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LICH KING

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CHAPTER 3

A NEW CLAN

Unngk struggled to keep up with his father. The wet snow and mud were difficult enough for him to walk through, like he had earlier in the day when he and his sister were following their father to practice swordplay in a serene, but snow-covered field at the foot of some mountains. But now that he was chasing after his father, who was chasing after his sister, who was strapped to the back of a giant wolverine. Well, that just seemed impossible.

His feet were wet and cold from what was clearly gallons of snow that had leapt into his boots while he was running, and his toes were cramping all the way up the back of his legs. He had to toss away his practice sword and shield a while ago in a desperate attempt to keep up with his father. He was sure to catch hell for losing them, but that didn't matter. They took his sister, and he had to do everything he could to get her back.

While Unngk was doing his best to keep up, it seemed like every step, his father got just a little bit further away. Fortunately for him, though, it wasn't at all that difficult to see where his father and the wolverine with his sister were going. The giant beast had left paw prints in the snow and mud that were as big as an oxen shank, and his father was tracking right along next to them.

It looked as though his father was intentionally running off to the side of the wolverine, to leave a separate set of tracks for Unngk to follow. So, Unngk did just that, and followed his father's path back the way they had come, what seemed to be back toward their home village.

He trotted over a ridge to find his father standing still on the other side of a plateau. Finally, he must have waited, to give Unngk a chance to catch up. It was a place he knew very well. Unngk and his family came to this ridge many times for training, often with a picnic lunch afterwards. Majestic mountains stood high up around the small plateau. The Iron Ridge mountains. The range his clan was named after. Crested in white even when it was the hottest of summer days down in the plains where they lived, he loved to imagine the gods and giants fighting epic battles up on the slopes, and then recounting their stories around an extravagant feast in Morg's mead hall at the top of the highest peak. On a clear day, and it was often a clear day in the orc territories, one could see almost all the way to the edge of the orc capital in the east, home to the finest chefs in the territories.

Unngk ran up to his father, sweating, panting, and cold. Very cold. He kneeled over and put his hands on his knees. "I'm here, kor. Thank you for waiting for me."

His father did not respond. Unngk looked up at his father. The large orc stood as still as a statue made from green speckled granite, staring straight forward. Unngk followed his father's gaze, down the hill toward his home. Rather than the usual heart-warming view of his home city bustling with life and activity, spread before him was a battered and smoking husk of the village he grew up in. It was not the smoke of cooking or forge fires, but rather he saw the sky itself being choked from the burning remains of his home town. The houses, the town hall, the shaman's cultural activity center, everything. The entire village was in ruins, and smoke rose up from everywhere. The skies were already grey and overcast when they left, so he hadn't really noticed the smoke while running up the hill to his father, but now that it was right there in front of him, it was impossible not to see it.

"What? Is that—"

"Aye."

Unngk stared at the smoke pouring into the sky. He gasped, finding it difficult to breathe. Not from the smoke of the village burning, only a mere whisper of it made it up on the ridge where

they stood, but he choked more from the bleakness of what he saw wrenching at his chest. The extent of the destruction. He was having trouble understanding what he was looking at. They had just left here a couple of hours ago to go practice. The day was just getting started, and there was an energy and excitement in the air for the upcoming festivities. But this, this was someplace foreign and strange, somewhere different. This isn't the home they had left behind. This place was horrific, repulsive even. Surely, they must have gone the wrong way somewhere on their way back.

Then he smelt it. It was foul. The air was rancid and burnt. The smell borrowed into his senses, and he remembered the reason they had run all the way here in the first place.

"But what about—" Unngk jumped up and ran down the hill. "Mey!"

"Unngk, wait!" His father reached for him, but Unngk was already too far ahead.

The two orcs quickly crossed the final distance to the edge of their village, and slowed as they approached the outer buildings. Unngk coughed again, this time from the air, heavy and thick with acrid smoke. It may have looked disheartening from up on the hilltop, but once he ran down into the village, the completeness of the devastation sunk in. He stopped, stunned. Two hours ago. That was all. It was just two hours ago, maybe even less, when they had left. Everything was fine. He was preparing a feast for his mother's celebration when he went to practice with his father and sister. Something they had done hundreds of times. Why was this time any different? How could this have even happened?

Unngk's father stepped behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"How—" The young orc stammered.

"Mmm."

Unngk looked around, but only saw despair. There wasn't even anything here to rebuild. Everything was gone. He couldn't make any sense of what he was witnessing. Why would anyone want to destroy our home? They were planning a celebration. Can't they just go back an hour? Can't he just get back to cooking for his mother like he wanted to? Everything will be alright if we just go back.

"Ka!" Unngk ran into the ruins of their village. He didn't think about where he was going. It's not like there were any land-

marks left for him to use, anyway. He just ran instinctively, from a lifetime of being on these roads. He laced his way through the snow, mud, and ashes, all of which was now more of a deep grey colored mush. He slowed as he approached what was left of his home. There were no longer any walls, nor roof to speak of. No heavy wooden beams holding it all together. No couch, cabinets, nor beds. No curing shed behind the house, no fence around their garden. Nothing to distinguish where his room once was, nor his sister's. Nothing but a pile of stones that used to be the chimney over the fireplace. But he knew. He knew where his room had been. He knew every inch of the home that used to be here.

It was the only home he had ever had. He was born here. Every memory he had of his mother, or more like feelings rather than proper memories, were associated with some room or object in the house. A hairbrush or the smell of the couch, each object triggered something hidden deep in his subconscious and made him feel safe, secure. His bed, pillow, and blanket should be right there. His cook books over there. He was blessed by the clan shaman in the living room over there, on the day he was named for his great uncle. He took his first steps in his parent's bedroom, right there, and heard his first battle hymns and stories of victory swaying in his mother's arms by the fireplace.

He stepped through the ashes of what used to be the kitchen, where he first skipped practice to watch his grandmother cook a stew, because he loved the taste of food and wanted to know where it came from. Where he wondered what it would be like to mix mint with peppers, or cinnamon with seasoned salts. This was his favorite room in the house. It was his room as much as any other. His bed may not have been in here, but it was where he spent most of his time, and where he did his part for the family. He loved cooking for them, seeing their faces when they ate something new he had discovered.

But the food was no longer here. The butcher's block and cupboards had also somehow just disappeared. The mint, cinnamon, and other spices. The couch and brush. The living room, and his parents' bedroom. Everything that was once his home was now nothing more than black ashes that wisped up around his feet as he walked. He strode past the remains of the chimney and ran his fingers across the top of the fireplace where he had done much of his cooking. The rough surface he'd largely taken for granted all of the times he used it, and occasionally even bruised or burned

him, now gave him some small scrap of comfort. He traced the outside of the opening, wiping away ashes. Suddenly, his hand instinctively snapped back. He shook it. Small droplets puffed in the ashes at his feet. He held up his hand, dark blood oozed out of a fresh cut on the tip of his finger. Some sharp edge in the stone betrayed his only consolation left in this place. There was no safety here. Not for him. Not anymore.

The blood trickled down his hand and ran onto the bandage around his palm. His thoughts shifted to earlier in the morning, when he had sliced his hand with a knife, while fighting with his sister. He looked at the opening to the fireplace where the stewpot usually hung, then turned around and took a few steps toward where the hallway wall behind him would have been. He squatted and sifted through the ashes. Lifting a small piece of broken clay, he held it in his hands. He stared at it, remembering how the pot had shattered against the wall when he had thrown it at Mey. He reached back into the ashes and found another piece. He put the two together, sliding their edges, trying to make them fit. Excitement swelled in him. It was as if he could just put the pot back together, that would somehow take him back to a few hours ago, everything would be as it had been, and Mey would be here with him. He felt around in the blackness and grabbed another broken piece out of the ashes. Again, he tried to fit it with the other two.

He held the pieces of the pot in his hand and reach down to find some more. One of the pieces he was holding in his hand fell back into the ashes. He sifted through the shadows and picked it back up, along with another piece. He fumbled the four pieces in his hands, trying to find any common edges between them, working anxiously to bring his world back to something he could understand. Two of the broken pieces slid between his fingers. Puffs of smoke followed them back into the darkness. His excitement turned to anguish.

Desperate, Unngk reached back down into the ashes for the two lost pieces of the pot. He had to put it back together. He just had to, for Mey. He held the broken pieces that he had left close to his body to keep them from falling away, too. With no way to counter his shifting weight, he was clumsy and off-balance as he searched. He tipped forward and dropped to his hands to knees. He tried his best to keep his hand in tight, but instinct took over. He opened his grip to catch himself and save him from going face first onto the ground. The broken bits of clay clattered away com-

ing to rest somewhere in the darkness.

Unngk remained there, on his hands and knees. He had to finally accept that he would never again be able to cook in that pot. He would never again cut vegetables on his chopping block with his favorite knife. He'd never listen to stories on his couch, and he'd never sleep in his bed. Loss swelled up inside him, and tears rolled down his cheeks. He sat back.

"I'm sorry. Mey, I'm sorry." He took in a deep breath. "It's all my fault. I should have listened to you. If I had just trained like you asked, you'd be here with me now." He wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his arm, a dark streak of ash dragged across his face.

"You were right. I will train with kor, and we will come find you. We will go back to how it was, honor ka, and be together again in the Hall of Honor."

"A warrior for the clan?"

Unngk jerked back hearing the voice behind him. He turned to see the silhouette of his father, outlined in the ashy haze. "Yes, kor."

"Come with me." His father turned and walked away.

Unngk trotted to catch up with his father. As he passed by the old fireplace, he kicked something in the ashes. It flashed a bright light, and rang out with metallic pings as it bounced away toward the street. He gave chase, and saw it disappear again into the black smoke. Unngk sprang toward where he last saw the object, almost diving into the ashes to find it before it disappeared forever. Soot puffed into his face, filling his eyes and nose. He held his breath as he felt around him for a few moments, feverishly sweeping away black dust. A sparkle caught his eye. He blinked away the ashes and focused on the flicker of light. He reached out. His heart raced as he grasped the hard, metal object. He knew immediately what he had found. He raised his mother's spearhead out of the darkness. It was clean and bright, gleaming in whatever light was able to push through the smoke, not a smudge or speck of black on it. It was as though it spurned the ashes and refused to accept the destruction that they represented.

"Kor, kor!" Unngk jumped up to show his father, but he was too far ahead now, no longer in sight. Unngk rushed in the direction his father had left, his fresh footprints in the ashey mud were easy to follow. Unngk ran through the remains of their town, ignoring the smoldering ruins. He ran passed the iron bell that used



to sit atop the highest tower in the village, but now lay on its side, broken, never to ring out again. He ran passed the open square and the still burning wreckage of his old school. He didn't see the smoldering ruins of his home any longer, at least he didn't notice them. He thought only of the spearhead, and his mother.

Unngk followed his father's footsteps to the edge of the village, and found him standing next to the remains of a watchtower.

His father stood motionless, staring forward. "What do you see?"

"Kor—" Unngk put his hands on his knees and took in a few deep breaths, his throat burned from the smokey air. He coughed and choked. "Kor—" He wheezed out a second attempt to get his father's attention.

"What do you see, Unngk."

Unngk stood up straight and studied the field in front of him. He saw a wide, open range filled with bumps and divots that covered the rolling landscape. Footprints, some large, orc sized, and others quite a bit smaller, like those from children, maybe. There were also hoof and claw prints that could be from any number of species. He got excited when he saw some that looked like the giant wolverine they chased earlier.

"That, there." Unngk pointed to the tracks. "That's from the wolverine, right? Mey is here."

"Is she?"

Unngk looked around. "It brought her here. She has to be." He stepped forward to get a better look at the tracks, but they were quickly mixed with the jumble of other prints, and he lost the path of where they led. "Maybe she left. It looks like the wolverine brought her back here, but then I guess she left. I guess they all left. So, we can go find them."

"Left where?"

Unngk studied the field, but could not make any sense of the mess that he saw. "I...I don't know."

"Start with what you do know. Are the tracks all facing in the same direction?"

Unngk looked again. "No, I guess not."

"So, what does that tell you?"

Unngk stared and thought. It looked like a giant mess. How could anyone discern anything from looking at a bunch of footprints in the snow. He let out a breath, louder than he expected.

"If everyone in town were leaving, what would the tracks look

like?”

Unngk shrugged. “They’d look like footprints, and horse hoof prints, just like they do.”

“When you leave town, what direction do you go?”

Unngk pointed in the direction of a road. “That way, usually.”

“Are the tracks pointing that direction?”

“Yes.”

“All of them?”

Unngk stopped. “No, I guess not. They are pointing in lots of directions.”

“That’s right. If everyone were leaving in a group, all of the tracks would lead one direction.”

“So, what does that mean, kor?”

“They didn’t leave, Unngk.”

“But...what are all of these tracks, then?”

“This is it, Unngk. This is where it happened.”

“Where what happened?”

His father remained still. “What else do you see?”

Unngk stared at the field, but couldn’t see anything but footprints everywhere. Footprints and blood, orc blood. “Blood?”

“Yes, and a lot of it. What else?”

He tried again, but couldn’t see anything but footprints, blood, snow, mud, a few broken bits of weapons and armor, and ash.

Lots of ash. “That’s all, kor. I don’t see anything else.”

“Exactly.”

Unngk looked confused. His father turned to him. “Where are the bodies, Unngk? You don’t get this much blood without bodies. A lot of bodies.”

Unngk turned and scanned in front of them. “There aren’t any.”

“Hmm.” His father shifted his attention back to the battlefield. “Where are the survivors? Where are the victors? Where is anyone?” He knelt down and placed his hand on some prints in the field. “See this? What are these?”

“Footprints. They are small, probably from some of the children when they were leaving.”

“No, Unngk. Those are boots, military boots, and not from an orc. This wasn’t just some simple raiding party looking for food or trinkets. An army did this.” He stood back up. “An army of dvergr, and they came to do exactly what they did. But why? Why would they come now? We don’t have anything they could want.”

He turned to look at Unngk. “You want to train and become a warrior for the clan?” He stared hard at his son. “There is no clan.”

Unngk blinked. “What do you mean, no clan? But you just said they didn’t leave.”

“No, they didn’t leave. They were slaughtered. Everyone. Right here in this field, by an army that was here not to pillage or conquer, but to kill and destroy.”

Unngk paused as he pieced together everything he had seen. The dvergr scouts, the burnt husk of a village, the footprints and blood from the members of his clan. It wasn’t just his cooking pot and bed. It wasn’t just their house, the temple, and the bell tower. Now it was his friends, schoolmates, relatives, and neighbors. He finally understood the totality of what had happened here in the short time he was away with his father and sister. The town, the people, the clan, everything he had ever been a part of was all gone. He collapsed into the snow and stared straight ahead. His hands fell forward. As they did, his forearm scraped against his mother’s spearhead, tucked into his belt. Still razor sharp, it cut into his skin. He winced from the pain, and snapped his focus back to the present. He looked down and saw the spearhead in his belt.

“Kor.” Unngk pulled out the spearhead, stood, and lifted it toward his father. “Kor, I found this. At home, in the ashes.”

His father turned to see, his face cold and hard. He stared with dead eyes for a few moments, not really reacting or showing any sign of awareness. A glimmer of orange light flickered off of the spearhead from part of the watchtower that still burned behind him. He blinked and his eyes beamed wide, now seeing the spear, and a smile spread across his face. Genuine happiness. Something Unngk had not seen from his father in many years.

“Yes.” He reached for the spear. “Unngk, that’s it. This is it. Well done, Unngk. Well done.”

“Ka’s spearhead?”

His father held up the trophy and studied it. “No, Unngk. It’s no mere spearhead. Not any more. This will be the symbol of our new clan.”

“New clan, kor? But, what about—”

His father stepped out into the field and grabbed a spear out of the snow, its prior owner certainly dead, or worse. He snapped off the tip. Placing the tip from his wife’s battle spear in its place,

he used a cord that had been wrapped around his arm to fashion a new spear from the remains of the pieces. He walked back to where Unngk had been watching.

“Take off your jacket, and hold out your arm.”

Unngk did as he was told. His father dragged the point of the spear across one of his son’s biceps. Unngk grimaced as fresh blood pooled on his arm. His father made a few more cuts on his arm. If he had been trying to spell a word or draw a shape, it was impossible to tell from the flow of blood that now ran down his forearm into the snow at his feet.

“There, you are the first official member of a new clan. What do you want to call it?”

Unngk stood, confused. He had named mock clans many times while playing, but now that it was happening for real, his mind was blank. All he could think of were silly joke names he used to use, like The Grilled Brisket clan, or The Victory Pie Made from My Enemies Buttholes clan, but his father would be very angry if he suggested something stupid like that right now. His breathing became shallow and his hands started to sweat.

“Umm—”

“What’s your symbol, Unngk?” His father wrapped Unngk’s bleeding arm with some cloth.

Unngk looked at the bloodied spear in his father’s hand. “Ka’s spear. The spear clan?”

“Not that simple, Unngk. There are a lot of spears. What’s special about this one?”

“It was Ka’s spear that she used against the barbarians.”

“What else?”

Unngk thought hard. “It was broken.”

“But it’s not anymore?”

“No, you remade it.”

His father nodded. “Yes. The spear has been forged again, and so will the clan.”

“Reforged?”

“Good. Battle-forged, even. Now, since you are the only member of the clan, you are its leader. Do the same to me, make me your first recruit.” He held his arm out for his son. Unngk took the newly fashioned spear from his father. His hands shook, still a bit overwhelmed at all that had happened, and nervous about the idea of slicing his father’s arm.

How can I lead a clan? What if I cut him too deep?

“Do it.”

Unngk dragged the spear across his father’s arm. His trembling hands drew a jagged line with no real form. His father grimaced and then grabbed the spear just below the head. He directed the point and drew a figure to match the one he had drawn on Unngk’s arm. When he was done, he released the spear and wrapped his arm. The point fell to the snow, Unngk still holding the shaft loosely.

“Now, we are two,” his father declared.

Unngk smiled. He felt pride, even. He and his father were a new clan.

“Where do you want to go, chief?”

“Chief? Me? But you’re the best fighter.”

“Being the best fighter doesn’t make you best chief.”

Unngk’s mind whirled, but all he could come up with was, *That way.*

“I’m not sure.” He looked back at the tracks, but could not determine anything useful. Being a chief is for old people. It was all unknown to him, confusing. “What do you think?”

“Good. Don’t be afraid to ask your counsel for advice. What do you want to do?”

“Find Mey.”

“Your counsel agrees.” Jagar nodded. “So where do we go to find her?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t. If we knew that, we would already be going there. But don’t say that.”

“Say what?”

“That you don’t know. None of us know where she is, or where she’ll be, but we’ll do what we can to find her, because that’s all we can do. The chief says we’re going to find her, so we’ll find her, whatever that means. Your clan doesn’t need you know everything, that’s impossible. Your clan needs you to make a choice.”

Unngk pointed. “That way.”

“But don’t just guess. Do you have a reason for going that way?”

“Yes. That goes toward the dvergr mountains.”

Jagar nodded and started jogging that way.



THANK YOU!



Check back weekly for more scenes from Act 1 of Lich King



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