost calming her. It was late, very late. Almost no one else wandered the streets.

Except for a young man who emerged from another cross street not far from her. He glanced at her, froze, the look of fear clear on his face in the pale moonlight. There was no curfew, why should he fear her?

Her own introspection forgotten, she was ready to approach him and ask what he was doing, why he seemed so afraid to be noticed. Until another figure approached him, a young, slender woman, also donning a cloak, but much more ragged than his, full of holes. He looked at her, cautious at first, but she said something to him. A moment later, she planted a kiss squarely on his lips.

Feeling her own face warm, Amaya smiled, and placed her hands on her hips. She could not hear what they said, but the young boy seemed to forget her for a moment, the kiss clearly having stunned him. She suspected a forbidden love had just revealed itself before her, though she did not recognize who the boy was.

When he returned to reality, he looked back at Amaya, who smiled, shook her head, and then waved him on. The girl looked her way, her pale face flashing in the night. She looked terrified too, but Amaya did not know who she was either. The boy smiled, said something, and then together the two walked away from her.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Something warmed in her heart at seeing them. A warmth she had not felt in a long time. One she never expected to feel again.

Love still blossomed. Even after the atrocities of the Battle for Archanon, amidst a horrific war against the orcs, love could still bloom. Even class borders, if their differing attire was any indication, could not separate or thwart love.

She shook her head, and then realized just how tired she was. Sighing, she got her bearings, and then turned back towards the Castle District. Tonight she would sleep. And perhaps tomorrow, a new assignment would await them. Then she could vent her anger upon her country's enemies.

With that thought helping lift the darkness in her heart, for now anyway, she made her way back home.

Until she felt the flare of power that stopped her dead in her tracks. She had felt that flare before, many times.

Turning slowly back to where the two lovers had gone, she felt it again, and saw from the river a flash of bright, orange light.

Enchanted weapons.

Orcs.

Zerek's heart soared, pounding in his chest in excitement, relief flooding every inch of his body and making his fingers and toes tingle. He had gone to the river to look for Laira, afraid she would not be there, that he'd never see her again. Instead, not only was she there waiting for him, but the first thing she had done was grab on and kiss him.

The cloaked woman that had seen them had worried them both, but she seemed amused by their late-night rendezvous and had waved them on. Now they rushed towards their landing on the river.

Jon Wasik

He couldn't wait that long, he had to say what he had been thinking ever since he'd talked to Endel. "I'm sorry," he said to her.

Laira squeezed his hand, still pulling him along. "I know," she said quietly, looking at him with those deep, dark eyes. "So am I."

They weren't far from the landing, but he was bursting with what he wanted to say, so he tugged on her hand and pulled them to a stop. She turned to face him with a smile and a look that wondered at what couldn't possibly wait. She moved to kiss him, but he put up a hand to stop.

"Wait, Laira," he smiled. "I...want say something. To make up for what I'd said earlier. For what I'd asked of you."

She started to say something, but then stopped, and nodded, squeezing his hand encouragingly. "Go on."

"I, uh..." He stumbled with his words, looking down at his feet, shuffling them. His heart raced ever harder. Not because he had just run across the rooftops of Archanon to reach the river, but because of what he was about to offer.

Finally, nodding his head, he looked into her eyes, trying not to lose himself in them. "It was wrong of me to ask you to change your life for me. I shouldn't have. I just thought..." He paused, realizing what he was about to say was no better. "Look. I want to be with you, okay? No matter what. So here it is." After a gulp, he finally said, "I'll leave the castle, leave my job, and come be with you on the streets."

As what he said registered on her, her jaw slowly fell open, her eyes growing wider. "Zerek, no," she breathed.

Grasping both of her hands in his, he smiled in excitement, "It's okay! I'll do this for you, Laira."

"Your dreams," she shook her head, "you want to become a soldier some day, don't you? Or a Warrior?"

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

A small void opened up in the pit of his stomach, and he shook his head. “I’m a fool to think that could ever happen. I’m no soldier. Torick, the guard that’s been teaching me, says I’m learning quickly, but I’m just a miner.” He caught himself, felt a rush of blood in his face as the memories flashed through his mind. “No. I’m not even that anymore.”

He looked away, loosening his grip on her hands, trying to pull away from her. “I’m no one,” he said, his voice shaking. A void bigger than the greatest mining pit opened up in his stomach.

She wouldn’t let go, and she suddenly pulled him close to her, until they were nose to nose. Looking intently into his eyes, she said, “No. Damn you, Zerek, don’t you dare give up on your dreams!”

“Laira, I...” He paused, the thought of what he was about to say creating a lump in his throat that caught his voice. He had to force himself to say it. To tell her what she already knew, but what he had avoided talking about. “I have nothing left. No family. No life. I’m just a messenger in the castle, a pity case the King took on. The first victim of a new war.”

Before he could prattle on more about how horrible his life was, she suddenly pulled him in and kissed him fiercely. When the moment passed, and she pulled away, she smiled. “Thought that might shut you up.”

His mind was blank, but when she said that, he shook his head and tried to clear his head. “I, um...”

“No,” she shook her head. “You aren’t nothing. You’re everything to me. And that’s why I have to tell you something.” She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. Her hands shook a little, and he glanced down at them.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, almost afraid of what she was about to say.

An ironic smile crossed her face. “I never thought I would tell you this.” Opening her eyes, she looked intently into his. “But I have to. I can’t do this anymore, Zerek. You need to know that...”

Jon Wasik

There was a bright flash from downriver, near their landing, bright enough that even Laira noticed it and turned around to look. A metallic clang reverberated up the canal.

“What in the name of the Six?” he mumbled, moving to the edge of the road and peering over the railing with Laira.

A horrible dread filled his heart when he saw what had happened. The iron grating that covered the mouth of the river was red hot and melting, and several pieces of metal had already exploded into the canal. Through the freshly-made hole in the grating streamed his nightmares. His nemeses. The one thing he hoped never to see again in all of his life.

“Orcs,” he said quietly.

And one of them immediately spotted Zerek and Laira. Its darksteel armor made its body difficult to see in the darkness, but he could see its pale, mottled face easily, and it sneered at him.

“Orcs!” he called, looking back into the city, only to realize the city was asleep. “ORCS!”

Now all of the monsters saw him, and he realized he had just sealed their fate.

“Run!” Laira grabbed his hand again and pulled him along.

Even before they left the edge of the river, he saw one of the terrible beasts climb up over the edge of the canal wall. Without another thought, they ran for their lives.

Amaya’s heart raced, until she heard the metallic clang. The couple she’d seen earlier were close to the wall and had stopped, but now they peaked over the edge. Even before the young boy shouted “Orcs!” she knew what it was. Reaching for her sword-

Her heart skipped a beat. She didn’t have her sword!

The young couple ran towards her, as fast as they could, but one of the orcs was already over the edge and charging towards them, faster than they could possibly outrun. With no sword, she could

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

only fall back on the steel dagger she had bought after her release from prison, which she pulled from the sheath on the outside of her right boot.

She quickly charged the blade with magic, though with so small of a blade, it could not hold much of a charge. Willing as much power as she could into it, she pointed it straight up, and loosed a bright red flare high into the sky. A warning flare. An alarm for all of the guards.

With at least that accomplished, she ran towards the couple. But she was too late, the orc had caught up and grabbed the girls flowing cloak, bring her to a sudden stop with a gag as the cloak caught her neck.

“Laira!” the boy shouted, pulling a dagger of his own. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she wished she could run faster. The boy stabbed at the orc, but it used its sword-arm to deflect the blade with ease. The boy was undaunted, ducking beneath a swing of the orc’s weapon, and then taking that moment to step in, his rudimentary training apparent in how he moved his feet. Before the orc could react, the boy jabbed the long blade deep into its armpit, the weakest point in most plate armor.

The orc roared in surprise, and then elbowed the boy in the head so hard that he sprawled to the ground in a daze.

Amaya was almost to them by now. The orc turned his attention to the girl, but she was back on her feet and spun around, so fast that the ragged cloak tore free. She had a dagger of her own, and like a dancer, she dodged several attempts by the orc to take her head off, until she was so far inside of his defenses that she leapt up and buried the dagger deep into its throat.

Coming to a stop only a few feet away, she watched as the orc pulled the dagger out. The beast dropped his sword so that he could clutch at his throat, blood oozing through his fingers as he fell backwards.

Stunned that the two were not so helpless or defenseless, Amaya smirked. “Nicely done!”

The girl spun around, looked Amaya up and down, and then turned to the boy, helping him stand up.

But they had no time to celebrate their victory. More orcs were already over the edge of the canal wall and were charging at them. Including a very large one. Thankfully neither the large one nor most of the other two dozen that had climbed up focused on them. Explosions rocked the city as they fired the full force of their magic into the storefronts and homes that lined the riverfront.

“Go, get out of here,” she shouted, pushing past the two to stand between them and the three orcs charging their way. She noticed more flashes to her left, and saw a few orcs had gone into the farmland on the other side of the river, and were blasting away at crops and farm houses.

Cursing the gods, Amaya charged her dagger up again, and then fired as powerful a blast as she could at the lead charging orc. The blast of magic bounced off of its enchanted armor, and did little more than slow it down.

Without her armor to help her focus her shield magic, she was vulnerable, and facing three darksteel orcs, who were notoriously more intelligent and skilled than their normal Wastelands ilk, she was dead.

But she wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Turning to the anger she had felt only moments ago, she shouted, “Come on, then!” and leapt right into the oncoming storm.

Flashes of horrors past. Elina facing off against three orcs. Zerek helpless as he watched. He managed to kill one, but the other two... Elina's look of surprise and shock as she and the last orc killed each other. The light in her eyes fading as she pleaded with him to find someone, to warn that the orcs were back. Her empty body, the fire of her soul gone.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

As the mysterious woman charged the oncoming orcs with an enraged battle cry, he knew he couldn't stand by and watch it happen all over again. He looked at Laira, who looked back at him in fear and with a clear desire to run. "Go," he simply said. And without another word, he charged in behind the woman.

"Zerek, no!"

The woman was a Mage, and she used her magical shield to help her deflect the first blows of the orcs. They focused only on her, an obvious threat with her magic, and within moments she was surrounded. Presenting an orc's back to Zerek.

The orc was at least twice his size in bulk, and the armor gave it a more intimidating profile, but that just meant he was able to leap onto his back, climb up, and try to jab Elina's dagger into the back of its neck. It didn't penetrate enough to kill the monster, but it was enough to make it arch back and cry out in pain and surprise.

The orc spun around, throwing Zerek down so hard that he skidded up against a shop, whose storefront suddenly exploded from a magical blast. Wood splinters and glass rained down on him, some of the glass cutting at his face and hands, tearing his cloak.

When the debris stopped raining down, he pushed up, pain searing his left hand from a piece of glass cutting him.

Looking back to the battle, he saw Amaya was somehow holding off the other two orcs. But the one he'd attacked was facing him, its axe glowing with a magical charge. Time stopped for a moment, and he wondered if this was when he would finally see his father, see Elina...see his mother once again.

As the orc prepared to release its powers upon him, Laira suddenly was there, holding the first fallen orc's sword in her hand. "Hey!" she shouted.

The orc turned to look at her, instinctively bringing its axe up to block her blow. But her blow did not connect with its weapon. She cut its hand off!

Roaring in pain, the orc used its other hand to swipe her aside. “NO!” Zerek charged forward, not caring that the orc flailed about. He ducked under its swinging arm, and tried to swipe at its throat, but missed. It noticed him, and tried to bash him, but he had learned how to dodge attacks well, thanks to his recent training.

The orc tried to swat down on him like a fly, palm-open, so Zerek jabbed the blade up, straight through its gloved hand, the point splintering through the darksteel from inside. The force still brought him down to his knees. Roaring in pain, the orc yanked back, tearing the dagger out of Zerek’s hand, now stuck in its only remaining hand.

Laira was back on her feet now. She was stronger than she looked, but he still didn’t think she had the muscle to penetrate the orc’s armor. So she instead used its size against it. Swinging low, she caught the back of the orc’s knees, another weak spot in its armor, and cut the tendons and muscles through the bit of leather that protected that part.

Once again the orc roared in pain, and it fell backwards. Laira planted the pommel of the sword into the ground, ducking down low and holding on with both hands. The orc impaled itself upon the blade, its weight carrying the point through its armor.

The scene seemed surreal at first, Laira nearly crushed under its weight, the tip of a blackened steel blade pointing through the chest of the orc. It writhed a little, but soon fell silent and still.

Rushing forward, Zerek helped push the orc off to the side, the blade now stuck. Laira stood up and huffed, glaring down at the monster. “Gods they stink,” she waved her hand in front of her nose.

Laughing despite himself, Zerek wrapped his arms around her in a quick hug. Until he remembered the mysterious woman. He pulled away from Laira and looked down the street, to see Amaya just finishing off the second of the two orcs. The rest of the attacking horde had moved further into the city. Suddenly an ear-splitting roar broke into the carnage of the night. Moments later, the enemy soldiers began streaming back towards the river.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

Blasts of magic followed them. Zerek smiled when he realized what it meant.

They were no longer fighting alone.

Then his heart skipped a beat when the giant orc that led the others barreled out of one alley, and came face to face with Amaya.

The invasion had gone better than Arkad had hoped, despite the initial setback of two children spotting them and shouting an alarm. They had damaged or destroyed several buildings and, while the children and another woman were handled by some of his men, he led his troops deeper into the city.

They weren't going to go too far, they couldn't. They needed to have ready access to their only escape route. But the damage was exhilarating, and as he blasted fire into a two story building, he reveled in the screams of horror and pain he heard come from within.

Several of the humans streamed into the street from the ruckus, many armed, but none were soldiers or Warriors as far as he could tell. One literally ran right into him while trying to flee a burning building. Arkad shoved him away, and swung his heavy two-sided axe, taking the man's head off with ease.

Suddenly a blast of magic shot out at him, slamming into his armor and eliciting a grunt of pain from him. Looking down the smaller side-street he was thrashing his way through, he saw half a dozen humans charging towards him and his soldiers, too well armed to be regular citizens.

That was it, then. The human reinforcements were coming. They had arrived faster than he had hoped, but the damage they had inflicted was good enough. Taking in a deep breath, he roared out the call to retreat. Then, with barely a thought, he swung his axe and unleashed a wave of fire at the charging Warriors.

Their leader was the Mage that had just attacked him, and he put up a shield to deflect the worst of Arkad's fire, but it still gave them pause. Pause enough for him to close the distance between

them in moments, and to tear through them like they were nothing. His sheer size and strength gave him an advantage over them, and as his axe burst through the Mage's magic shield and embedded into his shoulder, his opponent fell.

The others were not Mages, and took even less effort for him to dispatch.

More were coming down the street, and he knew he could not fight them all off. He turned and ran after his retreating brethren, right back out onto the riverside street. And next to the unarmed woman.

She had picked up one of his fallen kin's darksteel axes and held it in her hand. That was when he also felt the spark of magic in her. She wasn't so defenseless after all.

For a moment, they stared at each other, his heart pounding, the blood lust almost making him tear right through her. Until they heard the sound of footsteps running towards them. They both looked up-river, and saw the two kids from earlier running towards them.

"No!" the Mage shouted, moving to place herself between the kids and Arkad.

He was almost incensed to attack, especially when he felt the Mage's powers flare. But then he realized it had flared because she had put up a defensive shield. She wasn't preparing to attack, she just wanted to keep the children safe.

They stopped behind her, both of them armed with daggers, ready to fight. Children, fighting orcs.

Suddenly he felt his face grow cold. An image of his home flashed through his mind. A terrifying army slaughtering orcs wholesale. Slaughtering children.

"No," he grumbled. "No more."

Slowly he lowered his axe, and the Mage frowned at him. Once more, they simply stared at each other, neither speaking, neither moving. She, like him, was just trying to protect her people.

The Orc War Campaigns – Crossroads

“General!” he heard Kilack shout for him from the river. He looked over towards his friend, and then down the road at more charging soldiers.

And he saw the carnage they had wrought on the city. At the buildings they had destroyed. The homes they had destroyed.

Homes with children.

Looking again at the Mage, he bowed his head at her, and then ran for the river, leaping over the edge and splashing knee-deep into the waters. His boots sank into the mud, but he was undaunted, and he quickly made his way down river to the melted grate, now cooled by the water and the cold night air.

All of the other survivors were out, so only Kilack waited for him. They made their way through the grating, and climbed up the docks on the other side, no longer caring about stealth. As quickly as they could, they ran for the cover of the forest. Enchanted crossbow bolts seared past their heads as they fled.

His blood lust was dead. And he wondered if it would ever come back. His rage at losing his friends, at seeing orc children slaughtered before his eyes, unable to stop it... The rage was gone now. Finally gone. Replaced by a deep sadness that threatened to consume him.

In that moment, he knew he could never see it happen again. Never watch children be slaughtered again. Never take part in their deaths.

Not even human children.