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LICH KING

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SUMMER 2026 BETA EDITION

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CHAPTER 8

A WAY IN

Jagar knelt down, his knee pressed into the soft ground. He ran his thick fingers through the dark patch of drying orc blood in the grass, almost like he was caressing it. He raised his fingers to his face and rubbed them together. After a few moments, he let out a gruff sigh and stood up. “A spear. Did you find one?”

One of the elves nodded. “Over there. A simple one.”

Unngk’s spear lay on the ground near a bush. Jagar picked it up, and flipped it in his hands. The balance felt a bit off. He had fashioned it as a symbol, after all, and not as a fighting weapon. He snapped off a chunk of the staff, and spun the remainder of the shortened spear in his palm. After a few more tricks and flips, he nodded.

“Rank’gaar, let’s go!”

Jagar started walking away from the burning barn, toward the city gates.

The two elf women looked at The Swift. “Rank’gaar? Is that your name?”

The Swift rolled his eyes. “No.” He held up a hand, “Just a minute,” and ran around in front of Jagar. “Wait. Don’t you want

to find Unngk?”

Jagar stared down at The Swift. “He’s not here.”

The Swift waved at the city. “So, you think he’s over there somewhere?”

Jagar nodded. “Everyone is over there.” He pointed to the side of The Swift’s head. “Use those fancy elf ears of yours.”

The Swift smirked. “What about tracks? Why don’t you just follow them? Isn’t that your thing? They can’t have gotten far.”

Jagar faced the elves. “Do you see any tracks?”

One of the elves tilted her head. “Now that you mention it, no.”

Jagar turned back to The Swift. “No.”

The Swift scrunched up his face. “No tracks? How can that be?”

Jagar gruffed. “There weren’t any tracks leading out of our village, either. At least not an entire army’s worth of them.”

The elf perked up. “Maybe they used the tunnels.”

Jagar and The Swift both looked at her. “The what?”

The prettier elf nudged her companion. The two elves entered into a heated discourse of whispers, hand gestures, and twisted faces.

Jagar nudged The Swift. “Here it comes.”

The Swift squinted. “Here what comes?”

Jagar smiled. “Just wait.” He held up a hand that eclipsed The Swift’s entire face.

The two elves finished their conversation. The pretty one stood and crossed her arms while the other approached Jagar and The Swift.

“I am Kinnara.” She motioned back to her companion. “This is my charge, Dewa. Our two groups seem to have a common purpose.”

Jagar leaned back. He looked down at The Swift. “That.”

Kinnara tilted her head. “What?”

Jagar nodded to Kinnara. “Agreed. Go on.”

Kinnara softened. “We have both lost kin today. Alive, hopefully, all of them.” she looked at Jagar, “But kidnapped by these invaders. And I agree, they are likely being held together,

or at least close to each other. We.” Kinnara emphasized the word and motioned to her partner. “We think we’ll all have a better chance to find them and free them, if we work together.” Dewa snorted, but otherwise remained quiet.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” The Swift half whispered, shaking his head.

Kinnara shot a look at The Swift. “What was that?”

The Swift held his hands up. “No, no. I agree. Sorry, I was just...” He tilted his head. “I was just overwhelmed with excitement that the two of you are going to join us. Double our chances, as it were.” He smiled. “I am,” he swept his arms out and made his usual, step-back bow, “The Silken Swift.”

Kinnara tilted her head. “The Silken Swift. That’s you?”

The Swift straightened up. “You’ve heard of me?”

Jagar snorted. “You’ve heard of him?”

Kinnara nodded. “Of course. The name is so ridiculous, how could I forget.”

The Swift grimaced.

“I heard it came up as a suspect in a number of break-in and petty theft cases around the university.”

Dewa joined her companion. “I will be telling my father about this, as soon as it’s all over.”

The Swift shrugged. “I assure you ladies, I had nothing—”

Jagar put his hand on The Swift’s head. “IF, we get out of this, and you help me find my family, I’ll give him to you myself.”

The Swift scowled at Jagar. “And this,” he looked into the air, “this double-crossing, back-stabber is Jagar, who’s not half bad... when he’s not threatening to kill you, or have you arrested.” He smiled. “How may we be of service?”

Jagar rolled his eyes. “She just told us that. We don’t have time for any more of your smooth-tongued maneuvering.” He looked at Kinnara. “Tell me about these tunnels.”

Kinnara smiled. “Better if we just show you. Follow us.” The elves jogged off toward what looked like an inn. It was difficult to tell for certain, as it was also on fire. As they approached, they diverted away from the burning building and ran toward the outer ramparts. When they circled around some bushes, The Swift

slowed, and his eyes widened. In front of him Dewa opened what seemed like an otherwise regular chunk of stone in the outer wall, the soft glow of light came from within.

Dewa waved her hand forward. "Hurry."

The Swift stepped in to the lighted tunnel. He looked around him in awe at what he saw. Smooth white stones, each block exactly the same size, patched together to make the walls, floor, and ceiling that travelled with a gentle downward slope as far as he could see. A thin line of gold ran down each wall and glistened in the bright light, that from what he could tell, did not have any obvious source. There were no torches, no magic glowing balls floating in the air, just a soft, warm light that filled the tunnel.

Kinnara studied the Swift. "You've never been in these tunnels before?"

"Wha?" The Swift slumped a little. "Yes. Yes, of course, I have."

Kinnara cocker her head to the side.

"I...I've just been away for a while and had forgotten how beautiful they are."

Kinnara closed the door behind them. It slid into place and once again, it looked like just another piece of the wall. "These tunnels were designed for the members of the upper city to move around or get out during an emergency. It's possible that the enemy found them, and is using them to obscure their movement."

Jagar took in the passageway. "I assume they lead to various strategic locations throughout the city, yes?"

Kinnara shrugged. "Well—"

Dewa cut her off. "That's enough. Let's go." She turned and took off down the hallway. Kinnara motioned and followed. Their footsteps echoed off the hard stone as the ran.

"Wait." Jagar called out. "Where are we going?"

Dewa stopped and turned around. "If we go down this hall, there will be a branch that will take us to the upper city where I can contact my father."

Jagar scowled. "Again with your father?"

"Just follow me." Dewa continued down the hallway.

The Swift looked at Jagar. “How did you know?”

Jagar tilted his head. “How did I know what, about her father? I don’t anything about him, but I’m getting more interested in who he is every time she brings him up.”

“No, not that. All the way, back in the woods, before any of this. You said the elves were going to help you. And now here we are. How did you know?”

Jagar shrugged. “Basic psychology. Elves, orc, even you humans, sure we all have our obvious differences,” he reached out and poked The Swift in the ear again, “but when it comes down to behavior, and the choices we make, we’re all basically the same. We all have things we want. Show someone that you have value to them, and they will at least be open to that, and will likely try to use it to their advantage. I just turned that around on them, and used their inevitable interest in me to get what I wanted.”

“Oh really? So what do you want from me?” The Swift smirked.

He pushed The Swift. “I want you to go that way.”

The Swift and Jagar followed the elves through various turns and crossings in the tunnels. The air was clean, and they felt energetic and fresh as they ran. The Swift tried to map out in his head what part of the city they were under as they twisted their way through the tunnels.

The path forked, and Dewa led the team toward an incline in the tunnel. “This is it, this way.”

As she started up the fork, she stumbled. A deep rumble resonated through the tunnels, shaking the walls and floor. The Swift held out a hand to stabilize himself against a wall. He gasped. “Thallan Cor. What was that?”

Jagar and the elves froze and stared at each other. Another boom rolled through the tunnels. Some debris dribbled down from the ceiling.

“Sounds like the college magicians are turning the tides of the battle.” The Swift’s voice trembled a little as he spoke.

“No.” Jagar looked up at the ceiling. “That wasn’t magic.”

Dewa scoffed. “Sure it was.”

Jagar shook his head. “No. That was a building falling down,

a big one.”

The rest of the team looked at each other as though they didn’t want to admit he was right.

Jagar turned back the way they came. “We need to leave. These tunnels are a death trap.”

Kinnara held up a hand. “Wait.”

Jagar protested. “What? We need to go.”

She focused. “I hear something.”

Jagar scowled. “Whatever it is, it doesn’t concern us.”

“This way.” Kinnara sprinted down the hallway. Jagar continued his protest, but followed after the rest of the team. He found them kneeling among a small group of elves who were laying on the tunnel floor.

Kinnara cradled the head and shoulders of one in her lap. His legs sprawled out behind him, broken and unmoving. His silk tunic was coated with a blood that shimmered a mixture of light green and silver.

The wounded elf choked. “The cyrach army, they came from everywhere.”

Kinnara adjusted his shoulders. “What do you mean, they breached the outer walls and rushed in?”

He coughed. “No. They came from inside and outside the city at the same time.”

Kinnara looked at him confused. “What? How?”

The elf exhaled. “I don’t know. Just suddenly they were there, everywhere. Like they came right through the mountains.”

Dewa knelt next to them. “But you got away?”

“Yes. We were part of a group escaping from the upper city, but most of us were injured during the invasion. Many died along the way, he pointed back into the tunnels.”

“Where is everyone else?”

The elf coughed. “Those who weren’t injured, or were still strong enough, they went on and left us here.”

Kinnara flinched. “What? Why? Couldn’t they just heal you?”

He dropped his head. “They didn’t want to use their magic, said they needed to save it. They just left us here, like we were nothing to them, like we didn’t matter.”

Kinnara opened her canteen. "Here, drink."

The man spit out some of the water. "They're here!" He raised a hand and pointed at Jagar.

Dewa spun, her sword drawn half-way, but then relaxed. "No. He's with us. Fighting on our side."

The elf did not show any sign that he agreed, but seemed too weak to argue. He laid his head on Kinnara's lap and closed his eyes.

Dewa faced Jagar. "Go find your master and disturb these poor wounded no more. Leave them at peace, orc."

Jagar huffed and scanned the tunnel for The Swift.

Everywhere he turned, he was met with fear and anger from the huddle of injured elves. He relaxed, seeing a familiar leather coat. He took a few steps and came upon The Swift who squatted next to an elf lying on the floor. Still, and even more pale than normal for an elf, Jagar recognized the blank stare of a lifeless body.

"His name was Llolean." The Swift spoke without moving. "We were in class together here, at the college. We got into a fight yesterday. We got into fights many days, but yesterday was a big one." He sighed and stood. He turned to face Jagar. "He was rich, entitled, arrogant. A real, top-level rank'gaar, if there ever was one. All of them, he and his friends."

Jagar nodded.

"There were many times I'd wished him dead. I'd wished it on that whole group. I imagined a hundred different ways that they died. But now that—" A tear ran down The Swift's face.

"I...I never really meant it."

Jagar put a hand on The Swift's shoulders. "Aye. I understand...and I think now you do, too. Yes?"

The Swift looked up at Jagar.

"Death is never easy, but when its like this, when someone comes and steals away your truth, that cuts a wound that never heals."

The Swift blinked and then a stern look came over his face. "Yes. I understand."

Another wave thundered through the tunnels. More dirt and rock dust spilled onto the floor. Jagar stiffened and then shot up



straight.

“We have to go. Now!”

Kinnara glared at Jagar. “We can’t just leave all of these people here.”

“Listen.” Jagar pointed down the hallway

The Swift shrugged. “Just sounds like wind to me.”

Kinnara’s face drained. “Oh no.”

Jagar grabbed The Swift by the arm, directing him down the hallway. He stared at Dewa. “Elf! How do we get up?”

Dewa grimaced “Up?”

“You said you were going to the upper city. That sound. That’s rushing water. The tunnels are compromised. The lakes are draining into these halls. We need to get up there immediately.”

Dewa shuffled. “Umm.”

Jagar pointed. “Where does this go?”

Kinnara stood. She motioned. “Go down that way.”

“Follow me.” Dewa ran off the direction that Kinnara suggested.

“Dewa, wait!” Kinnara looked back over the crowd of elves gathered on the tunnel floor. The foot falls of her colleague trailed off down the hallway. She knelt down to help a young child off the floor. It yelped as it put weight on its feet. “Can you walk? Can anyone walk?” Kinnara addressed the group of elves, but none replied.

The child shook its head and lifted one leg off the floor. The Swift helped support the child. “Is it broken?”

A thin cord of shimmering water slid down the smooth stone floor. Almost like clear, liquid glass, it was visible only because of the slight distortion it caused as it expanded and skimmed across the marble surface. It found Jagar’s boot and pooled up against the sole, then looped around the toe, and continued down the hallway. Another strand of shimmering refraction followed it, and then another. In moments a layer of gliding water filled the hallway floor. The elves sighed as the lake waters rushed past them. The young elf in Kinnara’s hands leaned against its injured leg and showed a sign of relief.

The water rose a little higher and rushed over elves who lay

on the floor. The young elf put its weight on the injured foot, and bounced as though it were good as new. A loud roar echoed down the hallway walls. Kinnara pushed the young elf forward. "Run!"

Kinnara and Swift helped a few of the elves to their feet, all now showing significant recovery from their injuries. The water levels rose up higher, and started to ripple off the walls.

"Let's go, now!" Jagar ran toward Kinnara and The Swift. Water splashed with each of his footfalls. Several elves now had enough strength to stand, and helped each other rise and start down the hallway. Jagar grabbed The Swift and Kinnara, and threw them over his shoulders.

"We have to help them!" Kinnara beat Jagar's back with her fists as he ran. Ankle deep water slowed his attempt to escape, winds howling in the hallway behind them. Several elves sprinted past him, light on their feet and not carrying two of their companions.

Jagar lowered Kinnara as he ran. "Go back if you want." He continued the way Dewa had gone when she left them, and soon Kinnara rushed past them.

The loud rush of water filled the hallway and Jagar struggled to push forward with any pace. His gate was now more of a hop than running, in an attempt to lift his legs out of the water. The winds created by rushing waters pushed him as much as he did himself. Ahead of them, he could see Kinnara's head and arm sticking out of a hallway.

"Hurry!" She yelled to him, but he could scarcely hear her over the roar of the wind and approaching torrent. After a few more strides, he threw The Swift down the hallway who splashed into knee deep water, and flopped the rest of the way toward Kinnara. She reached for his arm, but missed, instead grasping a handful of thick brown hair. She strained and lifted, but could not pull him out of the surge.

Jagar jumped forward, using the walls to help push himself as much as he could. A massive wall of water filled the hallway behind him. The wave of water seethed and boiled in on itself charging toward Jagar like a massive, enraged mother bear protecting its cub.

He dove down into the stream, using the flow of the water to push himself forward, ahead of the churning wall that closed down on them. When he reached The Swift's feet, he twisted his body. One giant green hand grabbed the corner between the two hallways, while the other pushed his companion up the incline, where Dewa and Kinnara pulled him out of the rushing water.

Jagar's feet scrambled against the slick floor under the flowing stream, unable to find traction to push himself out of the water. He felt a pair of hands grab his wrist and pull him forward. It made little progress as he struggled against the force of the rapids. Another pair of hands joined, and his head and shoulders rose up out of the water. The Swift, a shorter, human Swift, and Kinnara pulled on his arm. He managed to find the floor and pushed forward with his feet. Half of his body was out of the water and on the incline when a surge of lake water filled the hallway below them. The rush of the wave slammed Jagar against the opposite wall and he felt his feet being pushed against the corner. The Swift and Kinnara held their grip, and leaned back, hoisting him up onto the incline.

Water roared below them. He stood to thank his companions, but saw the two elves staring at human now standing with them, their faces half confused, half enraged. The Swift smirked and shrugged. Jagar sighed and pushed The Swift up the incline. He waved his arms forward, to usher the team further up the hallway.

A small trickle of water ran down the slope and joined the river flowing behind them. Jagar looked up. Another small trickle ran down the wall next to them.

"Vit'la." Jagar glared at the water. He motioned his arms faster. "Go, go!"

The elves looked around them and saw the lines of water coming down the hallway toward them. They started up the rising hall, and quickly passed The Swift. A second trickle joined the first, and then soon and third and fourth.

Dewa and Kinnara bounced up the hallway, but then suddenly we Dewa stepped forward, her feet spun out from under her. She crashed to the hallway floor, and slipped away from Kinnara on the slick floors. The Swift reached out for her. His hand grasped

onto hers, but they were both wet and could not secure a strong grip. She slipped away from him and plunged into the rushing water below them.

“Dewa!” Kinnara screamed for her companion, but she was gone. Kinnara ran down the hallway, and was stopped by Jagar. She howled at the rushing water. The Swift turned, took two steps, and dove into the water after Dewa. Jagar twitched, thinking he saw a leathery, green tail swish in the water where The Swift had entered.

Kinnara pushed against Jagar. “We have to help her!”

Jagar shrugged and let her go. “After you.”

Kinnara looked at the rushing water, and then back at Jagar. “You mean?”

“How else do you plan to help?”

Kinnara faced the water, but hesitated. “I guess—”

Jagar pushed her in. “See you on the other side.” He sighed and dove in after her.



THANK YOU!



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