

THE ORC WAR CAMPAIGNS

A SWORD OF DRAGONS STORY

Episode 2 “Counterstrike”

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The Orc War Campaigns - Counterstrike

The world was a jumbled mess. Zerek Betanil didn't know what was going on around him, not exactly. Well, he was aware, but he chose not to pay attention to what everyone said around him.

Chose. What did he choose? What was his choice? Did he have a choice?

Absently he realized that he didn't so long as he let people around him decide where he went and when, simply because he didn't want to act, or react. Maybe that meant he should choose to pay attention.

It wasn't easy. It was safe, inside his mind. Safe when he could close his eyes and see his mother, smiling down upon him. Sometimes, that image made him cry uncontrollably. Sometimes, it made him feel happier than he ever remembered being.

Safe. He was safe in his mind. But would he stay safe in there? Not likely. So he decided he needed to return to the real world.

As the world around him cleared, he saw that he was in a stone-walled corridor. A man dressed in warm-toned, soothing clothes walked beside him, lightly guiding him with a hand on his shoulder. Lightly, not firmly. As if to let him know that he was not trapped.

They walked towards a set of closed doors at an intersection, next to which stood a pair of guards wearing what was clearly ceremonial armor, and black tabards with the symbol of the Tal kingdom embroidered into them in silver.

He was in Archanon Castle. Well, he thought he was, anyway. He thought back, trying to remember everything that had happened to him.

But then terrifying images flashed before his eyes, and he almost ran away, ran back into his thoughts.

Once more, Zerek looked to the man guiding him. It was a member of the Order of the Ages, and based on his black tunic, trimmed in red, he was a cleric. The symbol of the Order, six lines that expanded outward from a central space, was embroidered in red on a patch on his left breast.

The cleric noticed that Zerek stared at him, and he looked over with a completely fake smile. "Welcome back, young man," he spoke with false kindness. "We feared you would not be able to speak before the Council today."

Zerek asked, "What Council?" But then the guards ahead opened the doors, and they entered a very crowded room. Kings and a Queen, members of the Covenant, and so many people crowded into one room, with six simple wooden tables arranged to face the center, and extra seats lined the outer wall of the room. He felt his heart begin to thunder in his chest, threatening to break out and run away, like the rest of him wanted to do.

He looked down and dared not meet the gaze of any as they all stared at him. Gently, the cleric guided him into the center, and stood there, his hand a bit firmer on his shoulder. Somehow he must have known Zerek wanted to flee.

The cleric spoke, but Zerek didn't hear a word the fake man said. Zerek was the center of attention for some reason, and the only reason he could think of was something he never wanted to think about again.

After a while, the cleric stopped speaking. Were they all waiting for him to say something? He wouldn't. He couldn't. That would give them a chance to break him open, make him spill out everything he held within.

Then a man who sat at one of the tables stood up and came around towards Zerek. He started to back away, but suddenly the cleric's hand became iron. He was trapped, he couldn't escape. They

were coming for him. They would always come for him, because he had survived, when no one else had. He was alone, trapped, and then...

And then, without any warning, the world became a brighter place. The dark weight, the shadow that weighed on his chest, the one he didn't even realize was there before, lifted. His eyes cleared, his heart cleared, everything became so much clearer.

Before him stood a tall, ancient man, dressed in white robes with gold trim. In his left hand, he held an equally white staff with an amber gem embedded in the top. The gem glowed warmly, and Zerek found himself staring longingly into it. He wanted to be there, to be inside of it, where it was warm and nothing could harm him.

As if reading his thoughts, the white-robed man smiled and said, "Do not be afraid, my young friend. You are safe here. No one can hurt you." He leaned forward a bit and added, "I won't let them." He winked ever so slightly, which made Zerek smile.

Smile. When was the last time he'd smiled?

After several moments, the man asked, "Will you be okay?"

At first, Zerek's voice cracked, like he hadn't spoken in days. Maybe he hadn't. "Yes. Yes, I think so."

The old man's smile warmed, and he started to move away. Zerek reached for him, "Wait!"

He didn't need to say anything more. The old man came back and stood beside him. "Very well. I shall stand with you." The cleric stood by as well, but Zerek moved away from him, towards the white-robed figure. "I will take care of the boy."

At first, the cleric was hesitant. Then he nodded and bowed, "As you wish, Master Wizard."

A Wizard? Here? So it was true, they had returned to Halarite. They had left the world long, long ago. He looked at the table the white Wizard had come from and saw three others sat there, each wearing a different colored robe.

After the cleric was gone, another man wearing dark violet robes and a golden crown stood up and addressed everyone in a strong voice. "This is the boy that survived the attack on the camp. Though he has not spoken since, the Warriors who found him said he gave his name as Zerek, and that he said his mining camp at Mount Relkin was attacked by orcs."

It took a moment for him to realize that the man speaking was King Beredis of Tal. Slowly he began to look around and get his bearings. At three other tables sat someone with a crown upon their head. At another sat three members of the Covenant of the Order of the Ages. And then there was the Wizards' Table.

The Council. That's what the cleric had meant. A council of the four kingdoms, the Covenant, and the Wizards. Suddenly he felt sick to his stomach. So many important people, all to see him?

"Young man," King Beredis addressed him directly. "I know you have been through so much, and it is unfair of us to ask you this. What did you see? What happened? We know orcs attacked the mine, and our scouts have confirmed that they occupy the camp now." The camp. The face of the monsters suddenly flashed in his mind, and he started to back away as a sick, sinking feeling overtook his stomach.

Then the Wizard's hand rested on his shoulder, and unlike when the cleric had held him in place, a sense of warmth coursed through his body, giving him goose bumps, but otherwise making him feel so much better. The face of the orcs suddenly didn't scare him.

Zerek looked up at the Wizard, who looked down at him with piercing, dark eyes, and nodded once. "You can do this. I know you can."

He nodded, and then turned back to King Beredis. "There was no warning. I..." His voice cracked a little, but the Wizard's reassuring hand never left his shoulder. "I wasn't there when it happened, not at first. But then I saw it. They just attacked. No reason, no warning. They overran the

camp, killing..." A lump formed in his throat as the images seared across his imagination. "Killing everyone who stood in their way. Destroying everything. And some even had magic."

"What sort of magic?" one of the other kings asked. Tall and broad-shouldered, that king flicked his blonde hair out of his eyes and looked very interested in what Zerek had to say. That only made his face turn red.

"From their weapons, like a Mage." Zerek frowned and gulped as images of the attack continued to stream through his thoughts. "But not Mage magic. Fire. Some ice, too, but lots of fire."

The Wizard beside him frowned, and looked at him curiously. "Did you see what the magic ones wore? Or what their weapons looked like?"

Another sensation of warmth from the Wizard's hand. Somehow it seemed to clarify the images in his head. "Yes. Yeah, I did. They wore very dark armor. Not black, just very dark. Same with their swords." He shook his head, wondering how he could recall that detail now.

This time the only woman monarch, whom he knew to be Queen Leian of Erien, asked a question. "But not all of the attackers wore such armor?"

"Very few," Zerek nodded. "They stood out, there were so few of them." Where was this calm feeling coming from? It grew stronger the longer the Wizard held his hand on Zerek's shoulder.

"That's a relief," another man who sat next to King Beredis spoke up. He wore a very large sword sheathed on his back, and was one of the very few armed persons in the room.

"Is it?" the Wizard beside Zerek asked. "We know that several hundred orcs survived the attack on Archanon." Rumors had spread through the mining camp a few days before the orc attack. Rumors of an attack on Archanon. *So that was true, too*, Zerek thought. "If these are indeed orcs from that battle, and if they are leading the attack, where are the rest of the survivors?"

The blonde King scoffed, "Do not attempt to make the situation seem worse than normal." He shook his head, "The Tal scout reported that he could scarcely see the extent of the army. They were likely all hidden from view in the forest, with the rest of the orc army."

"None-the-less," Beredis clasped his hands behind his back, "There is an army of thousands of orcs. Even if they are the only army opposing us, this represents a perfect opportunity for us to collaborate as an alliance. If we strike with a combined force, we can defeat them with minimal casualties."

"I agree," the white Wizard nodded. "The Wizards can very quickly assist in mobilizing your armies, and bring them to bear against the Relkin camp within a matter of days."

Zerek felt completely out of place. They were speaking of grand battle plans, invasion tactics. He should have been excited, he had always dreamed of becoming a Warrior. Instead, he felt afraid, and overwhelmed, and he wanted to get out.

His anxiety once again lessened when he felt warmth course out of the Wizard's hand. How did he do that? Still, he looked at the Wizard, who at first was too intent on talking to notice. When he did, he looked at Zerek with a frown. Then that frown turned to one of understanding.

While he didn't want the calming effect of the Wizard's firm grip to go away, his desire to escape steadily grew stronger. So the Wizard motioned for the cleric to come back. The conversation around them continued, and the Wizard piped back in the moment the cleric began to nudge Zerek towards the same doors they had entered in.

The moment the Wizard's hand broke contact, he felt a void form in his stomach. But surprisingly, the full weight of everything did not come crashing down around him. He was okay. Somehow, he was okay. For now, anyway.

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As they left, he overheard them speak of increasing patrols along the Wastelands. He wondered just for how long he would be okay. The orcs were invading. Maybe none of them would be okay for long.

Maybe he'd get to see his mother again soon.

Amaya had argued against returning home with her team after they had been hastily inducted into the Guardians by King Beredis. Now that she had a purpose, she had no desire to return. She had no family there, and no friends outside of her team to visit with.

When her mind had been set, and she went to wish them a good journey, they all reacted at once and practically begged her to go with. She tried to pull the 'I'm the commanding officer, I don't fraternize with my subordinates' hand, but they wouldn't hear anything of it. They weren't Warriors anymore. Neither was she.

After she tried using every excuse she could think of, they finally wore her down, and she agreed to go with them. It was only for a day, right? She would be okay. What could possibly go wrong in one day?

As Draegus Kataar had promised, King Beredis had convinced the Wizards to send her and her team via portal. Their journey with a Wizard served a dual purpose – the Allied Council had quickly decided to mobilize all armed forces after an emergency session. They would be accompanied by General Artula, who would command the Everlin Warriors to prepare for war. While Amaya's team enjoyed a day with their family, Artula and the Wizard would continue on to other towns and villages, warning everyone. Later, they would return to retrieve her and her companions.

Their journey through the portal was unique, unexpected. She had read about portals, they all had, in their lessons about Wizards. Of course, most of those lessons had been bitter, resentful. History had been written in such a manner as to paint the Wizards as selfish, pompous old men and women.

Yet the Wizard they worked with now, a young woman named Nia, was quite pleasant towards them, not at all what she expected.

When the General arrived, he was very quiet, and barely spoke two words to them. She wondered if he knew who she was and what her team had been accused of, or if he had only been told that they were merely travelers taking advantage of the convenience of the Wizard. Either way, she didn't speak to him except for the formal 'hello' and, after their journey through the portal, a formal 'farewell.'

That was when her whole attitude changed. The moment she stepped through the portal, she wanted to turn around and run back through, even though she knew she could not. She didn't want to be in Everlin. She didn't want to be anywhere near the Guild, near Din.

She wanted to run.

And then Elic was beside her. Somehow, his presence instilled a calm in her, made her take a deep breath and refocus her mind. There was no danger. She would not see Commander Din tonight. He would not be invited to their festivities.

That had been a topic of much debate amongst them all. Where should they go? Should they all visit their friends and family separately, or should they celebrate together?

The answer turned out to be self-evident – after everything they had been through together, their time in the dungeons together, they had grown so accustomed to each other that they couldn't imagine celebrating without each other.

So they would go their separate ways to say their initial hellos, and explain what had happened, and then meet for dinner and drinks at their favorite inn.

Except that Amaya still didn't want to go. She watched as Peren, Idalia, Nerina, Vin, Elic and Gell walked towards the town, leaving her alone on the edge. She looked with nervous eyes upon her hometown, her hands felt numb. Idly she rubbed the small Guardian logo that had been branded into

the inside of her left wrist, as if the constant ache mirrored how her own heart felt. Everlin had once been a place she loved so dearly, and swore she would protect with her life for as long as she lived.

Now she felt terrified of it. Amaya, once a brave Lieutenant in the Warriors' Guild, a powerful Mage, terrified of her hometown.

She was ready to turn and run, to leave them all and find safety in the wilderness. She couldn't go in there. She wouldn't.

Everlin wasn't a large town, but it was protected by a stone wall built by the Guild centuries ago. She watched with a void in her stomach as her team passed through the gates. Just as they were about to turn a corner and leave her sight, Elic stopped and looked back at her. His eyes bore into her, and she wondered if he knew why she couldn't go in.

Not likely. She wasn't even sure why. Why she couldn't face Din, no matter what.

Somehow Elic got the message. He merely nodded solemnly, and then disappeared, leaving her to her thoughts.

Knowing they weren't supposed to meet the Wizard or General Artula again until early morning, she would have to find some place to sleep for the night. There was only one choice, really, a very small lumber community up-river. It would take her a couple of hours to walk there, but right now that prospect was so much better than passing through those gates.

Not to mention stretching her legs would be a welcome reprieve from months in the dungeon. When she thought of that, a large smile stretched across her face, and she started jogging. At first it felt strange, like a sensation she had long forgotten. But the further she ran, the more familiar it became, and the more energized she felt. Faster and faster she ran, her heart racing until it thundered in her ears.

It didn't matter how much her legs burned or how hard her heart beat – the further she was from Everlin, and from Din, the more she felt like she was free.

That Wizard had done something to Zerek. He wasn't sure what, but he was both angry and relieved for what he had done. The world was no longer a haze around him, he felt fully aware and no longer terrified of being a part of it.

However, there was a part of him that still wanted to retreat back into himself. To ignore everyone around him, and to just pretend that his mother was still there to comfort him.

Unfortunately, the Wizard's trick also made him realize just how childish that desire was. He was fifteen, not five. So as much as he wanted to go back in, he wouldn't let himself.

Of course, that meant facing another reality. He had no family left. Not that he knew of, anyway. No siblings, no parents, and if he had aunts or uncles, he had never known about them. So that had left him with an uncertain future.

Now he sat in an empty hallway on a bench, staring at the wall across from him, contemplating what he could possibly do next in life. Find another mining camp? He knew the trade, there was no getting around that. It would be the easiest thing for him to do.

Easiest, but not what he wanted. He wanted to be a Warrior. He thought about the dagger he had taken from Elina's hands. It was wrapped in cloth and tucked under his belt now. They had tried to take it away from him, but he wouldn't let them. He would never, ever let it out of his sight.

He had dreamed of becoming a Warrior for as long as he could remember. But could he? Warriors trained from childhood, so was he too old? Probably.

Maybe that was another part of his childhood he would have to leave behind now. He would have to become an adult, take care of himself, make his own way in life. That meant doing what was necessary, not what he wanted.

Yet the thought of ever going back underground again, of ever seeing another mining camp, terrified him. His hands became clammy and his heart raced just from imagining walking into the mouth of a tunnel, hard hat on, pick axe resting on his shoulder. Like being swallowed into a giant mouth.

“So,” he jumped when the cleric suddenly spoke. He had forgotten the fake man still sat next to him. Why were they still just sitting there, waiting? “Have you given any thought to where you will go from here?”

Zerek shuddered. It was like the cleric could read his thoughts, could see right through him. He could see out of the corner of his eye that the cleric didn’t look at him, he just stared ahead at the castle wall, like Zerek did. “I don’t know,” he slouched and looked down.

There was a long pause, and he wondered why the cleric had asked that. The man just seemed so *fake*, and it made him uneasy. He was supposed to be a kind, caring man. Yet his kindness didn’t seem real, and his smiles always seemed completely off.

“You could always join the Order of the Ages,” the cleric looked at him. He didn’t dare match the man’s look. “Every child of the Six has a place waiting for them in the Order.”

He considered that offer, but only for a brief moment. The gods hadn’t saved his family, after all. More than that, he just didn’t want to have to stick around the creepy cleric.

Not all clerics were like this one. Several had visited the mining camps often, as part of their missions to spread the truth of the Cronal to every corner of the world. Those clerics had all been genuine. This one...there was just something wrong about him.

So he shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.” He glanced at the cleric, but quickly looked away again. “Thank you.”

The cleric did not reply for some time, and Zerek felt even more uncomfortable by the silence. Finally, the man nodded, and stood. “As you wish. We will always be here, should you change your mind.” Zerek glanced up again at him, wondering if he was going to leave him. He walked past Zerek

and down the hallway. He wasn't sure if he should follow or not. Was he supposed to stay with the man until someone else came along?

Or was that it? Was he now free to go do whatever he wanted?

Not that he knew yet what he wanted.

Just as the cleric was about to turn down the hallway, a woman's voice spoke from the other direction, "I understand you have no family to claim you."

Zerek turned to find a tall, skinny woman with sharp facial features and hard eyes. She stared down her nose at him, and began to look at every inch of his body, as if assessing a piece of clothing.

"That's right," he nodded and frowned. "Who are you?"

She narrowed her eyes, "I am the house steward, Kai Loric. Your name is Zerek, yes?"

Was she angry? Her features and mannerism confused him. "Umm, yes," he replied. "Zerek Betanil."

She raised one eyebrow. "Well, stand up, let me get a look at you."

He frowned at her, but somehow felt compelled to do as she said. She didn't look like someone you disobeyed, for any reason. So he stood up, and faced her, trying to find his courage. A Warrior wouldn't shy away from her, right?

Once again, she looked him up and down, and nodded with satisfaction. "Yes, you are a strong young lad." He had no idea what a 'lad' was, but it seemed like she had just given him a compliment. "His Majesty, the King, has commanded me to ask you to remain within the castle as a servant. You are by no means required to," she once more raised her right eyebrow, "but it would seem you have little other choice at the moment."

Zerek's face burned red when she said that, and he wanted to tell her 'no' out of spite. Maybe the Order wouldn't be so bad.

However, it was then that another thought occurred to him. A servant in the castle. That would give him access to the castle guards. Perhaps he could find a way to impress them and get them to request he join their ranks. It wasn't as glorious as becoming a Warrior, but it would be better than any alternative he could think of.

"What job would I be doing?" he slowly asked.

She rested her hands on her hips and huffed a sigh. "Well, let's see. We have need in several areas. How fast on your feet are you?"

The memory of running from the orcs briefly passed through his mind, but for some reason it didn't seem to hurt or scare him as much as it had before. He felt stronger now, thanks to the Wizard.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Fast."

Kai rolled her eyes, "That's descriptive." She folded her arms in front of her and narrowed her eyes appraisingly at him. "Well, if you are indeed as fast as you appear to be, we have need of a delivery boy. Someone to take or retrieve letters or supplies within the city. Do you think you are up to this challenge?"

He didn't know the city at all, but he was a quick learner. Plus mines often became mazes of branching tunnels, and he had learned to navigate them. How difficult could it be to navigate open streets?

"Yeah, I think I can," he grinned and nodded.

"Good." She once again sighed and shook her head. "First, we will teach you proper etiquette. Come along," she turned and walked away. He was too stunned at first to follow, but then realized he did not want to cross her, so he took off in a jog after her.

It probably wasn't going to be a fun job, but anything was better than the mines.

Over the past several weeks, Cardin Kataar's free time had mostly been spent with his Wizard friend Dalin, learning everything he could about the new powers he had gained from the Sword of Dragons.

Which hadn't been much. And that frustrated him to no end. Just like head witnessed from Kailar the first time he fought her, his strength and speed had increased considerably, and Dalin had taught him how to hone and even increase those powers.

What he hadn't learned to do yet was create portals. Kailar had learned how to within minutes of picking up the Sword, but he was still bound to one location, and grudgingly had to rely on Dalin or other Wizards for portals.

As a result, his daily lessons with Dalin had grown more and more frustrating, and he had not looked forward to today's. He and the Wizard, who was clad in his usual blue robes, strode through Archanon towards the Southeast Quarter of the city, still under heavy construction in the wake of the battle against Klaralin and his orcs.

He had no idea why Dalin was taking them there, the Wizard was being unusually cryptic. He had something new in mind. Cardin eyed the Wizard suspiciously, who noticed almost immediately and smiled ironically at him.

That's when Cardin stopped walking and folded his arms in front of him. "Alright, I'll bite. What has you in such a cheerful mood today?" Cheerful despite the renewed war against the orcs. It was usually Dalin who had to remind *him* of the dire events at hand, not the other way around.

Dalin had walked past him before he stopped and turned to face him. He placed both hands on his staff and glanced at the gem. "I am smiling because today I feel you are ready for the next level."

With a raised eyebrow, a personal quirk he had picked up from his Wizard friend, Cardin replied, "Next level? I haven't learned any new powers from the Sword. Are you saying there is something you can do to change that?"

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A part of him was ready to pounce on Dalin's next words if he said 'yes.' Cardin had made his frustration well known, and if Dalin had been holding back key information he needed to unlock new powers, he would not forgive the Wizard easily.

"Perhaps," Dalin shrugged, "but not directly. I do not believe you truly appreciate the increase in your existing magical prowess, nor the potentially deeper connection to the universe that this has provided you."

Dalin picked up his staff and began to pace before Cardin. It was a habit that annoyed him, mostly because it reminded him of some of his teachers from Warrior training. "The Wizards are not just powerful, my friend," he spoke slowly, not looking at Cardin directly. "We have learned to control and harness the power we have access to through knowledge, through understanding. Your connection to the magic around you has increased dramatically, and I believe we must begin to teach you to have a more refined understanding of that power."

"You're kind of repeating yourself," Cardin grit his teeth. "What's your point?"

Dalin stopped pacing and smiled at Cardin. "Have you ever felt a connection to someone through magic? Have you ever formed a link where you can feel their very essence, and they yours? Even pick each other out in a crowd just from that feeling."

Cardin immediately thought of Sira, and felt his face grow warm. "Yeah, I have. It was...well, it was magical, to use exactly the right word."

Dalin nodded, "It was with someone you were already close to, was it not?" He continued without waiting for Cardin to answer. "That connection you felt, whether you were in proximity to her or not, is a perfect example of what I am going to teach you today. Come along," he turned and continued towards the Southeast Quarter. Cardin quickly caught up and fell into step beside him.

As they strode deeper into the quarter, Cardin noted a considerable increase in activity. More men and women working at building or rebuilding homes, shops, store houses. It was a hive of activity.

It was beginning to look like a city again. While some buildings were just getting started, most were in the final stages of being rebuilt, and several were already completed. Cardin and his friends had helped with that effort in the beginning, but it wasn't long before there had been an incident with his new powers, and the decision had been made for him to start focusing more on honing those abilities.

Dalin began to search around, but for what, Cardin couldn't begin to guess. After only a short walk, the Wizard smiled and led him over to a house that, at least on the outside, was not being worked on. At the front of the building was a freshly-built wooden bench large enough to seat three. "This will do," he nodded and sat on one side. He motioned to the other side and nodded to Cardin, "Please, sit."

This was a surprise. Most of Cardin's previous lessons had been combat-based. Lots of running, jumping, attacking dummy targets or, in the case of when he used his pre-existing Mage powers, lots of boulders to be pulverized with his increasing power. He reached back and grasped the Sword – the scabbard vanished at his mental command – before he sat down and rested the Sword in his lap.

Dalin sat back and looked out into the activity around them. "Now, first take a look around you. Look at all of the men and women, working hard, moving everywhere like a swarm of ants."

Uncertain of where the lesson was going, Cardin did as he was told. At first he just generally stared at the movement, like he would ants. The movement was almost mesmerizing, a blur of little and big motions all mixed into one. Arms moved back and forth with every stroke of a hammer or pull and push of a saw. Little movement of legs as their owners finished a task and moved just a few inches over to do the next task. People walked between buildings and jobs, runners rushed back and forth to fetch supplies to help keep the workers busy.

The runners. He focused in on them first. He didn't know why, but he watched each individual as they ran about. Then he focused in on one of the women hammering away on a board. Then another man who was cutting a board for that same woman, to be attached to the frame of the building.

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Individuals, working as a whole to achieve a common goal, but still individuals.

“Good,” Dalin said. “I already can feel your spirit focusing.”

Cardin felt his eyebrows rise up, “It is?”

He focused inward to see if he could feel it, too, but Dalin quickly said, “No, no, do not look inside yourself. Keep your focus out in the crowd, on the individuals. Each one, a piece or part of the moving whole, independent and yet linked at the same time.”

Cardin felt himself blush, and then refocused his attention outward. After another moment of getting a general sense of the individuals working, Dalin continued on. “Now close your eyes, but keep your focus outward.”

A part of him began to suspect what Dalin was trying to help him accomplish, but another part told him ‘no, that’s impossible.’ However, without further hesitation, he did as he was told and closed his eyes.

“Can you feel it yet?” the young Wizard asked. Dalin said nor asked anything more, so Cardin felt himself frown as he tried to focus. He could feel the currents of magic around him, far easier than he had been able to when he was just another Mage, but that was it.

On the other hand, Dalin had never wasted his time, as far as he knew. There had to be a point to this lesson.

The people. The purpose was in all of the workers scurrying about their tasks. So he imagined them before him, the same kind of mesmerizing blur of movement.

Then, he finally began to see it. That imagined view of motion began to sync up, quite of its own accord, with the pulse and throb of energy that he felt all around him. Like the flow of a river, where in some places it flowed fiercely, and in others sedately.

At first it was just a general sense, but then he recalled what had happened when his eyes had been opened, and how Dalin had said his spirit began to focus. So he began to try to make out

individual collections of energy within that sea of movement. It wasn't easy, not at first. After all, how do you follow a specific part of a river as it flows?

You need something unique to watch, he thought to himself. *Like throwing in a twig and watching it follow the current.*

There it was! Someone, he didn't know who, walked by him, and he caught onto the ever-so-slightly unique feel of the energy within that person and how it flowed around them. He felt the person walk by like someone felt a breeze - gentle, but distinct.

That was the key. He didn't know how, but somehow he began to pick up on the minor differences. This pulse of energy throbbed at a certain rhythm. One was stronger than the others around it. And another one had a warmth to it that the others did not.

They were all different, every single one of them. The points of energy were as unique as each individual they belonged to. Before long, Cardin began to wonder how he'd never noticed it before, how he had never felt or seen the obvious differences.

Suddenly it was no longer an indistinct river of energy that flowed past him. Now he felt *them*, their energy, every single one of them. And he could see them, too, through closed eyes as if they were all spirits of an unimaginable array of colors, shapes, and sizes. They were twinkling stars against the dull backdrop of the world.

Everyone was made of magic.

His stomach tingled at his excitement. He opened his eyes and beamed at Dalin. "That's...that's fantastic!"

Dalin grinned and nodded. "Yes, it is."

Cardin gazed about the worksites and realized the sensation remained. Though he could no longer see the lights, he could still feel them, feel their energy. He knew which ones were Mages now, too. They shined like beacons amongst the others, their intensity strong and mesmerizing.

“This is how you see the world?” he breathed.

“All of the time,” Dalin nodded. “You have barely scratched the surface, my friend. There is more, so much more to what you have learned.”

As the Wizard spoke, Cardin watched as a platoon of Warriors walked by in formation, headed for the Southeast Gate. The two in the lead were Mages, the rest were not. He noticed something about how they felt, like they shone with a sharper clarity. He closed his eyes and allowed his senses to remain extended, and sure enough, that was how they appeared in his mind’s eye.

He again focused on the workers rebuilding the city, and began to suspect why their colors were all a little duller than the Warriors that had just marched by.

“They are tired,” he turned his head towards Dalin. Unsurprisingly, Dalin’s light shone brighter than the brightest star, and with an intensity that almost overwhelmed him. He opened his eyes, and saw a curious frown on the Wizard’s face. “The workers. I can feel it, they are exhausted.”

Dalin’s eyes widened just a little bit, almost imperceptibly. He turned to look outward and closed his eyes. Cardin felt the energies around him shift a little as the Wizard flexed his own powers to perceive the world. After several moments of silence, he frowned and shook his head. “I do not feel any such indications.”

“I can’t really explain it,” Cardin looked back out at the workers. Then he noticed that many of them moved a bit sluggishly, little cues he probably could only physically notice because of what he had learned about tracking in the wild. The signs were there, so he knew his perception had been correct. “But I can see it now, too. Look at how they move, how they walk.”

The young Wizard opened his eyes and looked carefully at them. After several more moments of silence, he turned and looked at Cardin, his mouth hung open slightly. “I have heard,” he said quietly, “that the very wisest of Master Wizards can perceive such nuances within each individual, and more. Never would I have thought it possible for you to pick up such ability in a matter of moments.”

Cardin felt his face flush, and then he looked down at the Sword, almost forgotten in his lap. He lifted the near-weightless weapon up and examined it as if the answer lay within its core.

Before he could say anything more, he suddenly felt a surge of energy from the center of the city. He turned to see Sira and Reis approaching, both clearly in a hurry, and both wearing full armor. That wasn't the surge of energy Cardin felt, but he knew they were linked to the flurry of activity he felt from the castle. "Something is happening," he said as he stood up.

Dalin joined him a moment later, and they greeted their friends ever so briefly. "We've been recalled," Sira stated, an edge in her voice that told him this was no exercise or war game. "The Council has decided to attack the mining camp now, with as many Warriors as we can muster."

He exchanged confused glances with Dalin, and replied, "I thought the plan was to mobilize our entire force before we tried to attack them. They have superior numbers."

"That's the concern," Reis replied. "Some general from Erien brought up the point. So many orcs in one place can't last long, there isn't enough food and water in the area for them."

Sira nodded, "General Zilan. He believes the majority of the orcs are going to move on for other targets as soon as the mining camp's fortifications are up."

Realization dawned on Cardin. "The longer we wait, the more likely they'll attack somewhere else."

"Exactly," Reis said. "Come on, we're mobilizing now."

Without further questioning, Cardin placed the Sword on his back and willed the sheath back into existence. He realized that the wait was over.

The war was starting today.

The Orc War Campaigns - Counterstrike

Amaya had run as fast and as far as she could, but even with the freedom it had given her, it hadn't been long before she could run no further. Her legs had burned, her chest had heaved, until she could stand it no more, and she nearly collapsed on the trail.

No matter how much she had tried to remain fit in the dungeons, the fact was there wasn't room to run down there.

Now, after only a couple of hours of walking, she approached the lumber community, known as Ironwood Lumber Mill, at a leisurely pace. She had entered the southernmost tip of the massive Daruun forest, which stretched from here, far in the south, almost all the way up to the northern shores of Edilas.

Ironwood was a community she knew quite well. More than once, she and her Warriors had been asked to fend off bandits or wild animals, even some fairly strange and dangerous creatures.

When Din had only been a Captain, she had even once helped him fend off what was now assumed to be the last werewolf to ever terrorize the forest. That was when he had first gained her trust.

She shook her head to dispel the memory, and continued on. Just one more hill to crest, and she would be able to rest.

It was only then that the hairs on the back of her neck began to rise up. She stopped, not entirely sure why, except that something felt off. The magic around her felt wrong, like something was missing from it.

Birds. She heard no birds. No wildlife at all. No insects. Not one single frog.

Where were all of the animals? It was as if the area ahead and around her had become a void of wildlife. Not just in sounds, but in energy.

No. Not a void. There was...*something* out there.

She reached for her sword, only to remember that she had not yet been issued one. All she had was a dagger she had purchased on their first day of freedom, sheathed horizontally at the small of her back. Slowly, quietly, she pulled the long, slender steel blade out, and then moved to her right to get off of the path.

The forest was never this quiet, except when something was terribly wrong. Unfortunately, the part of the forest she was in was not dense with foliage, so there was very little for her to hide in, but she did find a large tree to duck behind.

Expecting *something* to come from the camp, she waited with bated breath. Her pack would become cumbersome if she entered battle, so as slowly and quietly as she could, she shrugged it off of her shoulders and set it down beside her.

Moments passed. Minutes passed. But nothing came into view over the hill. Yet with each passing moment, the feeling that something horrible was on the other side grew stronger.

When it felt like she had waited an eternity, and she was about to step out from behind the tree, she began to hear it. Low grumbles and grunts from countless sources. Talking. The grinding of axes sawing logs and the reverberating thumps of axes chopping.

It was what she would have expected to hear from a lumber mill. Shortly thereafter, she began to hear the sound of the pulley-driven large saw at the actual mill, designed to slice trees in half length-wise.

Yet there still were no animal or insect sounds, and the feeling that something was wrong did not abate.

She had to see what was wrong. She had to know. It would have been very easy for her to just turn around and go back to Everlin. Or would it?

The Orc War Campaigns - Counterstrike

If she went back to that town, with that wretched human being, it would have to be for a very good reason. So she crouched low, and edged out from the cover of her tree. No one was on the path, but she was not foolish enough to take it any further.

She wore no armor, but that only made her task of remaining quiet easier. With the greatest care, she began to move further away from the path, and towards the ridgeline. It took her longer than she would have liked to reach the top of that ridge, but she dared not move any faster.

Fearing detection if she remained in the open, she approached a tree at the crest, and then began to edge her face around it to peak at what lay ahead.

Only to feel her breath stop. From the ridge onward, the way was clear, with the majority of the trees having been cut down for the mill. That gave her an unhindered line of sight to that mill and those who worked at the mill.

Orcs. They were here! And judging by the pile of human corpses that had just been set on fire, they had recently slaughtered every member of the community. Unlike the reports of the Relkin Mine, however, the lumber mill had been left completely intact. It was now under the control of the orcs.

She didn't know how they could have made it so far into Tal undetected, or why they had made such a bold move, but it turned her veins to ice when she realized what it meant. If they were at Ironwood, they could have made it even further into Tal.

The mines hadn't just been a one-off attack to gain a foothold. It was part of a larger, coordinated attack, very unlike what they had come to expect from orcs.

They were organized, and more dangerous than ever.

Quietly, she eased backwards, and crawled away from the ridgeline. She feared her hammering heart would give away her position. There had been dozens of orcs working the mill, and there was no way she could defeat all of them by herself. She needed help.

She needed her team.

It wasn't the largest force they had assembled, not nearly as large as what they had defended Archanon with, but Cardin still found himself in awe. Before this year, he had never found himself in a war. Now he was in his second.

West of the First City, a small army of Tal and Erien Warriors had begun to assemble, as quickly as could be mobilized with the help of the Wizards. As he, Sira, Reis, and Dalin hurried out of the western gate, he felt a rush of energy.

However, it wasn't his own inner excitement that energized him. It was what he felt from his new ability. He could see and *feel* the Warriors, the Mages, the Wizards, a mix of powers, abilities, and colors, all gathered together. Is this what it would have felt like just before the Battle for Archanon?

They had not been given the time to return to Daruun to collect their heavy armor, chainmail and plate armor, and supplies in the city were still scarce. Cardin worried for his two friends, especially Reis, who had neither a magical or physical shield.

His friend had always insisted that he had the ability to keep up with any Mage in battle, and to be fair, he had proven that fact not two months ago on the Great Road between Daruun and Falind. As the Daruun Warriors had been decimated by the entire Falind army, his quirky, prankster friend had held his own against two Mages.

Cardin wore a simple suit of leather armor, the same one he had worn when they scouted the Relkin Mine. He did not need as much protection now, not with the powers he had gained from the Sword.

Of the four of them, Dalin looked the least protected, wearing nothing but his blue robes and wielding his oak staff. Yet of the four, he was easily the strongest.

The Orc War Campaigns - Counterstrike

Today, all of their skills would be tested. Orcs were not generally intelligent, and based on the young boy's description, most of them were armed only with rudimentary weapons. But there was no discounting the strength of orcs, or their viciousness.

Together Cardin and the others rushed to the front line, where they knew the Keeper was needed most. Among his many new abilities, he had learned to expand his shield, much like a Wizard, and could protect large numbers from archers or other ranged attacks.

Unfortunately, General Artula was still out, travelling from city to city to mobilize the Tal army, and the Allied Council had decided he was best left to complete that task. That left them with General Zilan, Erien's lead Warrior, to take them into battle.

"Keeper," he used Cardin's new title. He wore very pristine, well kept steel and chain armor, which was dyed a navy blue and white, his country's colors. "We have awaited your arrival." Was that his politically correct way of voicing his annoyance at his and his friends' tardiness?

"Then the army is ready," Sira asked.

"Let us find out," he stepped away from them, and then turned to address the forces.

"Captains, report readiness!"

His voice was stronger when he needed to command attention. Cardin's initial impression had been of a simple political pundit, not an experienced leader. Now, however, the crowd of a couple hundred Warriors and Wizards grew quiet, and the various Captains assigned to lead the dozen units reported all was ready.

Zilan nodded, and then seemed to consider his next words carefully. There were legends of the General's speeches, always inspiring, but always with the hint of a political agenda. Would he give another such speech now?

“Today we stand united once again,” he began, using some of his Mage abilities to enhance the volume of his voice. It was usually a skill only politicians learned. “Tal and Erien Warriors, as it always was and always should be, shoulder to shoulder.”

That was why there were no Falind or Saran Warriors. Zilan *was* making a statement. Unfortunately, it was the opposite statement than what King Beredis wanted. The idea was to unite all four kingdoms, not break down into their previous alliances.

“While far outnumbered, we stand with over fifty Wizards in our ranks, our newest allies in our continuing struggle to maintain peace and security in the East.” He placed his fists on his hips, and Cardin had to actually stifle a chuckle. Was he attempting to look more heroic? “No matter what happens, no matter what odds we face, stand together, stand united as we always have.” He drew his longsword and pointed it into the sky. “March with me! March to victory, and the destruction of the orcs!”

The Warriors all drew their weapons and raised them into the air, and cheered along with him. “To victory!”

Cardin, Sira, and Reis joined with him, and then steeled themselves for what came next.

“Wizards,” Zilan addressed Master Syrn, charged with leading the Wizard contingent. “The time is now. Take us to war.”

As one, a dozen Wizards stepped forward, including Syrn, and planted their staves in the ground. Cardin felt a torrent of energy suddenly rush into the area, and in a matter of moments, twelve blue-white walls of light, portals to predetermined locations near the Relkin Mining Camp, came to life.

Now it was Cardin’s turn. He and the remaining Wizards would all pass through together, so he stepped up next to Syrn, and felt as much as saw the other Wizards fill in the spaces between the portal summoners. It was the same strategy that had been employed by the Wizards and Tal Warriors to defeat the Falind Warriors.

The Orc War Campaigns - Counterstrike

He hoped it would be just as effective. It *had* to work.

“Now!” Zilan shouted.

Heart thundering in his ears, with the Sword of Dragons in hand, Cardin led the charge ahead of the Wizards, and passed through the nearest portal.

Only to run into a wall of orcs.

He hadn't expected instant battle, but his instincts kicked in, and he swung the Sword in a wide arc that sent a destructive wave of energy out. The group of orcs that were before him smashed into one another and into the forest, hopefully dead.

It had merely been an unfortunate circumstance. They were a patrol of orcs just outside of the mining camp, and thankfully no others appeared in the immediate vicinity. He was in a small clearing in the forest, not far from the camp. The sun was closing in on the horizon, but there was still more than enough light for them to fight, and would be for at least another hour or two.

Knowing he had to make way for others to pass through the portal, Cardin did not stop. He pushed forward towards the camp, looking for any more orcs that could threaten the portal. He glanced back and saw Dalin pass through. “Come on,” he beckoned, and charged forward alone.

“Wait!” the Wizard pleaded, but Cardin didn't listen.

His heart raced, and he felt magic flowing through him like it never had before. He felt like he could take anything on.

Passing by the orcs he had first encountered, he continued on, finding more orcs that were rushing towards the intruders. The Sword was as light as a dagger, so he swung it with confidence and ease, charging the blade with ethereal power that allowed it to cleave right through the orcs' weapons and armor. He tore through them, slaying them one by one, moving closer and closer to the camp.

Unfortunately, his forward momentum quickly came to a stop when he encountered the first enemy armed in the same darkened steel as those that had attacked Archanon. It was not so easily defeated.

When the Sword met the orc's blade, the clang echoed off of the trees and rang in his ears. The darkened steel sword had not broken.

And then the orc went on the offensive. It was stronger than the others Cardin had slain, faster, and his moves were much more calculated. Cardin attempted to parry and strike, but the orc had anticipated his attack and turned the tables back against Cardin.

Back and forth they struggled, one trying to claim the advantage over the other, their swords flying with a furious speed towards one another. Cardin was relieved when they paused for a moment and he noticed deep gouges and nicks within his opponent's blade.

Then he noticed that several other orcs were charging to their companion's aid. He could not keep this orc at bay and take on the others by himself. He had to think of something fast.

Suddenly the leading orc was struck by a bolt of lightning. Then another was impaled by a shard of ice.

Cardin turned, and saw Dalin, Sira, Reis, and the rest of their unit rushing to him. They had all come through the portal and were ready to advance.

His opponent tried to take advantage of the distraction and swung at him from overhead, but Cardin was too fast. He stepped aside, spun around, and sliced into the orc's abdomen, though the armor prevented him from cutting too deep.

It was a great blow to his opponent, but the orc did not give up. It released its weapon with one hand, clenched it into a fist, and punched Cardin hard on his cheekbone. Stars exploded in his vision, and he felt himself stumble back, jerking the Sword free of his opponent's body as he nearly crashed to the ground. The world seemed to spin around him.

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The wounded orc pulled a small knife from his boot and moved to strike him down, but a pinpoint precision blast of energy struck it in the chest, flinging it violently to the forest floor. A moment later, Sira was there to steady him. He looked at her and saw that she spoke, but at first her voice did not register. A flurry of Warriors and Wizards rushed past them to meet the charging orcs from the camp.

“Are you okay?” she repeated to him.

“Yeah,” he tenderly touched his bruised cheek, the ringing in his ears subsiding.

“What’s the matter,” Reis smirked, “never taken a punch to the face?”

“Hey,” he frowned at his friend, “you try getting punched by one of them.”

The sounds of clashing weapons, shouts, and roars erupted throughout the surrounding forest, not just from their area, but from everywhere. With the help of the Wizards, the army had instantly surrounded the camp from all directions except from the mountain.

“Cardin Kataar!” Zilan roared. The General had taken up the rear. Definitely nothing like Artula.

“You were to cover the portal, not run off into a one-man war.”

“Yes sir,” Cardin looked at the General, barely able to contain his annoyance. “But I had the initiative, and I was able to keep them back.”

“Do not stray from your unit again, Keeper,” Zilan warned, jabbing a finger into Cardin’s chest.

“I cannot afford to fight the orcs while trying to control you.”

Already annoyed with the conversation, Cardin backed away from the General and said, “Then let’s get back to the battle.”

Without waiting for further orders or reprimand, Cardin turned and, finally regaining his bearings, rushed into the fray of the battle.

As their unit made their way into the camp, Cardin found himself surprised at how few orcs there were. Reis’s report had suggested many, many more, thousands, perhaps tens of thousands.

However, all twelve units made it into the clearing fast, and before long, all of them had reached the wooden wall the orcs had hastily erected.

Dozens of orcs manned the walls with rudimentary bows and arrows. A few more of the dark-steel armored ones used their enchanted weapons to rain fire, ice, or lightning down upon the invading army, but the shields of the Wizards were more than adequate, so much so that Cardin didn't even need to raise his own shield.

Far weaker than the Falind wall had been when Tal and the Wizards had invaded, the orc wall was breached in every quarter by simple blasts from individual Wizards. Even Cardin's own powers were strong enough that he created a small hole large enough for one person at a time to squeeze through.

The camp itself wasn't as heavily guarded as he would have expected. More and more he began to suspect that they were too late. Zilan had been right, and the orcs had already spread out from the camp. It was their beachhead, and they were advancing.

Several dozen orcs began to stream out of the entrance to the mine to join their failing forces. Cardin began to make his way there, knowing that if he could collapse the mine entrance, the Allies could then simply let the trapped orcs suffocate.

Defeating as many orcs along the way as he could, it didn't take Cardin long to approach the entrance. He began to charge the Sword with magic to send a blast into the mountain, but then something he didn't expect happen.

One more enemy emerged from the mine, but it was not an ordinary orc. It was much taller than the others, at least a head and a half taller than Cardin. No, more, as it stood up tall now that it wasn't in the mine. Cardin also noted that it looked considerably stronger than its compatriots.

It also wore the darkened steel armor. However, unlike the others, he did not wield a sword. Instead, he held a large double-headed battle axe in both hands. And somehow, he honed in on Cardin.

“By the gods,” he craned his neck to look up at the monster. “From what decadent swamp did they conjure you from?”

The orc smirked, sniffed, and shook his head. “You,” he pointed the axe at Cardin. “You have no idea what has begun.”

Cardin felt himself hesitate. The orc had not only spoken to him, but had done so in very clear, intelligent speech. That was not normal.

“I think I do,” Cardin replied cautiously, stepping to the side of the orc. He still had a full charge gathered within the Sword, and wanted to take down the mine entrance. However, he noticed that no other orcs emerged from it. Perhaps the big one was the last of them. He looked again to the giant orc. “A war to wipe out your people.”

The smirk on the orc’s face vanished, replaced by rage. “You have no idea!” he shouted, and charged at Cardin. It was like a giant boulder coming down the mountain.

Cardin should have side stepped the monster, but he wanted to prove his new powers were superior, so he stood his ground, enhanced his own strength by coursing magic into his muscles, and threw up a shield.

With a roar, the orc brought down his axe and shattered Cardin’s magical shield. He did this while at a run, and his momentum wasn’t diminished even a little. The giant slammed into Cardin full force and plowed him back several dozen feet. Cardin gasped for air as he slid to a stop, clutching his chest and trying to force air back into his chest, past the pain.

The orc didn’t stop. With Cardin temporarily incapacitated, he began swinging his axe with deadly effect at the other Mages and Warriors around them, cutting them down left and right. One Mage managed to send a blast of magic at the orc, but the armor seemed to absorb it. Or the orc just didn’t care or notice. Cardin believed that the latter was entirely possible.

The Sword! Cardin realized he'd lost his grip on the Sword, and it was no longer with him. He struggled to sit up and began to search for his weapon frantically. There it was, several feet away from him. And that was where the orc was headed. He wanted the Sword.

What terrible damage could an orc do with such power? Especially an orc as strong and apparently unstoppable as this one?

Cardin scrambled to get to his weapon, but the Orc just smirked, and sent a blast of fire at Cardin. Once again instinct kicked in, and he was able to send up a shield in time to deflect the fire. The heat still radiated through the barrier, and the blast of fire did not immediately end. As beads of sweat collected on his brow, he wished he could deflect all of the heat, not just the flame.

When Cardin felt like the heat would soon be too much to bear, he turned his head just in time to see Dalin had found him. With a quick focusing of magic through his staff, the Wizard sent a shard of ice flying at the orc.

He was surprisingly quick for his size, and managed to use his axe to deflect the shard, but it had been strong enough to stop his advance towards the Sword, and cut off the stream of fire. Dalin sent another shard, and another, but the orc managed to deflect each one.

"Puny Wizards," the orc shouted. "Do you truly believe ice can destroy me?"

Dalin paused, shrugged, and then sent a half-dozen bolts of lightning all at once. The creature also blocked these with the axe, but tendrils of the lightning played across the weapon, and onto the orc's arms. He shouted in rage and pain, and stumbled backwards. He looked at his smoldering arm and bared his teeth.

"You overestimate yourself," Dalin retorted, and sent another barrage of lightning bolts at him. This was very effective in making the orc back off further. Finally, with a frightening glare, he turned away from the battle.

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From somewhere in his armor, he produced a small vial filled with a lilac-colored fluid. He smashed the vial into the ground in front of him, and suddenly, with an unnatural rush of magic, a lilac-colored portal opened before the orc.

Before anyone could stop him, he disappeared into the wall of light, and moments later, it closed.

Cardin remained crouched down for a moment, staring at where the orc had been only moments ago. Where had he come from? How was he so much stronger, so different from any other orc he'd ever encountered?

Finally, when it registered in his mind that he was safe, Cardin dispelled his energy shield and stood up. His back popped in several places as he did so, and he cringed.

Dalin approached him, and gently placed a hand on his shoulder. "That looked and sounded painful, my friend."

Cardin nodded in agreement, "Yeah. More my pride than anything else."

The Wizard chuckled. "This is why you should not run off on your own."

Feeling his face turn red, Cardin walked over to the Sword and carefully picked it up. It was the first time he had lost the Sword since it had first been entrusted to him. The first time he had almost failed.

Two months in and he was already close to failure...

That was when he realized how quiet their surroundings had become. He turned back to the rest of the camp, and found that only a handful of orcs remained, and they were all surrounded. They didn't give up, however, and every single one of them fought to their very last breath.

The Allies had won.

Cardin returned to the Wizard's side and surveyed the battlefield. There were countless orc corpses, maimed, burned, frozen, totally destroyed. As he looked closer, he found some Allies wounded, being tended to by their friends.

Out there, away from where the giant orc had been, there wasn't a single Allied death, only wounds. However, when Cardin looked back to where the monstrous orc had fought, he saw seven dead Warriors.

That one orc was going to be a major problem. And what if there were more like him?

How many had already left the camp before their battle?

Cardin again looked to Dalin, and he commented, "Well no matter what I think about Zilan, he was right."

Dalin nodded thoughtfully. "The orcs have pushed further into Tal."

So much for a quick end to the war.

Pain. So much pain.

The orc leader, Arkad, stood on the other side of the portal. He looked down at his smoldering arm and clenched his forearm muscles, shooting fresh currents of pain throughout his entire body. His grey skin was blackened in some parts, and even a little of his black-red blood seeped out. The Wizards were indeed a true threat. Just as his master had warned.

That didn't matter. Pain was temporary, and the Wizards were limited in number. Their power was great, but even they could not hold back their numbers. Nothing could stop his army.

In his other arm he held his enchanted double-axe firmly. It had served him well today. Many humans had been slain by his hand alone. With a satisfied smile, he looked up to find the Fortress of Nasara ahead of him.

The blackened fortress, a nightmare structure made of the black indigenous stones of the Wastelands, loomed ahead. Several of his brothers and sisters still worked on restoring its damaged exterior.

Summer in the wastelands was pleasantly hot and humid, and he inhaled a deep breath to take in all of the pungent scents. It was not his home, but it was close enough that he felt at least a little at ease.

With confidence undue for her rank, another orc approached him swiftly. She wore simple leather armor, blackened by fire in a pitiful attempt to match his own dark-steel armor. "Arkad," she called out in clear, confident words. "We did not expect you to return so soon."

He grunted at Orinda. "The humans attacked much sooner than expected." He began walking towards the entrance to the fortress. Several orcs stood guard, but as he approached, they parted, showing him all of the respect he deserved. "I must inform her."

Orinda placed a hand on his shoulder to stop him, and he nearly bit it off of her arm. She retracted her hand quickly, only to then have her face turn darker in embarrassment. It had been enough to stop him.

"She knows," Orinda stated. "She saw your failure and sent me out to meet with you."

He felt his own face grow warm. The master was sorely disappointed in him if she would not even see him. A broad smile crossed Orinda's face, showing off her long canines. She reveled in his failure and embarrassment.

"What are her orders," he asked through a clenched jaw.

She waved him off and began to walk away from the fortress. "Your failure is of no great consequence. It is but one of many."

He followed after her, clutching his axe with both hands, tightening his grip until he could hear the wood groan. He could take her head off in one blow. It would be so easy with his strength and the axe's enchantments.

She moved towards an encampment of his warriors, all of whom began to stand up in honor of Arkad's approach. No doubt they could see the foul look on his face and knew he would take *their* heads if they did not show their reverence.

Orinda stopped at the edge of the camp and looked at Arkad. "You will take this group to reinforce our armies in the mountains. Our master prepares another portal as we speak. Now that we know the humans are ready, we must reinforce our forces. They must complete their objective."

Arkad felt a broad smile cross his face, and felt even more pleased when Orinda flinched at the sight of his teeth. "I will not fail her again."

She almost reached her hand out to him again, but another glance at his teeth made her think twice about it. "Be sure you do not," Orinda lectured. "We need the supplies to arm the rest of our army."

He wanted so badly to take her head off of her shoulders, and he brandished his axe threateningly at her. Some fear showed on her face, but they also both knew that he was unwilling to suffer the consequences of killing his master's favorite pet.

With a quick snuff, Orinda walked past him, back towards the fortress.

His anger at her began to boil up again, but when he looked at the encampment of orcs, his anger turned to glee. His time was still at hand. He would lead his people to a victory that would ensure freedom for them all.

The humans would suffer for the indignities they had suffered upon his people. He would make sure of it.