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LICH KING

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SUMMER 2026 BETA EDITION

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CHAPTER 7

RETURN TO TAVA
CARAID LLYN

The Silken Swift trotted up to Jagar. “If you’re going to lead me to my untimely death, the least you can do is tell me your name.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, of course, it’s just common decency. Do you orcs know about things like decency?”

Jagar glanced down and smirked. “Where you come from, is it considered decent to hide who you really are from your companions?”

Elven Swift squinted. “Of course not.”

Jagar grunted and kept walking.

The Swift stopped and held up his hands. “What?”

“Well, are you human or elf? Or something else?” Jagar stopped and turned to face The Swift. “Maybe you’re a dvergr and you just don’t want me to kill you.” He put his hand on the top of the axe tucked in his belt.

The Swift held up his hands. “No! No, definitely not, and why are you always threatening to kill me?”

He released the image of Athralaryn from the back of his mind

that he had been using for his elven form. He began to shrink and broaden as he transformed back into the human body, his natural body, that he held when Jagar and Unngk first found him. When the change was complete, he opened his arms and tilted his head.

"Many apologies. Sometimes I, well, I just tend to forget how I look on the outside. You, my fine, errm, orc, it just so happens that you have the distinguished good fortune to be in the presence of none other than," he stepped back with one foot and bowed, "The Silken Swift."

Jagar snorted. "The what?"

"The Silken Swift. Delighter of fair maidens, discoverer of secrets, and obtainer of seclusive artifacts."

"So, you're a con-man and a thief." Jagar nodded. "I can see how wearing many different faces would be useful in your profession."

"I prefer the term, *Rapscallion*."

Jagar scoffed.

The Swift stepped in front of Jagar. "And you are?"

"In a hurry." Jagar pushed The Swift forward. "Pick up the pace."

The Swift stumbled backwards. "Sorry if I'm not in any rush to go face an army of un-killable dwarves with some kind of weird, purple fire-breathing zombie dragons."

"The sun is reaching its high point. Would you rather take your time and fight them in the dark?"

The Swift stopped and shrugged. "I don't want to fight them at all. And look," he pointed to the sky, "it's so gloomy. How can you tell where the sun is? It looks like it's going to rain."

"Unngk, do we care if it's raining?"

"No kor. We fight in the rain, snow, day, or night, because we don't know when the enemy will attack."

Jagar nodded. "Right. Now move, the enemy is already attacking." He nudged The Swift forward again who stumbled at the force of the push. "Rather than complaining, Mr. Swift, or whatever you call yourself, why don't you make this time useful and tell me what you know about this elf city?"

The Swift collected himself and regained his footing. "Let's be careful, now. You don't want to kill me by accident while I can still provide so much value to you. You can save that pleasure for when you really want it, yes?"

Jagar smirked and nodded.

“So, you want me to tell you what I know about Tava Cara-id llynn?” The Swift thought back to the princess and the night before, and smiled. “Well...”

Jagar continued straight ahead. “How big is their garrison? What kinds of fortifications do they have?”

The Swift smirked and skipped around Jagar. “To be honest with you, I wasn’t really paying attention to those kinds of things, if you know what I mean.”

Jagar rapped The Swift on the back of the head.

“Hey! What the hell, baj’tahi. I thought you wanted my help.”

Jagar stopped in his tracks and snorted. He looked at Unngk, who doubled over, laughing.

The Swift gave them a confused look. “What? I thought we were in a hurry?”

Jagar grinned. “What did you just say?”

The Swift’s face flushed hot, unable to hide a rising level of shame and confusion. “You need my help. That’s what you said.”

Jagar stared at his companion. “Before that. You were trying to say something in Orrach.”

The Swift shrugged. “What the hell? I mean, you smacked me, what do you expect me to say?”

Jagar took in a deep breath. “You called me,” he squinted and looked at Unngk who shrugged. “baj’kaji?”

“No, I called you ‘baj’tahi.’”

Jagar and Unngk chuckled again.

“Make him say it again, kor.”

The Swift scowled. “You think it’s funny that I called you an asshole?”

Jagar smiled at Unngk. “Is that what you think you said?”

The Swift’s embarrassment peaked.

“What you called me was,” Jagar screwed up his face, “the best I can come up with is, well, a whole leg of a ham.”

“Cut from a freshly slaughtered wild boar,” Unngk added.

Jagar tilted his head toward Unngk.

“A ham?” The Swift squinted, looking up at the sky for answers.

“From a wild boar.” Unngk swung his backpack around. “I may have some in here, hang on.” He opened his pack, shuffled around inside, and then held out half of a sandwich to The Swift.

Jagar waved his hand. “Alright, that’s enough. Let’s go. Unngk, we need to keep moving.”

“But kor, from what Mr. Swift was saying, it sounded like he had to leave in a hurry, and he probably didn’t get to have any breakfast. And after what just happened back there, you know with the—” Unngk lurched, pretending to vomit, “Well, I expect he needs some nourishment to refresh his body. Besides, we didn’t get to finish our breakfast either before we—” He paused and his face dropped.

The Swift reached out. “You’re right. I’m very hungry.” He took the sandwich from Unngk and bit into it. He perked up, chewing. “Hey.” He chewed some more and swallowed. He looked at the sandwich. “Wow, this is really delicious.” He turned his attention toward Unngk and put a hand to his chest. “Thank you.”

Unngk nodded, his eyes down.

The Swift looked at Jagar. “What did I say? What’s wrong?”

“Just this morning, he was preparing a feast for our village. Today is the anniversary of his mother’s day of honor.”

The Swift looked at Unngk who moved next to his father. He took another bite of the sandwich. “You were? Well, the how the hell did you wind up here, in elf territory, of all places?”

“This army we’re hunting kidnapped my daughter, and destroyed our village.” Jagar exhaled. “Burned it to the ground, everything. The fact that we were out exercising is probably the only reason we’re still alive.” He pointed to the sandwich. “And that, that’s probably the last of what’s left from the feast he was preparing. So you see, this isn’t just some personal spat between orcs and dvergr, and I don’t have any delusions about what we’re up against. This is about family and community, and trying to save what’s left of ours. We need to get going and stay focused before they get any further ahead of us, and we lose our chance to save Mey from whatever they have planned for her.”

The Swift took another bite and pointed the sandwich at Unngk. “Did you and your sister get along?”

Unngk nodded slightly. “Yes, I guess so.”

The Swift pursed his lips. “You know. I grew up in a big family. I had several brothers and sisters. I was the younger one, like you. They used to beat me, take my things,” he sighed, “just about every mean thing you can think of...they did it. I can’t say I’d be all that upset if they had been kidnapped by a band of dwarf warriors.” He chuckled. “Hell, I’d probably be happy about it.” He looked down. “You know, you’re a lucky kid, Unngk. You have

a family that cares about each other.” His eyes met with Unngk’s again. He swallowed the last bit of the sandwich and he nodded. “And a heck of a sandwich chef.” He stood upright and arched his back. “That really hit the spot, you’re right, I feel a hundred times better.” He tilted his head and winked. “Let’s go get your sister back.” He started jogging.

Jagar and Unngk followed. When they caught up to The Swift, Jagar leaned in, “Next time, if you want to call me an ‘asshole’ in the manner you were thinking, as an insult, try using ‘rank’gaar’.”

“Rangaar.” The Swift whispered.

“Close. And I’m sure you’ll find plenty of opportunities to practice.”

“Rankgaar, rangaar, rangkaar.”

Jagar pushed The Swift to the ground, and motioned with his hand. “Unngk, get down.”

The Swift shot an angry look at Jagar. “Rangkar!”

Jagar put his finger to his lips. “Better, now shut up.” He pointed ahead of them. “Patrol. We must be getting close.”

The Swift rolled over and saw a band of small, but heavily armed warriors in the woods ahead of them.

“Stay still, they make so much noise in that armor, they should walk right past us.” He tilted his head. “Speaking of noise, what is that?”

The Swift shook his head. “I don’t hear anything.”

Jagar looked at his son. “Unngk, do you hear that?”

Unngk nodded. “Yes, kor. Some loud screaming, but like through a metal tube, or something.”

The Swift held up a hand. “Wait a second.”

He closed his eyes and his form began to change. He became a little more slender, and paler in tone as he transformed back into the elven form of Athralaryn that he used earlier.

Unngk quivered, a wide smile on his face, watching The Swift change his form.

Elven Swift squinted and focused.

“Ah, yes, I hear it now.” He wiggled a finger at his now pointy and elongated ears. “Elf ears can hear a much wider and longer range than human. Those are the water bells. They float in the lakes around city. That sound is an alarm. The city is under attack. There are hundreds of them. They sing all sorts of—”

Jagar covered The Swift’s mouth. “Didn’t need some floating bells to tell me that.”

Both men sat quietly, listening. The warning cries of the elven cantu weren't the only sounds hanging on the air. Pounding war drums and bleating horns mixed with the howls of giant beasts and the the roar of tens of thousands of soldiers, battle cries from those charging and the shrieks and screams from the fallen. Heavy war machines creaked and groaned as they released their lethal payloads that crashed into the thick stone ramparts protecting Tava Caraid llynn.

"Gach'dor." Jaguar slapped The Swift on the back. "Sounds like you brought us to the right place."

The Swift winced in pain. "Really?"

Jagar got up to go.

Swift held up a hand. "Hey, we're near the end of the woods."

"That's good." Jaguar replied.

"The city is built on a couple of lakes, one above," the Swift held out two hands, "and one below. They are connected by waterfalls."

Jagar snarled. "Sounds lovely."

A loud explosion echoed off the trees. The Swift and Unngk winced, Jagar straightened and looked forward.

"Let's go." He motioned forward.

"Wait," cautioned the Swift. "Don't you want to do some reconnaissance for a few days, or something like that?"

"There won't be a city, or your princess, left in a few days. Let's go. Now."

Jagar started jogging toward the city and Unngk followed behind him. The Swift rolled his eyes, but had no choice other than to follow the two orcs. They dodged between some trees, working closer to the outlying town that surrounded the main city and spread to the edge of the forest. As they approached, the sounds of war grew louder. The Swift tensed with each monstrous howl or thunderous crash that reverberated through the forest.

Jagar dropped down again and crawled up a small hill. The Swift crept up next to Jaguar and squeezed in between the big orc and a fallen tree. He lifted his head and peaked through a gap between Jaguar and the log, in an attempt to get a view of Tava Caraid llynn. His first look at the city since he left in such a hurry that morning was nothing at all like what he was expecting. As he gazed out, the city, the ramparts, towers, and buildings of Tava Caraid llynn all seemed to shimmer, vibrate almost. Not a shaking, as if from some kind of seismic quake, but more like the

very walls themselves quivered and trembled under some terrible strain.

The songs of the cantu waterbells lost all of their normal sense of melody and rhythm. Instead, harsh screeches and wails resonated off the high mountain ridge and echoed through the forest where The Swift lay watching. It was as if the entire city, once so noble and distinguished, pride of this kingdom and envy of many others, the great city of the twin lakes itself writhed in pain, suffering through some kind of heartless torture.

Jagar squinted. "This doesn't look right."

The Swift stared in bewilderment.

"You're telling me. This is awful, a damned nightmare."

"No. That's not it. This isn't what a war is supposed to look like."

The Swift glared at Jagar. "Not what it's supposed to look like? What does that even mean? Don't you hear that? The city is clearly under attack."

"Really? Where is the army?"

The Swift wriggled around. "I don't know. Most of what I see is your forearm, and this big log, but I can hear them out there."

Jagar scowled and shook his head. "Its unbelievable that you humans weren't just slaughtered for food a long time ago." He grabbed the back of The Swift's shirt and hoisted him up.

"Whoa." The Swift flailed, feeling suspended in the air. He stabilized himself on top of the log they were hiding behind as Jagar loosed his grip. "Oh, oh. Yeah, that's much better."

He focused his elven eyes. As he concentrated on the city walls, he saw that what he thought was vibrations in the buildings and walls was actually people. Soldiers, both elven and dwarf clashing together, so small from where they were observing, that they looked like two armies of insects crawling over each other.

The Swift squinted. "What do you mean? The armies are right there, on the walls, fighting."

Jagar twisted The Swift's body to face the lower lake and motioned toward the woods and islands in front of the city. "Only a small part of any army is involved in the attack. The bulk of it is used to move, feed, and support the forces. Where are they? The reinforcements, support, the tents and fires?"

The Swift stammered, but held his balance on the log. He looked out to where Jagar was pointing, but did not see any evidence of any dwarven army formations or camp anywhere sur-

rounding the city.

Jagar motioned and pointed to various parts of the rather scenic landscape that surrounded the lower lake. “No horses, no oxen, no other beasts hauling supplies. No cooks, no armorers.”

The Swift shrugged then looked at Jagar. “Yes, and?”

“And this isn’t right.” Jagar pointed back to the main city. “What else do you see?”

The Swift relaxed and widened his view of the battlefield. The usual glimmer and shine of the sun reflecting off the various majestic buildings was gone, replaced by some kind of a murky gloom. While it was overcast, this felt different. The Swift had seen many rainy days during his time in Tava Caraid Llynn, but this was something much more ominous. The enveloping twilight felt like it was part of the invading force itself. An ever-present purple energy mixed with the gloom hanging over the entire city with hundreds of bright flares streaking up and down, between the city and the sky.

His attention was drawn toward wisps of grey clouds that mixed and churned over the city. He watched them swirl and turn, almost as if they were seething far over head. Small sparks of purple light flickered amongst the clouds. Suddenly, a bright flash of lightning struck down. It forked and struck several targets across the city. The Swift recoiled and covered his eyes as the hot light stabbed into his senses, momentarily blinding him. A jarring thunderclap shook the city and the surrounding forest. The Swift staggered and fell back from the shock of the sound wave.

“I have you Mr. Swift.” Unngk steadied the elf who couldn’t help but turn look back to the battle.

The Swift smiled and pointed at the city. “Look! The buildings are all still there, undamaged. I told you the elves would win.”

“Is that what you think?” Jagar scoffed.

The Swift turned to face Jagar. “Well, sure. You saw that massive lightning bolt, and it did nothing.”

Jagar held up a hand. “If the elves were winning, a spell like that would never have gone off in the first place. No. They are on the defensive.”

The Swift, anxious to prove this big green oaf wrong, shook his head and stared back at the city. “Nah, you’re wrong.”

He studied the activity on the walls. He searched, hoping to find some great elf captain leading a host of brave warriors, all

clad in gleaming metal armor and wielding great two-handed swords that were twice the size of their adversaries. Or maybe he'd see the professors from the college, banded together to save the city. They would glide effortlessly in the air, down from the upper city, and throw fireballs or beams of raw magic energy that would melt the attacking dwarves, who's burnt bodies would flow through the sewers into the lower lake. But he did not see any shining elf captain, and the great mages of the college were nowhere to be found.

He diverted his attention to the skies, thinking he might catch a glimpse of phoenix or griffon riders streaming into the city to push back the invaders. He did see a band of giant flying creatures above the city, but they were not griffon riders. A wave of leather-winged beasts arched in the sky and then dove toward the city. The Swift stared, mostly out of plain curiosity as to what they were, and then lurched as they slammed into the wall that separated the upper and lower cities. Large, elongated boney heads smashed into the sturdy marble barricade at a terrifying speed. The wall exploded from the force, sending chunks of stone high into the air. Hundreds of warriors from both sides of the battle hurtled into the different parts of the city. A resounding crash caused The Swift to winch with each impact.

Jagar squinted. "What was that?"

The Swift stood in shock. "It...they...I—"

Jagar scowled. "Spit it out, boy."

"They just flew right into the wall," The Swift mumbled.

Jagar stood. "What?"

"The wall!" The Swift pointed. "They just flew right into the damned wall."

Jagar looked over The Swift's shoulder. "What did?"

"I don't know. Those, there." The Swift pointed to the creatures that were flying back into the skies as though they showed no cognizance of the violence they had just caused.

"What do you see now?" Jagar tried to watch, but his vision wasn't nearly as good as The Swift's, especially in these low light conditions.

The Swift gasped. "They killed everyone."

"What do you mean everyone?"

"The walls. They were fighting on the walls, elves and dwarves. They just smashed in. Destroyed it all, like they don't care."



Jagar nodded and grunted. "So, you see now."

The Swift continued to stare at the destruction of the city that just a few hours ago was his home. Mr Arn's bakery, the concert hall, the student dorms, the princess' apartment. They all seemed like a distant memories, now. Jagar was right, The Swift did not understand war. What he was witnessing in front of him was beyond his wildest nightmares. This was terrifying. This was chaos.

"Look! Over there." Jagar's shoulder pushed The Swift aside as he lunged forward to point out a cluster of buildings in a clearing surrounding the outer fortification walls.

"Thallan's blade! Watch where you're swinging your big, fatness." The Swift flailed, trying to keep from falling backwards, down the hill.

"Kor is not fat." Unngk protested.

Jagar ignored the quip. "A group of elves just ran into that building. That's it. Let's go."

The Swift steadied himself and threw up his hands. "That's what?"

"That's our in." Jagar looked at his son. "Unngk. Stay close to me." He stood to leave.

The Swift crossed his arms. "Remember, you asked for my help, so I'm in charge of this little," he waved his hands, "whatever this is, not you."

Jagar turned to face The Swift. "Stay here and die, if you want."

The Swift watched Jagar and Unngk hop over the log they had been hiding behind and work their way between the thinning trees, moving toward the group of buildings Jagar had pointed out. He exhaled and shook his head.

"I'm going to regret this."

He hopped down the hillside and caught up with his companions.

Jagar jerked when he saw The Swift behind him. "Keep it down."

The Swift smirked. "Don't worry. My boots don't make any noise. I can run through dried leaves at a full sprint, and you'd never know it. I just snuck up on you, didn't I?" He turned to face the same direction as Jagar. "Now. What in Rygch's fine name are you doing?"

"I'm going to save those stupid elves who locked themselves in a barn, so that they will then, in turn, help me. Get it? Now get

out of the way.”

The Swift motioned his hands down. “Now just hold on. I’m here, now. Let’s come up with a plan.”

Jagar scowled. “I just told you the plan.”

The Swift rolled his eyes. “Fine. At least tell me which building it is?”

Jagar pointed. “That one. The one with all of the dvergr around it.”

The Swift grimaced seeing the group of soldiers. He put his hand on Jagar’s biceps and scanned the clearing. “I’ll tell you what. Give me a twenty-count. I’ll climb on top of one of the buildings to get a better look. For all you know there are a hundred dwarves on the other side of your barn, or around those other buildings next to it.”

Jagar scowled and then nodded. “Twenty. Then I’m going in.”

The Swift looked at Unngk and winked. He then ran out of the forest into the clearing. He scaled the wall of the first building he came to. Plain white plaster with thick wooden beams. It was a stark contrast to the smooth glass and polished stone surfaces that he had climbed up in the upper city earlier that day. He scampered to the top and hopped onto the thatched roof almost as easily as if he were walking down an empty street.

He lay there prone for a few beats, spreading his body across the lightweight frame of the roof. He felt is give a bit and realized that it probably wasn’t designed to have full-sized adults tromping around on it. He listening for any indication that he may have been given away, but heard none. Satisfied that no one had noticed his clandestine activities, he poked his head up over the top of the sloped roof. The barn that Jagar had pointed out was next to the building where he was now, and had a small group of dwarf warriors collecting around the front doors. The Swift looked up and down the street, but did not see any additional enemy forces. He raised into a crouch and slipped along the other side of the roof, doing his best to stay light on his feet, and out of sight. He crept down a side wall to the ground, and then climbed up the back of the barn they were all so interested in. Laying as flat as he could, he surveyed the surrounding area.

Several small huts and large storage buildings were scattered throughout the flat clearing that spanned from the main city walls to the shores of the lower lake. Stone roads connected the buildings in what looked more like random loose strands of yarn than

organized streets. Other than the commotion at the front of this barn, however, the entire area seemed quite peaceful, like everyone who lived or worked here was away on a holiday. The Swift felt rather calm, laying there on the roof, when a sudden explosion from inside the city radiated throughout the area and shook the barn. The Swift flexed, grasping and pressing himself into the straw that made up his observation post.

“Tepak,” he exhaled.

After a few moments, he relaxed, picked his head up, and made one final scan of the district. Satisfied that he had seen all of the enemy soldiers around or near the barn, he raised up to give the all-clear to Jagar. He felt a confidence about their plan. He had seen Jagar fight, and a few dwarves wouldn’t be much trouble for him. This should be fun. The Swift smiled and stood up on the roof. He was about to wave the orcs forward when he felt it. Cold.

There it was again. The same biting chill that he had felt earlier that day in the woods. First when the spirit of the dead dwarf had invaded his body, and then later when the dragon and its rider flew overhead. His breath stuck in his throat. Was it back already? The blood drained out of his face. Cold sweat formed on his brow. The icy sensation tugged at him. Unaware, he turned slowly in the direction of the cold. He blinked, his vision blurred. His mind raced, unable to focus.

Four more dwarves were running toward the barn, but no, that wasn’t it. There was something else with them. His wits dulled, The Swift couldn’t tell if it was one creature, or several all mashed together. A jumbled mass of ink-black fur, twisted tentacles, and leathery wings that nearly spread all the way across the street lumbered toward him. Emanating from the bowels of the creature radiated the same mystical purple glow he had seen with the dragon and when he dwarf warrior was brought back to life.

The Swift stared, but then again, he didn’t. He was looking at the thing, but wasn’t fully processing what he saw in front of him. The glow pulsed with each of the creature’s strides. He took an awkward step back, more of an inadvertent retreat than a deliberate action. His heel cocked on piece of the wooden framework. He stumbled a few steps sideways. He placed his foot down onto a section of unsupported straw, and the thatched roof gave way.

“Whaaa!”

The Silken Swift, straw, some sticks, and various other scratchy materials all tumbled down into the barn, and right on

top of a flock of goats and sheep. The animals scattered in a flurry of bleats and hooves just in time to let The Swift miss their nice, soft woolen pelts. He flailed and landed on the hard stone floor with a dull thud.

“Oof!”

Stunned, The Swift scrambled to his feet. He swayed for a moment while his vision cleared. He blinked a few times and saw two elf warriors in front of him, both fashioned in leather armor. Their chest pieces were dyed and embossed in the colors and emblem of king Reiklyn. Several other forms moved around behind them, in and around a pile straw. He couldn’t make out very well who or what they were, and assumed this must be the group of elves Jagar had been talking about, or maybe just some more of those sheep or goats.

He shook his head and blinked a few more times, gathering the last few of his wits from the fall. The elven warriors who were now staring back at him were women, and strikingly beautiful women at that. One was so much so that she even rivaled his beloved princess. She also seemed to be the more senior of the two, as her ensemble was much more elaborate than the other. He looked her up and down.

Yes, please.

The fall, coupled with now being in the presence of two beautiful elf warriors, The Swift’s instincts took over, and he forgot all about the horror that was lumbering toward them outside.

He smiled and winked, holding up a hand. “Hey, there.”

The prettier of the two ladies let out a battle cry and lunged forward. He recoiled, realizing that he hadn’t even noticed her sword was drawn. He grimaced, reaching for his dagger. He had been lunged at before, but that was usually by a scorned husband or father, not by the prize herself. He wasn’t in the habit of arming himself before he even had a chance to make his move.

She was far too quick for him, even though he was currently transformed into an elf, and she was upon him before he could draw his dagger. He felt the brush of her sword as it swept by his neck, coming a mere hair’s width from cutting into his unprotected flesh. She extended forward and grabbed his shoulder. With a quick shift of her weight, she cast him backwards.

“Get behind us!”

The Swift stumbled toward the back of the barn. His foot slipped on some straw that had fallen in with him, and he toppled



forward, landing in a soft, but somewhat damp pile of hay.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?” The other elf asked without looking at him. While being an elf and quite athletic, she somehow seems almost lacking when compared to the other.

The Swift clambered back to his feet. Wiping the straw off of his shirt, he saw that the group milling around behind them was not sheep or goats, but children. Several young elves, ranging from toddler to mid-youth, all gathered together looking rather frightened and confused. He spun around to engage with the elf warriors protecting the children, and warn them about the dwarf warriors, but found that the group of dwarves that he had seen collected at the front of the barn were already inside and forming around the group of elves.

The Swift motioned to the children. “Stay here. I’m going to help.”

He watched as the two elf warriors moved with a fluid grace, blocking attempts by the dwarves to advance toward the back of the barn. While there were only two of them defending against several opponents, they were much faster and had longer reach with their swords. When one of the dwarves would try to move to a flank, the elves would cut him off before it had a chance to get outside. The two would then regroup in front of the children before the dwarves could advance. They worked in unison, like they were directing their adversaries, keeping them from reaching the back of the barn.

But, with only two of them, The Swift could see that the elves were at a stalemate. They were keeping the dwarves away from the children, but couldn’t make an advance of their own without leaving an opening. He knew that other thing was coming, and they didn’t have time to wear down the dwarves or wait for them to make a mistake. He needed to improve their odds so they could get out of here while they still could.

The Swift looked around, and found a good sized stone on the floor. Picking it up, he tossed it in his hands a few times, gauging the weight. He nodded, and looked out at the large barn in front of him. He focused in on the dwarf warrior closest to him, wound up, and threw the stone with all of his might. Not used to throwing things as an elf, however, his aim was a little bit off. Instead of striking his intended target, he grimaced as his throw hit the prettier elf smack in the back of her head.

The elf turned to him with eyes ablaze with anger. “Just stay

back there, and keep the children together.”

Distracted by the errant throw, the elves lost focus on the enemy in front of them. The dwarves saw their opening and closed in. They swarmed the elf The Swift had just hit with the stone. She turned her attention back to the dwarves just in time to dodge a hammer that hummed through the air next to her ribs. She high-stepped to avoid another blow that targeted her knees. Two dwarves teamed up, one launching off the hunched over back of the other. The elf was able to twist her head away from the strike, but the hammer still found her shoulder. She screamed out in pain from the heavy blow, and her sword arm fell limp.

The other elf sprang to the aid of her partner. She danced between the dwarves. Her blade sang as it made contact with the metal helmets and chest plates of the dwarves. No real damage was scored, however, and their opponents continued to press their advantage.

Now, it was the attackers turn to work together as a team, while the elves scrambled to keep from being overwhelmed. One warrior would attack from a side, while another would take away any opportunity to find respite or escape.

The Swift watched the squad of dwarf warriors close in on the two elves. The outcome quickly became clear. He had to help now, or these two lovely ladies wouldn't last another twenty heartbeats. Then again, he could always take this opportunity to be free of this godforsaken battle, and get far away from the orcs and the destruction that was about to befall the city. What was it the big one said?

If we help these elves, they will help us. Something like that.

He was right, again. This delightful elf maiden would surely appreciate his saving her. Him, and not some dumb, orc. It was only a few dwarves. He probably wouldn't even have to do very much. The elves looked like they could handle most of the fighting. Then, he could always make his escape afterwards if he wanted to, and with another elven star for his collection. It would certainly be a lot less dangerous than infiltrating the city to find the princess, who had probably already been evacuated, if not dead.

The choice was clear, he drew his dagger and charged. While quick and athletic as an elf, he was no warrior. He lunged at one dwarf, who easily side-stepped the clumsy attack. The dwarf thrust the head of its warhammer forward and caught The Swift

under the chin. Elven Swift stumbled backwards, never before feeling such a crushing blow. The dwarf pressed forward. It readied its hammer and caught The Swift in the side, who crumpled over from the strike. He gasped for air, feeling dizzy from the pain. He turned his head and saw the two elves weren't faring much better. The prettier one was on one knee without her sword, her arm hanging limp, while her companion took a blow to her thigh with three more dwarves closing in on her. This wasn't going at all how he had envisioned it.

The Swift looked back at the dwarf he was fighting. It raised its hammer. The Swift rolled to the side as the dwarf hammer crashed into the floor. The Swift grimaced, but rose into a hunched-over stance, ready to dodge or run, whichever seemed appropriate. He took in a deep breath, and readied himself, scanning the barn for escape routes.

The dwarf raised his hammer again, and stared at The Swift its empty, soulless eyes. It was like they weren't even looked at him, but just out into the space that he happened to be standing in.

"Death is only the beginning."

The Swift flinched. "What?"

The dwarf was about to lower its killing blow when the double doors at the front of the barn burst open. Large planks and splinters of wood sprayed into the room. The Swift flinched and leaned away. The dwarves and elves also lurched at the sudden, unexpected disruption, and all stopped what they were doing and turned toward the front of the barn.

Through the opening bound a swirling ball of jet-black fur, tentacles, and wings. This time, however, it was mixed with Jagar's menacing scowl and big, green biceps. The orc and the enemy monster rolled into the barn, locked together in hand-to-hand combat. The orc grappled the torso of the beast. He roared, twisting his body, and flung the creature into one of the support beams. The barn shook, hay and stones from the roof tumbled to the ground around them.

The beast bound back at Jagar and rose up to its full height. The Swift and the elves finally got a good look at what it was that had burst into the barn. One-and-a-half stories tall, it filled the front of the barn. Jagar, as large as he was compared to The Swift, looked like a child in front of the monster. It stood on wolf-like haunches, a mottled mixture of fur, bone and decaying flesh, but with the lower legs of a bird each featuring massive talons that

looked as though each could rip him in half with but a single swipe.

The body was as much bone as flesh, wrapped by some grotesque patchwork of fur and feathers. Swirling purple energy flowed throughout the creatures exposed core. Extruding from the rib cage were four thick, black tentacles that swiped at Jagar. It swung a taloned claw at the orc, who caught it inches from his face. He grasped a second attack and forced both limbs to the side. The two massive combatants howled scorn at each other.

A tentacle wrapped around one of Jagar's legs, then another his chest. He let go of one of the furry limbs, and grabbed at the tentacle around his chest. It spiraled around his back, and worked its way toward his head and neck. Jagar growled and bit down on the grotesque, black arm. He tore off a chunk of the flesh, and spat it at the face of his shrieking adversary. Before he could take out another piece, the other tentacle grabbed his head. Bright purple energy flared from the underside, and Jagar roared with pain.

Two tentacles wrapped around Jagar's body pinning one of his arms, and two more constrained his legs. The orc thrashed about. He twisted his hips and shoulders against the tentacles, but that only caused them to wrap just a little tighter around him. His free hand pounded and clawed at the thick restraints. He tore off chunks of rotting flesh, but they still held him firm.

The creature raised Jagar off the floor, his feet loose and dangling below his restrained legs. The orc continued to struggle with little, if any effect. The monster brought its prey up close. Twin wolf heads at the top of the mishappen body snarled and snapped at Jagar, spraying froth onto his face and upper body. Between them, the head of a crow snapped out and bit into the orc. Jagar twisted, but could not avoid the creature gashing his cheek.

Jagar bellowed and twisted his head. With his free hand, he struck at the bird head that had just torn into his cheek. His leverage was weak, but he still made solid contact and cracked the creature's beak. He grabbed the neck and pulled the bird head together with his. Again, Jagar bit into the creature, tearing into its neck. It screeched and stumbled back, loosening its grip but still dragging Jagar with it, latched onto one of its necks. It flailed about howling. One of its wings knocked into torches on the walls and support posts, knocking them out of the sconces.

The lit torches fell, scattering burning wood and embers across the barn floor. The flames mixed with and ignited loose

straw that had fallen from roof and loft above. Fire devoured the dry straw, and started to burn the wooden foundation. Thick smoke filled the front of the barn. The silhouette of the creature stood and stretched its wings. Orange flames flickered and jumped on the creature's fur. The massive outline of an orc appeared behind it in the smoke. It ran toward the creature and crashed into its torso. The two figures became one with wings, tentacle, arms, and legs all mashed together and tumbled across the barn. They crashed into a flaming support beam, bringing down the loft above them, along with an avalanche of stones and more straw from the roof that added fuel to the blaze. A few small stones and strands of straw trickled down onto the fallen loft and bits of the roof. Crackling fire interrupted the stillness that now lay beneath the rubble.

A loud crack broke the silence, then an eruption of purple energy blew what was left of the roof off of the barn. Swift was knocked back into the piles of hay behind him. He bounced onto the floor, then groaned and rolled over onto his hands and knees. Without a roof, most of the smoke billowed up, out of the barn. The Swift stood up and winced, rubbing his head.

The form of a large figure with multiple limbs rose up in the smoke and started moving toward him. The Swift panicked.

Oh, shit. I knew I never should have followed that stupid orc.

He reached for his satchel and fumbled around for any rune disc that might help. The two elf warriors leapt out in front of him toward the figure. To everyone's surprise, Jagar emerged from the smoke, dragging a tentacle in one hand and the vulture head in the other.

One of the elves scowled. "Where did you take my cousins!"

She leapt forward, hurdled a fallen beam, and cut down with her sword. Jagar flinched at the unexpected attack. He swung the tentacle, and parried her attack. The orc took a step back into a defensive position. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just know this building won't last much longer, and we have to go."

The elf stutter-stepped toward Jagar, flinching and feinting attacks. "The elf children who were with us. Where did you take them, you?"

Jagar "I didn't take them. I'm fighting with you!"

"Liar! Where are they? You will be sorry you ever came here,

slave-trader!” The elf thrust forward, only to have her sword pushed to the side again.

Jagar continued his defensive posture, making no riposte strikes toward the elf. He deflected another swing, dropped the monstrous body parts he was carrying, and grabbed the elf. He pinned her arms to her sides. “They have my daughter.”

She looked up at him as he held her firm, her stern look softened.

“Unhand her, beast!” The other elf, the prettier one, thrust at Jagar, who sidestepped and twisted her partner between himself and his new attacker.

The elf danced toward Jagar looking for a target, but he managed to pivot and keep her cohort between them, using her as a shield. “The attackers are dvergr, not orcs!”

“Of course they are.” The elf thrust forward. “You orcs aren’t smart enough to plan an assault on Tava Fyannae Calharam by yourselves.” She swiped to the left, but checked her swing just before slicing into her partner’s shoulder. “You’re clearly mercenaries. In it purely for the gold, hostages...or, worse, just for the fun.” She thrust again. “You orcs disgust me.”

The elf in his grip kicked Jagar. The hard sole of her boots clunked against his shin. He grimaced, but did not loosen his hold on her.

“It’s true.” The Swift ran toward the quarreling group, his hands up. “It’s true.”

The pretty elf paused and turned toward the Swift. “What’s true?”

The Swift stepped between her and Jagar. “He’s not with them. There is no orc army. It’s all dwarves. Just dwarves.”

“Dwarves?” The elf tilted her head.

“Umm...dvergr, I mean, cyrach.” The Swift stammered through the various names for the species attacking the city.

The elf straightened up and stared at the Swift. “How do you know this?”

The Swift shrugged, meekly. “He’s with me.”

She scoffed. “With you? An elf and an orc together? I think not.”

The Swift nodded. "I know! I know, it sounds strange, but really, he's with me. He contracted me to help him find the army because he believes they have his daughter. I brought him here, thinking that, based on his recent movements tracking them, this is the obvious target for an army of cyrach."

The elf stepped to the side and pointed her sword at The Swift. "A contract between an elf and an orc, to bring him to Tava Fyannae Calharam? You're behind this?" She paused. "An elf? Betrayal? Of course. That's the only explanation."

Before the Swift could justify his actions, pieces of flaming wood planks crashed down on top of them. The elf leapt to the side and twisted, tiptoeing away from a beam that connected squarely onto the Swift's shoulder. He cried out in pain and crumpled to the floor.

The elf charged Jagar whose attention turned to The Swift. A well placed jab to his shoulder with the butt of her sword triggered a nerve in his arm that forced him to loose his grip on her partner. The elves looked at the inferno that now roared between them and the front gate where the dvergr had taken the elven prisoners. The entire building was now ablaze. It was a patchwork of rippling reds and oranges, with waves of black smoke swirling up into the open sky above them. The path between them a the front of the building was gone.

Jagar held out his hand. "You can't save them if you're dead."

Ignoring his offer for help, the two elves hurdled the burning crossbeam and ran toward the back of the building and disappeared out into the street behind the barn.

Jagar picked up The Swift off the floor and broke through a burning wall in the back of the barn. They gasp for air as they entered the road behind the hall. They stumbled a few steps, coughing until they regained their breath.

Jagar ran around the front of the burning barn, followed by a gasping Swift.

Jagar slowed to a stop at the broken front gate of the burning barn. "Unngk! Come out. It's time to go!" He looked around. "Unngk!"

The Swift jogged up to Jagar. "Wasn't he with you?"

Jagar looked around a corner. “He hid when I started in on that beast.”

Jagar ran into the wide open door of a building near the barn. “Unngk, are you in here?”

The Swift followed, helping his search. They rifled through what seemed to be an office building of some sort, but found no trace of the young orc. They ran back outside, and did the same to the building next to it, and then the one across the street. They turned over barrels, and tore open crates. They climbed into attics and down ladders into underground storage. They rummaged through what was left of the war-torn village, but did not find Unngk hidden anywhere.

“Come.” One of the elves touched The Swift on the shoulder. “Over here.”

She lead the companions to a grassy strip next to one of the outer walls. There, the the prettier elf knelt, inspecting a disturbance in the grass. She stood, the broken shaft of a spear in her hand. “Looks like you weren’t lying to us after all, orc.” She pointed to a patch of dark green blood amongst the lighter colored herbs.



THANK YOU!



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