

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 5 “The Siege of Valaras”

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The Orc War Campaigns – The Siege of Valaras

The sun had not yet fallen behind the Ilari Mountains at Arkad's back when they cleared the tree line. They found a vast clearing marked only by thousands of tree stumps, echoes of the great woods that once reached all the way to Valaras.

Their timing was perfect, even if they had arrived far sooner than he had planned for. The sun helped conceal their approach, and even once they reached the range of enemy archers and Mages, their adversaries would still be blinded by the light.

If they reached the city walls fast enough. "Faster!" he shouted, the city still miles away. Then he let out a battle roar that surged his troops ahead.

They had a clear line of sight to the farms ahead, the tree stumps closer to the city having long been cleared out for fresh new farmland.

He knew of no two-legged species that could run as fast as orcs, so he felt confident. Confident that they could tear through the farmlands, killing any who stood in their way, and reach the city walls before the sun completely fell behind the peaks.

This was their time. This was their victory.

It wasn't long before his group reached the first farm. It was surrounded by fields of grain, but just off to his right he saw a small stable. Several humans streamed out from the house to his left, running desperately for the safety of the city walls, still so far away.

Someone in the stable must have seen them coming - a moment later two humans broke out and raced upon the backs of their horses towards the city. That was fine. Even if they didn't catch them, the cowards would perish soon enough.

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He reached the house, and reveled in the power he wielded in his enchanted axe. He pointed the head of his axe at the house and willed the tantalizingly powerful energy within to stream forth in a concentrated burst. The house instantly exploded in a fiery death, and he found himself roaring in cheer.

To his right, Kilack used his own enchanted weapon to pelt the stables with shards of ice, tearing it to pieces and slaughtering the animals that remained inside.

Arkad wanted to lead the charge forward again, but they had to investigate any potential secret tunnel in the farm he had just destroyed. While the house was badly damaged, its frame remained intact and the fire was far too hot to enter. He looked to another of his orcs wielding a dark-steel mace, the silent command clear. The orc swung his mace, releasing an explosive wave of arcane energy that obliterated the failing structure and scattered its burning carcass out into the fields.

He and his group entered the remaining hulk of the house, pieces of the frame and chimney still intact, all burning. He felt the heat all around him, and many of the flames licked at his armor, rising even his enchanted armor's temperature. He was used to heat, in fact he missed it, and he was sorely tempted to remain a moment.

It was for naught, as they found no signs of a hidden passage in the building's carcass, nor did Kilack find one in the stable. That would leave it up to one of other groups. So with another battle roar, he led the charge to Valaras.

It was a calculated risk, breaking the line to investigate the farmhouses, barns, and stables. But he smiled in satisfaction when he noticed one group, off to his left, disappear into the ground. They had found it, and as he expected, it was one of the most outlying farms.

His heartbeat thundered in his ears as they drew closer and closer to the city. The bells were ringing, horns were wailing, probably since long before he could hear them above his own pounding pulse. The humans knew they were coming, and would be prepared.

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Not prepared enough, he thought. This would be the shortest siege in history, he was sure of it.

With renewed excitement and bloodlust, he surged forward, leading the charge for his people, for his entire species. This was their chance. This was his destiny.

Everything became a blur, moments in time that passed in a blink. He covered the miles faster than even he thought possible. Those who did not stop to investigate or destroy farms made it first, as waves of energy bolted out from the city wall. Mages attacked his people, and many were killed before they could even reach the wall. Those few of his kin who wore the dark-steel armor were fortunate enough not to be killed outright, but it hampered their advance.

However, the humans were far outnumbered, and their wall offered little protection. Arcane and elemental energy streamed forth to converge on the top of the wall, burning, freezing, obliterating, *destroying* the enemy, decimating their numbers before he reached their wall.

With the bloodlust ever increasing, he willed the power of his weapon to leap from the darkened blade and burst forth upon the wall. Elation filled his veins when two of the humans were engulfed by his attack, screaming in their demise and falling back into the city.

Orc archers added their own assault to the mix. Human Mages threw up shields to try to protect themselves from the onslaught, to protect the city from errant attacks. They gave up their attack against the orcs, and focused only on protection.

When he finally could touch the wall, his madness began to wane, the bloodlust fading under strained control. Control he had lost in those minutes on the fields.

Taking in deep breaths, his nostrils burning with the smell of charred flesh, he calmed himself as best he could. His anger made him useless to his people. Flashes of his own past failures echoed in his mind, and threatened to anger him further, but he pushed the images of burning homes and his kin on their knees out of his mind.

This was their moment. He could not lose it.

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Kilack soon joined him at the wall. The guardians above him were too busy defending to pay attention to what went on below their field of view and did not attempt to attack them. Together they looked back out into the fields and saw the qrishag lumbering their way towards the city, still miles away. Did the humans even notice them yet, or were they too focused on the closer, more immediate threat?

“The assault proceeds well, General,” Kilack smiled, his fangs and the red of his gums making him look amazingly terrifying. “The humans were completely underprepared for us.”

Arkad wanted to celebrate with his companion, but something was amiss. Something horrible. “Where are the Wizards?” he asked. “Have you seen any Wizards amongst those upon the wall?”

His smile fading, Kilack looked around, looked up, and shook his head. “No. Not one.”

A dark pit began to form in his stomach. “We cannot wait for the qrishag,” he growled. He finally took in his surroundings well enough to get his bearings, and realized he was only a short distance north of the southern entrance.

“Gather as many darksteel brothers as you can,” he placed a hand on Kilack’s shoulder. “Quickly. We must use our powers to try to breach the doors now.”

Kilack obeyed without question, and drew himself out from under Arkad’s heavy hand to leave the wall and begin issuing orders to their soldiers. Tightening his grip on the axe, Arkad began lumbering south along the wall. Most of the orcs stayed far enough back that they could help keep up the assault. Every common soldier, whether they had archery skills or not, had come with at least rudimentary bows and arrows for the initial phase of the attack.

He ordered the few dark-steel-clad soldiers he could find to follow him, knowing the risk he took. Arrows could not last forever, but the enchantments could. If so many hadn’t been killed in that attack upon Archanon only two months ago...

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Suddenly a blast of magic smashed into a cluster of three orcs before him, and he looked up to see a Mage had wisely decided to peak over the battlements and unleash an attack upon them. Arkad, along with the two other darksteel orcs behind him, all lashed out with their enchanted weapons. The Mage ducked behind the battlements, and if their return fire did not slaughter the Mage, he was too frightened to glance over again.

After several minutes and a handful of other such attacks, Arkad had made his way to the southern entrance. This section was much more heavily guarded. The wall intentionally was recessed to give those upon it more room to focus on defending it, and they used this to great effect. None of his orcs had made it into that deadly zone, not alive.

His anger flared greater with every orc loss, and he struggled in desperation to control his rage. To keep the memories at bay. To not let fury overcome his intellect.

The humans were smart. Mages kept shields up, and the few wielding crossbows ducked between them to fire a bolt, then duck back to reload. There were enough of both that little could be done.

Before long, Kilack joined him, bringing nearly a dozen dark-steel orcs with him. With the couple Arkad had found, he thought it would be enough. “Bring weapons to bear upon the defenders,” he shouted, raising his double axe and pointing the tip of one blade at a Mage. “Do not stop until none remain upon the battlements.”

With a battle roar, he unleashed the fiery power contained within the core of his weapon. Again, and again, and again, he let loose the power, as did his soldiers. The Mages’ shields held, at first, and only because of their combined strength.

But the orcs had numbers, and greater power within their weapons. Arkad did not know if it had been Klaralin or some other powerful being that had enchanted their weapons and armor, but he

silently thanked them as he watched the shields fail, and the Mages either duck out of the way, or suffer the terrible consequences.

When there were few left upon the battlements, he looked over the sea of orc heads as they began to surge forward.

“No!” he bellowed, his soldiers stopping their advance at once. Flanked on either side by several of their elite, dark-steel brethren, he could only imagine how terrifying he looked to the common, unrefined, uncivilized orcs they had brought up from the Wastelands. “Move,” he shouted, waving his hand for them to part.

In seconds, the way was clear, the heavy ironwood doors directly in front of them.

Without giving the order, Arkad led the attack, marching forward and launching the most powerful fire attacks he could at the door. His kin joined him, and the space between the battlements became a torrent of magic. Fire blew against the door, ice shattered against it, arcane blasted it.

Ironwood was a special kind of wood, and its special properties was why they had sent a contingent of orcs into those woods to try to procure some. When first cut from their roots, the wood of those trees were completely normal, bendable, burnable, breakable. But when tempered in the right kind of heat and infused with the kind of arcane energy all Mages wielded, the wood became as hard as iron.

But even iron could not withstand the intensity of their unstoppable attack. It took well over a minute, but by the time they entered the cul-de-sac between the battlements, the doors clearly bent inward, and moments later, they burst, the magical attacks spilling into the city and tearing apart the buildings beyond.

None of the defenders had been stupid enough to stand behind the doors, but he knew they stood to the sides, ready to attack the orcs the moment they entered.

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He cried out their success in a terrifying roar, calling all of his soldiers who could hear to the entrance. Those not clad in dark-steel near them began to stream past, their bloodlust blinding them to strategy, their excitement overcoming their intellect. He sneered at them, and almost ordered them to stop, but knew their numbers were too great, and the enemy would fall before the wave of his kin.

The enemy walls had been breached. The siege was over.

The invasion had begun.

It happened fast, faster than Amaya could have imagined. She swore the bells and horns had sounded only minutes ago, but by the time she had left the Forge District and made her way to the western side of the city, the orcs had made it to the wall.

With her team right behind her, minus Nia who had left to report the orc attack, they had run to the wall near the southern entrance. This brought them the closest to the Warriors' Guild complex, and she knew they would need to protect it at all costs.

As they approached one of the many staircases that led up to the battlements on the wall, they all came to a sliding stop as there was a sudden explosion of magical energy that assaulted the defending Warriors and soldiers protecting the gate. Parts of the battlements crumbled against the onslaught, the walls never having received the enchantments that Archanon had to protect them.

A city soldier flew off of the wall and landed a dozen feet away from Amaya and her team.

She immediately knew what was happening, and what they needed to do.

"Elic, Idalia, Nerina, get on the other side of the doors." They immediately moved without question, and she added, "Stay clear of the doors."

The southwestern entrance was like any other entrance to a city, and led into an open square, giving room to defend against any attackers. Usually defenders had time to setup additional defenses,

but for the orcs to already be here, she realized they had been given little warning, and there were no other battlements in the square.

Looking at the nearest stairs up to the wall, she saw that there would be plenty of room for an extra body at the top of those stairs without impeding troop movements. “Peren, get up there,” she pointed. “Do not expose yourself to the other side, wait for them to breach into the square. The rest of you, stay with me.”

More Warriors arrived, led by Commander Argus. He took one look at Amaya’s troop formations, looked up at the battlements where streams of magic flew overhead, and grimaced. Without saying a word to acknowledge her quick thinking, he began issuing orders for his troops to bracket the entrance.

“Commander,” she nodded to him as he came up beside her to await the inevitable.

“Lieutenant,” he responded without looking at her.

The assault finally began against the ironwood doors. The constant pounding, the doors vibrating, pushing further and further inward like a steady war drum, it almost terrified her. But she had no time for terror. None of them did.

“I never expected to defend this city against orcs,” Argus stated with an almost casual voice. She barely caught the hint of anger in his voice.

Thinking back to her encounter with Trebor, she realized that it hadn’t been his anger or his agenda that had allowed him to inspire others to take the Forge District by force. It was their fear. Fear of everything that had changed in the past few months.

Maybe change has become the new normal, she thought to herself. Maybe we either adapt to the change, or we get run over by it.

Realizing what they were about to face, even if she hadn’t looked over the wall to see how large of a force was pitted against them, she shuddered and looked at the Commander. “I need you to know,

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should something happen to me.” She paused and waited, until he looked at her. “Trebor won’t be a problem anymore. Or at least, his group won’t.” It wasn’t entirely a lie, those who followed Trebor hadn’t outwardly renounced him. But she had seen the look upon their faces as he admitted to her his motives.

Argus made little effort to hide his surprise, and in that moment, his demeanor towards her changed forever. “Perhaps I was wrong about you.”

She did not take any comfort in his words, did not revel in his admission. She couldn’t. There was too much pain behind her, and too much work ahead of her.

The doors were bending inward around the central bar that braced them, the iron bar itself groaning and bending and creaking, threatening to give way.

“We only need to hold them off long enough,” Argus stared at the doors as he spoke.

“I know,” she nodded. “Reinforcements will be coming soon.”

And then the doors breached, a flood of magic following it in, shooting between the two flanks to smash against the buildings at the far end of the square, destroying their walls and laying waste to anything inside.

The stream of magic continued only for a short time, and then ceased. It was soon followed by a terrifying roar that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up on end. What monster had made such a terrible roar?

Only a few moments later, the orcs streamed in. The moment the first had stepped through, clad in scaly leather armor and wielding a haphazardly crafted sword, Peren’s first loosed arrow struck it right in its neck, catching it off guard.

With trained ease, Amaya charged her blade with ethereal magic, her skin tingling as she extended her will into the cold, sky-blue steel. More orcs streamed in, tall, muscular creatures that she had become too familiar with in the past month.

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Drawing her sword up beside her, making the blade parallel to the ground, she thrust it forward and willed the arcane power within the blade out. It flowed easily and instantly along the etched markings in the flat of her blade, gathered in the point, and shot out like an impossibly fast arrow. It caught one orc square in the chest and threw him back into his following companions like a sledge hammer. Every Mage in the defenders did the same thing, destroying the front ranks of the orcs in an instant.

But more kept coming, streaming through the entrance like a horde of ants issuing forth from their mound. She charged again, fired again, managed to do so a total of four times before the first orc was upon her and the Commander.

In that moment, chaos reigned. The orcs were strong, powerful, but not well protected or trained. Amaya used a combination of magical shields, sword play, and charging her blade to give it strength against their weapons and armor, and cut through three in a matter of seconds.

But the stream of enemies did not end, and very shortly into the battle, orcs clad in the darkened steel armor made their way in. As she had noticed in previous battles, they fought smarter, were stronger, and their armor and weapons were reinforced with magical enchantments.

She tried to make her way to the nearest one, cutting through the lesser orcs as she went. Her target was focused on others, not her. He was focused on Peren.

Wielding a blackened sword, he pointed it up at Peren, and she felt the surge of magic. "Peren, down!" Amaya shouted.

Somehow he heard her above the roar of battle and jumped away from the stairs, towards the other side of the wall, as a blast of lightning shot out of the sword's tip. It missed Peren, barely, and lanced into the sky.

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Amaya's distraction was enough to allow another orc to get in past her sword, and its mace connected with her arcane shield, softening the blow enough that she wasn't wounded, but it still hurt when it clanged off of her shoulder plate.

The pain and anger fueled her, and she jabbed her sword straight into the orc, using the magic she had pre-charged it with to force her blade completely through her opponent. The blade had a clear shot at the darkened steel orc, and she let loose what power was left in the blade.

But another orc had been pushed in the way, and the blast caught it in its shoulder instead, spinning it around until it crashed to the ground.

It had been enough to get the big orc's attention. It looked straight at her, and pointed its sword at her.

Pulling her weapon free of the slain enemy, she ducked behind her dead opponent, who slammed into her when the blast of lightning magic immolated one side of it. She could smell the biting stink of ozone and burnt flesh. Falling back to one knee, she pushed the corpse aside, and gathered her powers into the strongest shield she could between her and her newest enemy.

Another blast of lightning struck her shield, and her shield held, but only barely, and she felt herself instantly grow weary and disoriented. She had no choice but to charge at him, or his next blast would tear through her shield and cook her in her armor.

Springing forward, she shouted her challenge at the orc. He smiled and pulled back into a defensive stance, keeping his sword between them. Raising her weapon above her head, she brought it down hard, the orc pivoting to deflect her blow. But training had taught her long ago not to put all of her strength into such an attack, and instead of deflecting her and throwing her off balance, she pulled her weapon back at the moment of impact, and jumped back so that the orc's return attack missed her.

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Before she could even think about attacking again, Vin leapt up onto the orc's back, daggers in hand, and used both to slice open the orc's throat. The monster dropped his weapon and clutched at his throat. He fell to his knees, Vin riding on his back as he crashed.

The orc glared at Amaya, shock at his defeat evident in his eyes, and then he fell over face-first.

A lesser orc tried to attack her as she watched, but she saw it coming, deflected its stone axe, and cut its back open from upper left to lower right, severing its spine.

"Thanks, Vin," she huffed, the battle already wearing heavily upon her. They had not been involved in a pitched fight like this yet. All of their previous assignments had been attacks upon smaller groups of orcs. Attacks they had planned ahead for, and executed nearly flawlessly. This was the first time they defended against an overwhelming enemy.

But in that moment, everything changed. From over the wall, she heard in the distance countless horns sounding. One she recognized instantly as the deep, throaty horn of Tal. Another she recognized as the higher-pitched horn of their ally, Erien. The others she had never heard before, but she knew what it meant.

The horns of the Allied Forces. The Wizards had come through on their promises. Out there, in the fields, the combined armies of all four kingdoms had arrived and surrounded the attacking enemy.

Orcs everywhere suddenly stopped in their assault, and time seemed to stand still for a moment. Even the defenders ceased battle and looked around in excited hope. Then came several roars from over the side of the wall, different from the triumphant roar that had initiated the invasion of Valaras. Fearful.

It must have been an order to regroup, for every single orc turned tail and began to stream back out of the city.

The defenders cheered, Amaya with them. Commander Argus gave the next order, "Make safe the city!"

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As the last of the orcs streamed through the destroyed doors, a line of his Warriors formed up at the entrance, and used their powers to erect a line of shields that protected them all. More Warriors and city soldiers began climbing the stairs to the wall to help incur more casualties in the retreating orcs.

Victory was theirs!

The city would be theirs, Arkad knew it now. His army was an endless, unstoppable stream of terror that flowed through the gates, and it would only be a matter of time before they pushed past the defenders. Even if they didn't, the unit that had found the hidden tunnel would stream forth from within the city to attack the enemy from behind.

He smiled as he realized they would not need the qrishags. The giant, lumbering beasts would find no doors needing to be breached. At most, they would need them to help hold the city against counterattacks.

With a fanged smile, Arkad brandished his axe and decided it was time to join the troops. He lumbered forward into the stream of orcs, standing far above his kin, able to see into the square beyond, at the chaos of the defenders falling back, further and further, as more orcs entered.

And then the first horn sounded. A deep, throaty howl that he almost mistook for a qrishag bellow in the chaos of the battle. That thought was soon dispelled when three other distinct horns rang out.

All of them from the west.

He and the stream of orcs came to a sudden stop, and all turned towards the mountains. The sun was just falling behind the cliffs, only a sliver of glinting light still peaked from behind them. It did nothing to hide the new arrivals.

An army of humans stretched from north to south, completely surrounding them. Their army was just far enough out that they contained the still-advancing qrishags. Countless shafts of blue-white

light dotted the enemy line, from which more troops emerged, some mounted on horses, others on foot, all led by Wizards.

There were more Warriors and soldiers in their ranks than he thought existed on Halarite. All clad in gleaming, brand new armor, wielding glinting steel swords, axes, maces, and shields.

The last spark of the sun died behind the mountains, casting the city in shadow. That did nothing to dispel the sinking sensation in his stomach. "Impossible," he whispered. How could they have gathered such a force against them so quickly, even with Wizards?

As lessons long ago taught passed through his mind, he felt his face grow warm and his hands numb. *Never underestimate your enemy*, he had once been taught. *Always assume the worst, and you will never be caught by surprise.*

He had committed the worst sin any general could. And it was about to cost him everything.

"No," he growled. "NO!" With his stomach turning in disgust and hatred, he roared out the call to retreat. "To the desert!" he shouted at those closest to him. "Retreat to the other side of the city, make for the desert and make for the Wastelands!"

Then he looked around for his second in command. They could not all escape if the enemy overran them, and there were still orcs running with the qrishags. "Kilack!"

His most trusted friend was at his side in moments, "General!"

Grasping his friend's shoulder tightly, he looked intently at him. "We have to give them time to escape. We have to turn the qrishags around, and I need your help. Where is the rest of our unit?"

As he looked around, Kilack scowled, "All of the Wasteland orcs are fleeing."

That was what he had ordered, and he even if they were motivated by fear, he was glad that the Wasteland rabble followed his order without question. However, to his relief, many dark-steel orcs began to gather around him. They were fearless, and always loyal first to their general.

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He began shoving his way through the lesser rabble towards the now-advancing enemy. “Spread out, tell those lieutenants to turn around and fight!” With a roar, he cleared the way in front of him, and he and the remaining dark-steel commanders took off at a run, as fast as their charge to the city had been.

Arkad bellowed out another roar, a command to the qrishag unit directly ahead of him to turn around, but they were still a mile out, and his roar could not be heard above the noise of battle.

It was then that the Wizards let loose their first attacks against the qrishags. Bolts of lightning, streams of fire, shards of ice, all loosed at once upon the lumbering beasts that still had not turned around.

Many orcs were struck down in that first salvo, but there were dark-steel among them, and they used their enchanted armor to absorb as much of the initial attack as they could. They countered with everything they had, sending out salvos of their own elemental and arcane attacks, all of which vanished harmlessly against the Wizards’ shields.

As Arkad and the others broke completely free of the Wastelands orcs, his companions spread out and began to run down the line, roaring their commands. Whether or not they were heard, the unit commanders must have seen them charging, and must have realized what they intended. The qrishags began to turn around, and within moments, began sprinting.

The giant beasts could run faster than even the orcs, when necessary, but only for very short distances. This must have surprised the attackers, for there was a sudden lull in their stream of elemental attacks.

Off to Arkad’s left, he saw the enemy cavalry break off and begin to run south, no doubt to circumvent the battle and attack the escaping orcs. He grit his teeth and clenched his fists, frustrated that there was nothing further he could do for his troops. Their only chance would be in the sands of the desert, where he hoped their horses were ill prepared for the shifting sands on the dunes.

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Turning back to the battle at hand, his grimace turned into a face of elation. The qrishags had reached the Wizards' shields, and even with all of their power, their shields failed against the salvo of enchanted attacks and the physical power of the beasts.

His heart pounded harder, and for the first time that day, sweat began to bead his forehead. He was beginning to tire, and he imagined that the rest of his dark-steel troops felt the same. It was worth it, however, as they were now moments away from catching up to the intense battle.

The world before him exploded in magic, in clashes of steel, in roars, cries, shouts. The human Mages and Wizards focused their powers on the attacking qrishags, and the first one fell before it ever reached the first human. The others, however, plowed right through the enemy ranks, impaling with their horns, trampling, knocking over. The orcs behind them fell upon the enemy ranks with a brutality that rivaled anything he had previously seen.

Bloodlust began to take over Arkad's senses again. He smelled the rage in the air, felt the frustration in his veins. They had taken his victory. The closer he drew to the new front line, the worse his vision hazed, and the greater his murderous intent became.

Never again. He had sworn never again to watch his people fall, but the humans had taken his one and only chance at victory away from him. Tightening his grip on his axe, he surged forward. It didn't matter if they won or lost now, he just wanted them to pay.

As the battle unfolded before him, he roared, a terrifying, enraged cry of pain, anger, and intent. Even his own kin were startled by it.

And then he was upon them. Leaping into the air as high as his adrenaline-fueled muscles would push him, he brought down his axe on his first victim, splitting him down his left shoulder, the heat of Arkad's enchanted weapon helping cut through the steel chain and plate armor.

From there he went to the next human, a Mage, and let loose upon her a wave of fire that her pitiful shield could not defend against.

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It was stupid of him. Enchanted weapons had power of their own, but they still drew upon their wielder for their energy, and he was wasting his in acts of fury. The beads of sweat on his brow turned into streams, but he didn't care. He didn't care how tired he was, how foggy his mind was. He turned to another Mage and cleaved his head off.

Another victim, another Mage, another Warrior, he tore them apart. Even his soldiers began to give him a wide berth, fearful of errant axe swings and bursts of fire.

Then he came upon a pair of Wizards. A young one had defeated him last time, but this time would be different. They were focused on taking down the last qrishag, driving shards of ice into its head as it charged at them. More atrocities. More horror.

So he charged at them with a renewed burst of speed, and roared his challenge. The qrishag crashed to the ground in its final charge, letting loose its own whimper of a roar, and slid to a stop. Just as Arkad was upon them, the Wizards began to turn. The first didn't stand a chance, never saw the axe blade coming, and she fell in a heartbeat.

But the other, a much older looking woman, blasted him with an arcane blast, the impact of which knocked the air from his lungs and threw him back two dozen feet. Skidding to a stop, Arkad was grateful for the enchanted armor he wore, since it had likely absorbed some of the magic and saved his life.

Grunting and groaning, Arkad slowly stood up and faced his opponent. She wore emerald robes with considerable gold embroidery. Her dark wooden staff was a prim and pristine dark brown rod with a forest-green emerald at the top, an emerald that she now pointed straight at his face.

Without thinking, he swung his axe at her and let loose the most powerful blast of fire he could manage, but she threw up a shield to absorb it entirely. She was temporarily blinded by the wall of fire, so he pushed off of his knees and charged at her, swinging his axe with all of his strength.

She was fast, and powerful, and with a flick of her staff, he was flung to the side, crashing into the corpses of two of his kinsmen.

As strong as his rage was, as badly as he wanted to tear her limb from limb, he began to realize he could never defeat a Wizard as powerful as she was. His campaign would end at the hands of a frilly little human in simple cloth robes.

Once again, she pointed her staff at him, but did not slaughter him. Not yet. "I know you are their general," she spoke in a gruff, tired-sounding voice. The sounds of battle rang all around them, and she had to shout to be heard. "I know you command them all. You can end this!"

He snarled at her and began to pick himself up. She kept her staff trained on him, brandishing it warningly like it could ever hold him back. "You have defeated us here," he growled, "but there are more of us than you know."

She raised an eyebrow, "I assume you refer to your forces deployed to the west? Bound for Saran?"

Stopping short of charging her, he felt his face slacken. Valaras had been their key target, but it wasn't their only target. It wasn't their only goal in the war.

Looking around at the battlefield, she asked, "Do you really believe this represents the combined forces of the four kingdoms? Even now, half of the Allied troops are engaged in battle with your other army, and they are winning." The Wizard stared at him intently, her eyes pleading. "No more death. No more carnage. You are their general. You can stop this." Her words were passionate and moving, beginning to calm his blood lust just enough for his rational mind to completely take over.

They were defeated, and for a moment he almost wanted to surrender to her. Almost.

But then what? He had seen what the humans had reduced his kin in the Wastelands to. He had seen how a once proud, strong race had been reduced to shambles, to living like animals. Treat a person like an animal long enough, and that's what they become.

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If they surrendered, he had no doubt it would continue. Never trust a human. Never trust *these* humans. Never surrender.

“Never,” he growled.

She looked sullenly at him, but he prepared himself to charge, crouching low so he could spring forward. The Wizard gripped her staff with both hands, ready to strike him down. He knew he couldn’t get past her powers, could never defeat her.

Not alone, anyway.

With the chaos of the battle around them, she never saw them coming. Orcs from further afield, charging into the fray from behind the enemy ranks. The one who led the reinforcements was smart, he did not roar a challenge, nor did the two dozen orcs behind him.

At the last possible second, the Wizard turned to face the incoming attack, and she managed to begin erecting a shield, but the leading orc barreled right through it and slammed into her, sending her sprawling to the ground, slamming her head against a fallen Warrior’s steel breastplate. It did not knock her out, not immediately, but she was out of the battle.

Arkad stood up straight and nodded to the young dark-steel orc. “General,” the leader replied. The voice he recognized, belonging to a young orc named Tezarik.

He also recognized the troops from earlier. They had found the hidden tunnel in the farm. “Why did you not attack the city from within?” As grateful as he was for the help, victory still might have been possible had Tezarik succeeded.

“The tunnel was sealed off,” he shook his head, brandishing his dark-steel claymore. “Almost a mile in. We had to turn back.”

Arkad cursed and looked around at the battle raging on the fields. The orcs were being pushed back towards the city wall, where archers and Mages were prepared to finish off his troops. There were no enemies in the immediate area, but it wouldn’t be long before they were seen.

Jon Wasik

Then he felt a small smile creep onto his face as another dark-steel orc appeared from behind the fallen qrishag, clutching a squirming, struggling Warrior by the neck. "Kilack," he breathed. His best friend, his trusted lieutenant. At least he had survived.

Snapping the Warrior's neck, he dropped the body into a crumpled heap, and ran towards them. "General, we should leave, now!"

Grimacing, Arkad looked again upon the battlefield. A unit of Warriors not far away saw them and began charging towards them.

They could stay and fight. Die side by side with the rest of their companions. Or worse, be wounded and captured.

Or...

A wicked, toothy smile stretched across his face. "I know how we can strike back at them." He stared with loathsome anger at the approaching enemies. "I know how we can strike at their heart, remind them of the terror they now face."

It would not bring ultimate victory, but perhaps it would make the humans stop long enough to reconsider them, and lick their own wounds. He looked back at the mountains to the west, and then at Kilack and Tezarik. "Come. We must retreat back into the mountains."

It was not the first time he had ordered a retreat. But it was the most painful. With only the two dozen orcs surrounding them, they did not have to roar their orders. Instead, Arkad led them into a westward run.

He was exhausted, defeated, his spirits in the darkest depths. It was only the thought of the revenge he would bring down upon them that kept him going.

They would retrace their run through the mountains, and return to the south. It would take weeks to backtrack, especially as exhausted as they were, but they would not stop. Once they reached

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the sound end of the mountains, instead of running back into the Wastelands with their tails tucked, they would turn west.

Towards Archanon.

Zerek shivered, wrapping the cloak tighter around himself as he snuck outside of the servant's quarters. The nights were getting colder as fall began to set in. He hated the cold.

It was a fool's errand, he knew it. How in the name of the Six was he going to get past the guards at the gate to the Castle District? How was he going to get into the Guild complex, and climb the tower? It wasn't like he could just go explain it to someone.

That conversation played out in his head. *Hey guys, so I'm supposed to meet this beautiful girl on top of the tower, who just happens to be a thief. You don't mind, do you?*

He'd be tossed out on his butt in an instant.

But he had to see her. Had to find her. Had to prove to her that he was worthy.

With that thought, he drew the hood up on the cloak and stalked off as quietly as he could towards the edge of the wall. There were regular guard patrols in and around the castle, so he knew his best bet would be to cut through the gardens and yards of the rich houses that surrounded the castle grounds.

It was close to midnight, he had departed later than he had intended. Endel had wanted to go with, but Zerek knew that was a bad idea, so he didn't wake the young boy at the appointed time. Some of the other men in the quarters, however, had stayed up later than usual talking.

The cloak he wore was black and he hoped would hide him well in the night. Neither of the moons were full, but they still cast enough light that he would have to be careful. Creeping outside of the castle grounds, he was surprised that there were still lights on in some of the houses. Why would anyone who didn't have to be still be awake at this hour?

Then he realized that *he* was still awake. And he also realized that some servants did most of their work at night in the castle, and he could imagine the same being said for the wealthy. Would any of their servants be outside?

His heart beat faster and faster, and his hands began to shake. This was stupid, he shouldn't be out doing this. What if he was caught? Or worse, what if he ran into muggers again, out there in the dark? He had his dagger, but the encounter in the alley earlier in the day gave him pause.

Standing at the foot of a stone path leading into a small garden, he stopped and stared down at his hands. They were rough hands, miner's hands, calloused and dry. Even only a few weeks since his last shift underground, they still reminded him of what he'd lost.

Suddenly that was all he could think about. His father. Elina. Everyone and everything he'd ever known.

The darkness began to close in around him, and he began to feel terrified. Every noise, every cricket, the rustling of leaves in the breeze, everything startled him. He moved off of the path and fell to his knees beside a bush, his breathing becoming harder. He tried desperately to gasp for breath, tears welling in his eyes.

What was happening to him? What was wrong? Why couldn't he breathe or stand or think?

He wanted to go back, but to what? Where? To the quarters? Where he would live a life without his father, without his friend, without...

A leaf crunched under a footstep, and he whirled around, dagger drawn on pure instinct. A small figure stood in the shadows, stared right at him, unmoving. Was it a demon? A ghost?

His hand shook, the dagger threatening to fall out of his sweaty palms. "W-who are you?"

The shadow stepped into the light, revealing a worried, pale face. "It's me," Endel spoke, raising his hands disarmingly.

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The weight in his chest lifted, and he heaved a sigh of relief, falling back the last few inches onto his behind. “Endel...”

“What’s wrong?” the young boy asked, taking another tentative step closer.

Zerek’s face grew warm, and he shook his head. “I don’t know. No, it’s...it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re white as ash, Zerek,” his friend shook his head. “What’s wrong?”

Glancing at the dagger, Zerek slowly drew in a deep breath, forcing, *willing* his heartbeat to slow down.

Slowly, Endel crouched down in front of him, and looked him in the eyes. Zerek shook his head, gulped down his tears, and began to push himself up. “It’s nothing. Just forget about it, please.” His friend stood up with him, and the concerned look never left his face, but he nodded his assent.

After Zerek sheathed his dagger, he frowned, “What are you doing here?”

“I woke up and saw you’d left without me.” His young friend pouted at him. “Why’d you do that?”

Heaving a sigh, Zerek shook his head, “Because if I get caught, I don’t want you getting in trouble, too.”

“Yeah but I know this city better than you,” Endel narrowed his eyes and folded his arms. “Lots better. Do you even know how you were going to get out of the Castle District?”

Zerek looked west, towards the only entrance he knew of. “Sneak past the guards.”

Endel rolled his eyes, “Yeah, thought so. Come on, there’s more than one way out.”

Without hesitating, Endel took off at a run, his boots clomping in the grass. Zerek looked around for any guards, but none came running to the sounds of Endel’s steps, so he took off after his friend.

They ran through yards and gardens, hopped over stools and leapt over low hedges, until they came to a section of the inner city wall on the north end. They stooped next to a stone statue of...someone. He didn't recognize who it was and he couldn't read the plaque on it in the dark.

From here, they had a perfect view of the stone wall, and of steps that led up to the top of it. Steps for guards, he realized, as there was no doubt a walkway along the top of the wall for the guards to patrol.

Except this was an inner-city wall, and there wasn't a guard in sight.

"Where are the soldiers?" Zerek whispered.

"They usually don't patrol the wall at night," Endel shook his head. "What's the point? If any bad guys make it into the city, the outer wall will be the first to deal with them and sound the alarm."

Zerek nodded, realizing it made sense. He'd learned that the Castle District sat within the original city boundaries, but Archanon had expanded outward thousands of years ago, long before Klaralin. The inner wall was a relic, kept up only out of tradition and most likely to separate the richest from the rest of the city.

They waited for a few minutes longer, just to be sure, until Endel led the way to the stone stairwell. They ascended quickly, ducking low so as not to be seen from a distance. They came to the top landing, glanced down both sides of the walkway, and then Endel led the way to the right, bending low below the level of the turrets.

After only a few hundred yards, they came to a stop, and Endel quickly glanced over the ledge into the rest of the city. "Okay, this is it."

Zerek frowned, and then looked over the ledge himself. There was a narrow road on the other side of the wall, and a series of three-story buildings. "This is what?" he asked.

"We're gonna jump to that building," Endel smiled.

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His heart skipped a beat, and he looked at his friend in bewilderment. “What?!” Again he stood up, this time high enough to look over the edge of the wall. Where they stood was level with the roof across the street, but that also meant it was a three-story fall to the street below. “No way!”

Endel looked at him skeptically. “So you’re supposed to climb up the watch tower at the Guild, but you can’t make this one little jump?”

Once more, Zerek’s face burned red, and he smirked. “Funny.”

Rolling his eyes, Endel stood up and climbed onto the ledge. “Come on, it’s easy. The street is really narrow right here.”

Without any fear or hesitation, Endel crouched, and then leapt the distance with apparent ease. Zerek bolted up to watch, and saw his friend land on the pitched roof with ease, dropping to his hands and knees to steady himself. The roof wasn’t pitched at too steep of an angle, but enough that Zerek feared slipping off and falling to his death.

Once again he looked down at the street below and muttered, “Oh gods...” Someone walked by beneath, completely oblivious to the death-defying acts going on above. Zerek looked up at Endel, who also noticed the passerby, and waved his hand impatiently for Zerek to join him.

He didn’t want to. The drop was too far, the risk too great. But then...then he remembered facing off against an orc in the forest, only minutes after his father had been murdered. He hadn’t cared about the danger then, he only cared about helping Elina.

And he remembered the girl’s amazing, gorgeous face. Her depthless brown eyes. That smile she gave him when she called him ‘lover-boy.’ He wanted to see her again. He *had* to see her again.

Without another thought, he climbed up onto the ledge. It was only a few inches thick, so it was hard to stay balanced, and he suddenly felt his stomach flutter when he almost fell forward.

Not today, he thought. *I’m not giving in to fear today.* For a moment, he closed his eyes, and pictured everything that made him feel courageous. The thief, Elina, his father, the Wizard from the

Allied Council. He grasped the handle of Elina's dagger and drew strength from it, as if her soul inhabited it and flowed into him.

He could do this.

With every ounce of strength he had, he pushed off of the ledge, his eyes flying open as he sailed across the distance. The random passerby was already several houses away. The roof before him seemed to stretch further and further away, as he began to fall downward...

Until his feet made it, right on the very edge of the roof. He fell forward and caught himself with his hands, and in that instant, his spirits soared. He'd done it!

Endel gave a silent cheer, and then helped hold on to him when his left foot slipped off of the edge of the roof.

His stomach sank, but his other foot stayed firm, and he pulled himself further up until he felt safe. He collapsed onto his hands and knees, and then turned and sat down, staring back at the wall he had just leapt from. "I can't believe we just did that," he smiled at his friend.

Rolling his eyes, Endel just crouched next to him and clasped a hand on his shoulder. "I used to do it all the time. You'll get used to it."

Raising an eyebrow, Zerek once more looked back at the wall. Would he get used to it? Was this going to become the new normal for him? If he met this girl, found out her name, and she fell hopelessly in love with him, would he be sneaking out to meet up with her and have adventures with her over and over again for the rest of his life? *Gods, I hope so.*

Then he realized he'd completely lost touch with reality for a moment. His eyes focused, and he looked back at Endel. "You okay?" his young friend asked.

Zerek smiled, "Never better. Come on, it's almost midnight!"

Much to his surprise, they didn't actually climb back down to the street. They began leaping from rooftop to rooftop at a dead run, and the ease in which Endel made every jump, the fact that he

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knew exactly where to go so that they never ran out of rooftops to run atop, he suddenly suspected this young boy had lived more in his short life than Zerek ever realized. How many times had he snuck out to scramble across the rooftops? Climbing up to higher roofs, leaping down to lower, leaping across alleys without giving it a second thought.

It suddenly occurred to Zerek that for all Endel's talk, the young boy rarely talked about himself. He always cared more about Zerek's history. So Zerek decided to make it a point to find out more in the morning.

Though their route was rarely direct, they eventually made it to the Red District, where Endel stopped them and they crouched behind a parapet. The watch tower was in sight, but that meant *they* were in sight of it.

"Why would she tell me to meet her up there?" Zerek whispered. "Aren't there guards up there?"

Endel frowned and glanced over the parapet. Then he took an even longer look, smiled, and shook his head. "Apparently not. But someone else is."

Feeling his face flush, Zerek looked up at the tower, and there she was. They were still a block away, but even from there, there was no mistaking her in the moonlight, her slender figure, her tattered cloak billowing in the breeze. Her pale face glowed in the moonlight.

She was looking right at him, and he realized she had probably watched their entire approach.

Nudging him, Endel said, "Go on. Go get her."

Keeping low, Zerek began to move along the parapet until he was close enough to the next roof, and he leapt across. He still felt uneasy about each jump, but slowly, unsure without the guidance of Endel, he drew closer, until there were no more buildings between him and the Warriors' Guild complex.

Jon Wasik

It wasn't exactly a fortress, not like the ones he had seen in the smaller towns in the wilderness. The building itself was made of wood, not stone, and where there should have been turrets were instead pitched, pointed rooftops. In fact, if it weren't for the watch tower that dwarfed all surrounding buildings, he would have thought it nothing more than a mansion.

A mansion patrolled by Warriors. The Warriors were all about appearance everywhere he went, and here was no different. Two pairs of Warriors crossed paths near the complex, all of them wearing full chainmail and plate armor. One was a Mage, the other three carried the shields of non-magical Warriors. The two pair conversed for a moment, and then passed by each other, continuing their circuits around the building.

The mansion would be easy to climb, thanks to the latticed wood framing, but getting up it without being seen by Warriors would not be easy.

Zerek looked back up to the top of the tower, and saw the girl staring down at him, her arms folded as if to say 'well, I'm waiting.' He was so close! So close that he couldn't give up now, no matter what.

With an inexperienced eye, he began to search for a good place to climb. Part of the reason the complex stood out was that a large courtyard surrounded it, encircled by a low mortared rock wall with only a handful of arched entrances, and that meant there was no chance he could find a place to leap from rooftop to rooftop to get on top of the mansion. Besides, even not accounting for the tower, the Guild complex was far taller than any surrounding building at five stories. Surely there would be a tale Endel could tell him as to why it had more floors than any other building in the city.

There were a few places that could be promising, but he felt too frightened to even consider climbing down to try them. There were hedges in the courtyard he could hide behind, but if just one Warrior spotted him...

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The red torches didn't light up the area as well as the yellow-white torches of the merchant district, so he had that advantage, even with the moonlight. But where on the building could he actually climb up?

Once more he looked up at the girl, and he caught her shaking her head. She then pointed down and to her right. Following her finger, he saw where she pointed, at a giant tree near that corner of the building. Did she want him to climb up the tree and leap across to the building? That would be a huge mistake, the rustling leaves would make it impossible for him to remain hidden.

Then he realized what she meant. If that corner of the building was like the others, the flat-faced wall would bow out into the rounded turret-like corner, creating a partial natural cover. And the tree would hide him from being seen from a distance once he got above the ground floor. If the latticework frame was the same there, it would be as easy a place as any for him to climb up.

So she wants me to succeed, he thought with a smile. He waved his thanks to her, but then felt like an idiot doing it, and ducked down, realizing a guard might have seen his flailing hand. He felt so embarrassed that he almost didn't want to move, but he glanced over the parapet and saw her still waiting for him, and knew he had to.

Glancing around to make sure no one else looked his way, he moved along the roof to find a place to climb down. He found a 2nd floor balcony he was able to easily jump down to, and then stopped, his feet clomping down harder on the stone balcony than he expected. With his heart pounding, he slowly turned and looked into the house, but the windows and door were closed, and the light was out. No one stirred inside.

His hands shook and his breath was starting to turn a little ragged in his fear, but he pushed on and moved to the side of the balcony. He could easily hop down from the balcony to the ground, but now he feared being heard by a patrolling Warrior, even at this distance.

Zerek looked again at the rock wall, wondering about the lack of defensive structures. Shouldn't there have been a tall steel fence or something to protect the Guild? Or were they so confident that nothing could get that far into the city that they didn't need a big wall? What of common criminals?

With his chest thumping, he hefted over the wall and held on to lower himself as far as he could, until he finally could go no further and had to let go. He fell the few feet left to the ground, and cringed. But no one shouted, no one appeared to have heard him. He was safe.

For now.

He crouched as low as he could and crossed the narrow street to the rock wall. It was only three feet tall, he could have easily hopped over it. Anyone could have. It just made no sense!

Then again, he realized, there probably aren't a whole lot of people dumb enough to try to break into the Warriors' Guild.

Unless a girl was involved, apparently. Once more he looked up at the top of the tower, but then his heart froze. She wasn't there! His mind raced, and he wondered why. Had someone seen her? No, no one had raised the alarm, and he heard no one shouting. Maybe someone looked up and she had ducked down to avoid detection.

Yes, that had to be it. She was an expert thief, so of course she knew when she needed to hide.

Realizing that, he slowly edged his head above the rock wall to look at the grounds, but there was no one around. The patrols must have moved around to the other side of the mansion.

Looking up and down the street to make sure no one approached, he steeled himself with a great big breath, and then vaulted over the wall. Or tried to. His face smacked right into a solid wall of nothing, and he bounced back into the street, landing with a thud.

"Owe!" he said, then clamped his hand over his mouth. A bright light had flared when he hit the wall of nothingness, and that flare stretched high up above the wall. That was when he realized the Guild complex was surrounded by a magic wall.

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“Oh gods,” he whispered through his hands. Someone had to have seen it. “No, no, no,” he clambered onto his feet and peaked over the wall. Shouts came from within the complex, and he saw rapid movement. Someone was coming.

He turned to run, only to have hands suddenly grab him by the shoulders and whip him around. Panicking, he tried to squirm free, but then she spoke, “Easy there, lover-boy.”

It was the thief! He frowned, feeling his face flush but his mind race with questions. “Hey! Wait...how did you get down here so fast?”

“Never mind that, you fool,” she sighed and glanced behind her, where he saw one of the archways that led into the grounds. “Just run!”

Grabbing his hand, she pulled him along at a run. He chased after her in a daze, his mind focused intently on her handhold. And once again, he found himself chasing after the most beautiful girl in the city.

Scarcely aware of what was going on, he followed her willingly, running as fast as his legs would take him, trying desperately to keep up with her as she constantly tugged on his arm. He was afraid she would outrun him and he’d lose his grip on her, but she wasn’t trying to get away from him, not this time, and she let him keep up with her.

“Over there!” someone shouted from behind. Moments later, they turned down an alley way and ran as fast as they could towards a dozen boxes stacked conspicuously.

“We’re going up,” she glanced back at him. He wanted those eyes to never look away, but she only gave him a moment, and then looked back at the boxes. Without breaking her stride, she let go of his hand, much to his dismay, and clambered up one box after another. Not paying attention, he ran right into those boxes and almost toppled them over.

She hissed down at him, “Pay attention, I said we’re going up.”

Feeling his face burn bright red, he put his hands on the first box and pushed up, following her as fast as he could. She clearly had done this before, and was on the building's roof in moments. His own ascent took much longer, precious moments that they didn't have.

"On the roof," he heard that same voice shout from behind.

The thief cursed and grabbed his hand to help him the rest of the way up. "Great, now we have to outrun them."

Once he was secure on the roof, she took off ahead of him, and he tried desperately to keep up. She leapt from one roof to the next, and then climbed up a late addition to that building to a third story effortlessly. He tried to follow, but he had difficulty climbing the latticework frame, and she had to reach back over and help him again.

Once on top, he looked back, and saw a Warrior climbing up from the alley. He had a harder time, thanks to his armor.

"Move it," she yanked on his sleeve.

Once more, they took off running, and he followed her lead as best as he could. She knew exactly where to go, where they could easily leap from one roof to another, and never break stride. Twisting and turning, hopping over streets, alleys, using pillars, never slowing, never breaking stride.

He struggled to keep up, but his short sprint with Endel had helped him understand how to navigate the roofs well enough. If it hadn't been for Endel...

Something clicked in his head. Endel? Had he once run with these same people, scrambling across rooftops, evading guards? Excitable little Endel? No, surely he wasn't a thief, he worked in the castle for crying out loud.

Banishing the thought, Zerek focused on following the girl. On her billowing cloak, her short hair flowing in the wind, and her beautiful pale face in the moonlight. He'd finally done it, he'd finally found her!

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Now he just had to make sure he didn't lose her again. They ran, as fast as the wind, faster even, certainly faster than the guards. His cloak billowed out much like the girls, and he wondered if his looked as adventurous as hers did, flowing behind her like a hero's cloak. He only paid close enough attention to their path to ensure he leapt across the roofs, climbed up or hopped down from one level to the next, and never tripped or fell.

So when the girl suddenly came to a stop, he nearly crashed into her. Realizing they had run out of rooftops, they looked ahead at the green district across the river. She'd brought him to the river again, and he followed her as she hopped down onto another stack of boxes and onto the street that bordered the river.

They had long ago lost the guards, somewhere in the center of the city. Once they were at street level, he bent over and rested his hands on his knees, heaving breaths. For as much running as he'd been doing in the past few weeks, he clearly hadn't caught up to her level.

She folded her arms and tapped her feet impatiently, but she still waited for him. He looked up at her, felt his breath stolen from him when he gazed into her eyes, so dark in the night, so deep, so beautiful.

"Come on," she tugged on his sleeve and drew him along. "We should get out of the street, they'll be looking for us tonight." She led him along towards the southeast wall where the river wound back out into the world. It was well past midnight, and there was no one around.

He wanted to talk to her, to hear her sing-song voice again, but what should he say or ask?

"So, do you always run on the rooftops like that?" It was the first thing he could think of, and he felt stupid just asking it.

Looking back at him, she smirked, "No, only at night. It's easier to lose them in the crowds at street level during the day."

Jon Wasik

That he believed, after having chased her once before. In fact, he realized that both times he'd seen her, she had led him on a grand chase.

She picked up the pace some, and before long they were running again. He'd just caught his breath, but this time they ran a little slower and he was able to keep up. She smiled, "You've gotten faster."

Feeling his face burn, he smiled, "I had to be able to keep up with you."

Her smile broadened, and he felt a fluttering in his chest from it. She reached out and took his hand in hers. Her hands were rough, not as bad as Elina's had been, but clearly the thief had spent most of her life climbing buildings or out in the elements.

They came to the end of the street, right up against the city wall, and she stopped them right at the edge of the railing to the river. She looked down at the river, and then at him, "We're going down again."

Without further hesitation, she let go of his hand and leapt over the railing. He looked over and saw that unlike up river by the bridge, this part actually had a constructed rock landing. In fact the entire area was built up as a completely artificial canal, with easy access to the heavy metal grating that covered the arched mouth in the wall for the river to run out. The grating was interlaced close enough that not even a child could climb through, ensuring no one could ever sneak into the city by river.

Glancing around to make sure no one saw them, he hopped over the railing and clomped down with a thud. By that time, the girl had moved to the edge of the landing and had sat down. She was in the process of taking her makeshift shoes off, which he found to be curious, until she swung her bare feet over the edge and stuck them in the water.

"Isn't it cold?" he asked.

"Not yet," she shook her head, splashing the water. "Not until the first snowfall in the mountains. Which will be any day now."

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Smiling, he sat beside her and took his own boots off before he plunked his feet into the water. It splashed up his leg, and it was actually quite cold, but not so bad that he couldn't keep his feet in. She playfully splashed water on his legs, and he splashed back, eliciting a giggle from her.

Their eyes met, and he found he couldn't look away. She stole his breath, stole his heart. In every sense, she was a thief. His thief.

"Hi there," she smiled, her cheeks flushing visibly even in the night.

He didn't know what else to say, his head was completely numb. So all he managed was a quiet, "Hi."

"You're a persistent one," her fingers brushed against his. He looked down and stared at her hand, wanting desperately to take hers, but not knowing if he should. When he looked up again, she'd raised an eyebrow at him. "Have you been searching for me this whole time?"

"Uh," he stuttered, "Yeah. I have. I had to find you." He tilted his head, "I don't even know your name."

With her smile still broad, she giggled again. "All this time and you haven't even found that out?"

Suddenly he realized they'd drawn closer to each other, and his heart, which had only just begun to slow down, suddenly raced again. "No one knew who you were."

"Well," she whispered. Then, before he knew what he was doing, he leaned in closer to her, and their lips touched. Tingles exploded across his face, and his chest felt ready to burst with his pounding heart. She didn't pull away, and a moment later, she pushed her lips a little harder against his.

It was both the longest and shortest moment of his entire life. Their hands had connected at some point, he didn't know when. And when she pulled away from him, his mind was completely blank.

Jon Wasik

Until she told him something he swore he would commit to memory for the rest of eternity. “My name is Laira.” She stared into his eyes, her face as bright as his felt. “And I am very pleased to meet you.”

The dungeon in Valaras was among the largest that Amaya had seen, and was also one of the worst smelling. It didn't help that the few surviving orcs from yesterday's battle now occupied half of the dungeon cells.

She found herself having to cover her nose, and forced the gag at the back of her throat back down. This was no time to show weakness. The orc cages were not her destination, but any fear she showed would be incentive for them to try to attack. As they had found out often since the war had begun, captured orcs were far more dangerous than caged animals.

Passing by one of the orc cages, she didn't dare look inside, but she could feel several eyes from within following her. Hungry for her.

For her blood.

Several more paces ahead, she came upon her destination. The jailor that accompanied her, a tall, broad-shouldered man with deep green eyes, stepped in front of her and unhooked the keys from his belt, fumbling with them. He was nervous, but not about the prisoner she was visiting.

Amaya stared through the bars of the door at the only occupant of the cell. And he stared right back at her, his eyes calm, discerning, even disarming. Trebor Tem's composure had returned, and he sat calmly and unshackled within his cell.

The jailor finally found the correct key, and the iron door swung up with a screech. That set off some of the nearest orcs, and they roared and pounded at their prisons. Trebor flinched, but otherwise showed no sign that he was perturbed.

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“Thank you,” she smiled at the jailor. He tried to smile back, but glanced around nervously at the surrounding cells. Several Warriors assigned to keep watch over the orcs began shouting at them to shut up, but that did not help.

Stepping inside, Amaya waited patiently. The jailor closed the door behind her, but did not lock it, and did not leave. She didn’t need him there – Trebor was an unarmed man with no magic. He could not hurt her no matter how much he wanted to.

A charming smile crossed Trebor’s face, but she knew to look through it now. She knew the anger and desperation that existed beneath the surface of his face. The same anger that coursed through her veins.

She never diverted her eyes from Trebor’s, and they remained locked in a stare of wills, waiting for the chance to speak, waiting to break the other one down. The chance came after several minutes, when the orcs finally began to settle down.

“I was wondering if I would see you again, Guardian,” Trebor spoke, his voice cheerful. “I hoped you would come.”

Raising a curious eyebrow, she folded her arms, “Oh? I’m surprised, after the humiliation you experienced at my hands.”

His face darkened, but only a little. “Hardly a fair fight.”

With a sigh, she shook her head. “I wouldn’t say that. You were rather crafty in your attempts to deface my authority. At first.”

Very slowly, Trebor’s smile faded. He looked tired. Exhausted.

“Yes,” he spoke quietly, the false bravado gone and the pain in his voice clear. “At first.”

She let that sink in for a moment, and slowly paced around the cell. She passed very near him, a signal that she was not afraid of him by any means. He did not look up, but she saw his eyes follow her feet.

Jon Wasik

“Your riot has been disbanded,” she stated. “You’ve been discredited with all of your followers. And the attempted siege has left the people frightened enough to resume work in the Forge District with a renewed fervor.”

She approached the door again, and stood facing away from him, looking up at the ceiling. “You should see it, Tem. Countless chimneys all pouring smoke out.” She grimaced, but did not let him see it. She thought it was actually a disgusting sight, but she also knew it meant that the soldiers of Tal would not go without desperately needed arms. They would win the war.

Looking over her shoulder, she smirked at Trebor. “We’re not pressing charges against the others in your rabble.”

He raised his eyebrows and looked at her in genuine surprise. “I admit I am surprised. The anger I saw in your face. The hate in your voice. I thought you would have arrested them all.”

Her cheeks warmed and she looked away from him. Her hands clenched into fists, and she felt her earlier rage return.

“Don’t deny it or hide it,” Trebor continued. She could hear the victory in his voice. He had once again pressed against a deep wound, and he knew it. “I don’t know your story, but I know your pain. I know that only betrayed love can create such horrible darkness within one’s soul.”

She spun around to rebuke him, but was surprised to find that he had stood up and had closed half of the distance. His hands were at his side disarmingly, but it still startled her, and she prepared to draw her sword. Trebor raised his hands to show that he meant no physical harm to her.

“There is no darkness in my soul,” she said at length. “Do not try to compare me to yourself.”

With a smirk, he shook his head. “It’s already begun,” he lowered his arms. Somehow he looked menacing to her now. Dangerous. “Just give it time. I think by the time they let me out, you’ll have let it overcome you.”

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For a moment, she looked down at his feet, feeling fear, anger, regret. Was he right? Was this pain twisting her soul?

Those months in the Archanon dungeon had given her plenty of time to mull over everything that had happened. Everything that she now refused to face. And after yesterday, she began to realize it had continued to build up within her. Pressure building, growing stronger and stronger. How much longer could she push it down? How much longer could she keep the darkness at bay?

The worst part was that she felt completely alone. She had her team with her at almost all times, but they were her subordinates and she their leader. There was no one she could talk to. No one to help her sort out her feelings. No one she could trust with the terrible secrets of her past.

What was she doing? Why was she doubting herself? Doubting her ability to control?

It wasn't long before it dawned on her. It was Trebor. His words. His demeanor. She was the one armed and armored, the one with power in the room, and yet he had just torn her down. Just like Din.

He was dangerous. His voice, his reasoning, his charisma was dangerous. She looked up at him, her brow creased in a deep frown. The anger seethed within her. His smirk faded, and she reveled in the fear that suddenly entered his eyes.

With slow, deliberate steps, she closed the distance between them, until she could almost whisper in his ears.

"You are mistaken about one very specific assumption," she spoke, her voice shaking. "You will never be granted leave from this place."

"You can't keep me here forever," he growled.

She looked at him, their faces inches apart. "Oh no? I am a Guardian. My orders are backed by the King. And I shall leave orders that you are never to leave this dungeon again. Not alive."

The fear in his eyes deepened, and suddenly he seemed so much smaller.

Jon Wasik

For a moment, she wanted to justify her decision. She almost told him why. That he was too dangerous, that she knew he could rally another uprising, or worse. And as the world continued to change around them, more might be drawn to his cause next time.

However, she had no reason to explain herself. No responsibility to. Her order would be final.

With that thought, the anger subsided, and she pulled away from him. "Goodbye, Mr. Tem." Turning, she approached the exit and called over her shoulder, "You will never see me again, I promise you that."

The jailor opened the door for her, and once again the screech set off the orcs. They howled and roared and banged, and she felt as if they echoed her own heart. The door screeched close behind her, and she paused there, not sure if she should look back at him.

There was a part of her that wanted to gloat, to let him know that she felt satisfaction at winning.

Until that thought scared her. No, not scared, *terrified* her.

What was she becoming? What was her heart becoming?

The jailor locked the door, and began to lead the way back towards the stairs. She hesitated only a moment, but finally steeled herself and walked away.

Had she really won this battle? Or had Trebor?

Worse still, one question echoed in her thoughts as she passed by the enraged monsters. Was Trebor right? Was the pain and rage within her heart changing her? Was she losing herself?

Who were the real monsters?