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LICH KING

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CHAPTER 4

LIGHTFOOT HAS A
ROYAL MEAL

Evenings at the Kura Fyannae Calharam school of magic was a time where most of the students at the college blew off a bit of steam, taking a break from their grueling schedule of classes, exams, and practical exercises. For the most part, it was the usual, expected adolescent revelry, urged on by immature friends and often with the inclusion of some cheap human vintage of wine, many of which were readily available in the more proletarian regions of the city.

For the princess Reiklyn Twyllea, however, while being only the fourth daughter of the king, and therefore with no real aspirations for herself or a potential suitor to ever actually reach the throne, her responsibilities to his legacy were still watched very closely. Her evenings were more like a continuation of the days, but instead of having her lessons in a classroom filled with her fellow students, each night saw her working alone with a tutor on one of her subjects. Tonight, her magic theory tutor, Athralaryn, took a moment before they began to survey the dinner buffet that was set up in her room, another “convenience” provided by her father, so she didn’t even need to take time away from her studies with distractions such as mingling with her

fellow students in the cafeteria. The savory aroma of the finest foods available in the city filled her room.

Athralaryn motioned to the table. "May I?"

Twyllea tilted her head. "You didn't eat before you came?"

"Apologies, your highness, I was busy preparing for our work today, and time slipped by before I noticed. If you don't mind, I'll be quick."

"I suppose, if you must. There is plenty there to feed half of the school, after all." The princess watched as her tutor loaded up a plate with the finest sliced seasoned meats, finely grilled vegetables, and fresh baked breads that her royal chefs could prepare.

Athralaryn approached her and reached out a hand. "May I see your notes from today?" His mouth half filled with a dinner roll, his lips shimmering with butter.

Twyllea handed him her notebook. He sat, opened it and scanned through her notes, chewing. He nodded and raised an eyebrow.

Great Tsaharian, she takes much better notes than I do. And her handwriting is so elegant.

He coughed into a fist and swallowed. "Yes, well, very good." He put down his plate. "Now, let's see how much you remember." He flipped through a few pages.

"Let's start with an easy one, shall we? How many primary magical disciplines are there?"

The princess sighed. "Seven."

"And what are they?"

Athralaryn took another large bite of his dinner as she counted on her fingers and rambled off the known schools of magic.

"Light, life, transmutation, elemental, dimensional, invocation or summoning, and divination."

He swallowed hard. "Very good. Now, why is there no school of, say, necromancy, or something like night or dark magic?"

She rolled her eyes. "Because necromancy is the opposite of life magic, and dark is the opposite of light. If you want to make a necromantic spell, you just cast a similar life spell with a negative prefix."

"Excellent. Now—"

"Please, do we have to review first year material as well?"

Twyllea stood up out of the white, overstuffed chair where she was sitting. Her hair was loose, no longer woven into the long

braid from her earlier public appearance in the classroom, now resting on her chest, shoulders, and back. She spun and started to walk toward her bedroom. As she did, her hair and light blue causal silks flowed with her.

Athralaryn stared at the outline of her figure, visible in just the slightest beneath the translucent layers of silk. She slowed and turned to see him staring.

“So that’s it? You’re just going to let me walk away? My father would be furious if he knew.”

Athralaryn blinked. “What?” Then he coughed. “Well, of course not.” He pursed his lips and closed the notebook. “Now, my dear princess, as you know, you need to take this time with me seriously.”

“Really?”

“Yes, of course.” Athralaryn stood. “Why, you...you have a responsibility to the kingdom. That is a great honor.”

“Ah, yes, and there it is. That’s all I ever hear. Twyllea, you **MUST** do this. Twyllea, you **MUST** do that.” She brought her hands to her chest. “How many thousands of times have I heard this? My whole life has been about this grand and mysterious responsibility. Not like I will ever matter to anyone. I’m never going to be queen, much less king. I’m sixth in line to the throne as it is now, and once my brothers start having children, I’ll just become an afterthought who sits at the end of the table during royal events. But that’s just fine, crowns don’t suit me, anyway. So, I ask. What’s the point of any of this?”

She threw up her arms and walked to a window behind her. As she opened it, a soft breeze blew in and riffled through her hair and shawl. She leaned on the widow sill and looked out. “What about what I want? Does anyone care about that?” she inquired of the evening.

“What’s the point?” Athralaryn replied. “Why there are many in the kingdom who look up to you, your majesty. Of course you matter. You’re an inspiration to thousands of young elven-folk.”

She tilted her head and turned back to face Athralaryn. “You don’t say—” Her voice tapered off.

“Believe me, I am one-hundred percent sympathetic to your plight. We are not so different, you know, you and I.”

“Oh, really?” The princess crossed her arms. “And how is that?”

“I’m a younger child, too, raised more by my grandfather

than my parents. Always struggling to get attention, or a piece of—” He paused and held up her notebook. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s make this more interesting. I’ll ask you a question about your studies, and if you get it right, you can ask me anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, anything. Now come back and sit down.” He motioned to her seat.

She smiled. “It’s agreed.”

Athralaryn sat down in his seat across from her, and cleared his throat. “Now, let’s take the kid’s gloves off now, shall we?” He flipped through the notebook looking for something he didn’t know off the top of his head. “If you want to take a common healing spell and have it also cure disease, what changes would you make to your pattern of gestures?”

“Oh, now that’s a bit better.” Twyllea sat back in her chair, across from the matching couch where Athralaryn was watching her. “Well, according to the core triad-phrasing lattice, the root gesture of healing is leigh.” She twisted her fingers together, and then raised them to Athralaryn, who nodded. “Then, the normal focus gesture is alon, but to add disease you need to move one step inward on the frame to sair.” She folded her arms inward and started to reform her hands. Athralaryn opened his mouth to correct her, but she continued, “No, wait. Sair the step in from paa. You need to use leyf. Leyf is the step in from alon.”

Athralaryn nodded. “Very good. Continue.”

“After that, it’s the same as normal. You just use dhau to complete the healing chord.” She re-formed her hands one more time, and pushed outward, toward Athralaryn.

“Excellent. Well done. And I must say,” he straightened up in his seat, “Your spell made me feel much better. Healed all of my dreadful diseases.” He smiled.

She smiled back and folded her hands in her lap. “Do you often have a lot of dreadful diseases, Athralaryn?”

“Oh yes. Appalling. Horrendous, even. Is that your question for me?”

She waved her hands at him. “Goodness, no.” She took in a deep breath. “So, earlier, you said you were raised by your grandfather, yes?”

“Yes, in a sense. Is that it, this time?” His smile broadened.

“Again, no. Just clarifying. Where was this? I’ve always been

a bit curious because you accent seems, let's say, diverse.”

“Well, that is a more interesting question, Twyllea, and I guess you're right. I never really thought about my accent, or where I was raised all that much. I started, like most everyone else, with my parents, but they had important business in the capital, and rather than take me with them, they sent me to live with my grandparents by the coast.” He watched his student, but saw no reaction. “Does that answer your question?”

“I'm not sure, but it will have to do for now.” She smiled. “So, what's next?”

Athralaryn cleared his throat again. “Well, let's see. How about we stay on the gesture-phrasing lattice for a bit, but dig a little deeper. What's the difference between casting a elemental spell of fire and summoning a fire-elemental servant?”

“Which fire spell? And, by the way, I prefer not to call a summoned creature a servant.”

Athralaryn shrugged. “As you wish, your highness. As to your question, Fireball is too easy. Let's go with Flame Tunnel.”

“Ooo. I don't think I've ever cast that spell. You're trying to trick me, aren't you?” She stood up and looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “OK, now let's see. Both start with kii, of course, to excite fire energy.”

Athralaryn nodded. “Of course.”

Twyllea paced around her chair, looking up, with her hands clasped behind her back. “A minor fire elemental then blends into wyd, to switch to the life branch, before adding both the capacity and temporal gestures.” She paused for a bit and brought her hands back around front. Athralaryn could see her performing gestures. Finally she spun back around to face him. “My guess is that Flame Tunnel blends into the dimensional branch, which would go to symth.” She showed the form to him.

Athralaryn tilted his head. “Close. Yes, it would seem that way at first, wouldn't it, but it actually flows into the invocation branch.”

“Ahh, yes, of course. Enni!”

“Excellent, very good.”

She took in and exhaled a long breath of the evening air coming in from the open window. “Alright. Now, my turn.” She looked at him coyly, “What's your favorite meal?”

“Do you mean like breakfast or dinner? Because in that case, I'll always take breakfast.” He pat his stomach. “Have to start the

day of right.”

“No, no, no, I mean what’s your favorite thing to eat?”

“In that case, I guess I would have to say,” he paused trying to think of the fanciest thing he could, “probably a nice rare roasted greyson pork loin, in a spiced sauce made from an elder wine.”

He leaned toward her. “But to be completely honest, I do enjoy a minced meat pie as much as anyone.”

She gasped and held her hand to her chest. “You mean like the ones that have in the shops down in the trade district?”

“Mmm, hmmm.” He licked his lips. “And the smaller and seedier the shop, the better, I’ve found.” He winked.

They both laughed.

A familiar voice came from the entry to the room. “Excuse me?”

They both looked to see Athralaryn standing in the doorway, still wearing his coat with a backpack hanging on his shoulder. Athralaryn, who was in the room with Twyllea, stood up and closed the study book. They all looked at each other.

“What’s going on here?” Athralaryn from the doorway asked.

Athralaryn in the room took a few steps to the side, his hand on the back of the couch where he had been sitting. “I could ask you the same thing. In fact, I should ask you the same thing. Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

Athralaryn put his backpack down. “I am Athralaryn, Twyllea’s magic theory tutor. Who are you?”

“No.” He pointed at his chest. “I am Athralaryn, Twyllea’s magic theory tutor. And, as you can clearly see,” he raised the notebook, “we’ve been studying for the last half-hour.”

Athralaryn in the doorway turned to the princess. “Twyllea, what kind of obscene joke is this? You know we have to study for the upcoming test. We don’t have time for any of your silly games.”

“In two weeks,” interjected Athralaryn in the room,” who stepped toward the door. “That’s precisely what we’ve been doing. Now I kindly request that you stop this charade right now, and leave us to our much needed work.”

“Charade? Twyllea, please, end this, and let’s get to work. I have a pledge to your father, and I intend to honor it.”

Two royal guard appeared behind Athralaryn in the doorway. All three elves who were crowding the door, took a step into the room, one guard on either side of Athralaryn. The guards

addressed the princess. "Is there a problem here, your highness?"

She looked back and forth at the two absolutely identical versions of Athralaryn standing in her room. "Yes. Yes, I believe there is. This man," she pointed at the Athralaryn standing between them, "he is an imposter. He has come here, at best as some kind of prepubescent joke to disrupt my studies, and at worst, he has," she looked away and raised a hand to her chest, "who knows what nefarious and possibly illegal intentions."

The two guards each grabbed an arm of Athralaryn, who protested. "Twyllea! This is outrageous!"

She waved, still looking away. "Take him from me at once, and I will be reporting this to my father."

"Yes, your highness." The two guards bowed and pushed Athralaryn out of the door despite his very loud and boisterous objections.

"I won't let you get away with this!"

The clamor in the entry hall continued, though the shouting sounded as though it were receding down the hallway. Twyllea closed the door, and locked it. She turned to the Athralaryn who remained and smiled. "Well. Now that he's out of the way. Who," she paused and cocked her head, "are you?"

The excitement on Athralaryn's face turned to confusion. "What do you mean, your highness? It's me Athralaryn." He threw out his hands. "Your magic theory tutor. You just said that, yourself."

"Oh come now, my dear rapscaillon. I think we're a little past that by now, aren't we? And no, I didn't actually say that you were, in fact, Athralaryn." She took a few paces into the room. "You did have me going for a bit this evening, but I was starting to have my reservations." She spun and faced Athralaryn. "First, it was strange enough for you to ask me for something to eat, but the way you piled your plate...well...it's like you just came off of the docks, or something."

Athralaryn flushed. "Apologies, princess, but you have to admit that this is far better than any meal we get in our dormitories." He shrugged.

The princess eyed her tutor. "Indeed. Now, on that note, you see, Athralaryn is the second of his family, not the fourth, and he would never be caught dead in the trading district, much less eating some mystery meat pie. That was a nice touch, and may have worked on someone who didn't know him as well as I do,

but unfortunately for you, he's more than just a tutor. I've known him most of my life. It was a worthwhile gamble, I agree, but unfortunately for you, one that completely blew your cover."

"Well, Athralaryn flushed. "Again, I apologize for the deception, I...I was just trying to indulge you in your questions."

"Of course you were." She took a few more paces. "Now, at first I thought you were just trying to play me, to get me out of my undergarments. But there was something sincere in your stories."

"Of course they were, your majesty." Athralaryn bowed. "I am nothing if not sincere in my intentions."

"And that's another thing," she held up a finger. "You refer to my father as 'Your Majesty,' not me. Athralaryn may be a blowhard and full of himself, but at least he knows proper decorum, and what title to call me if he wants any chance of being connected to my family." She stopped and faced Athralaryn. "So, anyway, I played along with your little game to find out where exactly this was leading. I mean, changing one's appearance a little is easy enough, but to look," she cocked her head toward Athralaryn, "and sound, exactly like someone else, even the rather unusual accent, now that's no small feat. I have to say, I am very intrigued. So, I ask you once again. Who. Are. You?"

Athralaryn slumped, "But—"

"Would you like me to call my guards again? I assure you they won't be as gentle with you as they were with him, especially when they find out that you are, in fact," she raised her eyebrows, "a commoner?"

Athralaryn held up his hands. "No no no. I'm sorry, your royal princessness."

"Your highness will do. For now."

"I'm sorry, your highness." Athralaryn's form started to shift. The features of his face flowed like liquid flesh. His ears shortened, and his hair became a little darker. Before long, the half-elf, half-human Gerellynth Lightfoot stood in front of her. He tuned his head slightly and smiled. "My sincerest apologies, your highness. Allow me to introduce myself, I am," he bowed most gracefully, "The Silken Swift."

The princess snorted. "The what?"

The Swift stood up straight. "The Silken Swift."

"Is that, like," she put her hand to her chest, "some sort of nickname? That thing you boys like to do to make yourself feel special? My goodness, you should stop being friends with

whomever gave you that ridiculous title.”

The Swift flushed.

She cocked her head. “Wait, did you come up with that silly name all by yourself?”

He flashed a meek smile. “Well, I guess...well, you see, it’s my professional name.”

“Professional? Now that’s an interesting word. Professional... what?”

The Swift turned slightly and raised an eyebrow. “Rascalion, it would seem.”

The princess smiled and nodded. “Hmm. Yes. Yes, it would now, wouldn’t it. Anyway, that’s not how it’s supposed to work, you know. You can’t just give yourself a nickname. Someone else has to give it to you for some memorable deed or deeds you performed in their service, or at least in their presence.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Like slaying a dragon, or saving the kingdom, or probably just drinking more jugs of wine than anyone else.”

The Swift stepped toward Twyllea. “How about capturing the heart of a princess?”

Twyllea stepped back and covered herself. “You are a bold one, aren’t you? Don’t forget, my guards are just a doorway away.” She paused and squinted. “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before.”

“Perhaps. I am a student here.”

She pursed her lips and stared at his face. After a few moments she relaxed. “Oh yes, of course. You’re the one who stole into my box during class just this morning. You caused quite a stir, you know.”

“Well, it was quite necessary, I assure you.”

“Oh really, and why is that.”

“To get closer to you, of course.”

“Well, that didn’t seem to work out too well, did it?”

“Didn’t it?” Swift opened his arms wide, spun around, and smiled.

The princess grimaced. “Indeed.” She turned her back.

Sensing her discomfort, The Swift took a step closer and reached out. “Well, you were asking how I did this, yes? And... and you are correct,” he ran a hand down his face, “small changes to one’s form aren’t too difficult. But to take on the appearance of

a specific someone else in particular, you need to have, let's say, a sample of the goods."

She turned back toward The Swift with an inquisitive look. "A sample of the goods?"

"Yes, a piece of them. That's why I needed to get into your box. Not for you, as everyone expected, but for Athralaryn."

The princess gasped. "What, like a finger? You didn't cut off poor Athralaryn's finger, did you?"

The Swift held up his hands. "No, no no, nothing like that, though the more you have the better. Usually a strand or two of hair is sufficient, if the changes aren't too dramatic. My intentions were to get some spit or sweat in my face. That would be good enough. Getting some of his blood on my shirt, that was just an extra bonus, guaranteed that I would get his form perfect." Swift shrugged. "I hope he's alright, by the way."

"Athralaryn? Yes, yes, of course. A simple heal took care of that straight away." She paused. "You expected that, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have a bandage on your nose, yet you knew that he had been injured."

"Yes, that's true, and I was actually making one. But then I realized that I've never seen an upper...er...noble with a minor injury. So, I figured you must always get a quick heal, even for something as small as a bloody nose. Another gamble, I guess, but the right one this time."

"So you staged that whole affair just to get some of his hair, or dare I say, sputum, so you could transform into him?"

"So I could see you, your highness. So I could be in here with you, tonight."

"So it would seem." She looked at him and squinted. "You said small changes are easy."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Then who am I looking at right now?"

"Why it's me, your highness, like I said, The Silken Swift."

"Is it, though?"

"Why of course. You caught me, didn't you. There's nothing more I have to hide from you, now?"

The princess waved a finger. "I'm not so sure. You certainly are a clever one, and I expect you always have a back-up plan, and probably another back-up upon that. I'll bet a 'professional' rapscaillon such as yourself wouldn't risk your true nature being

known if you can help it, at least not just yet. I suspect you'd be happy to get what you came here for just like you are, and then get away free as bird, as it were."

The Swift smiled. "They were right. You are at the top of all of your classes for a reason. It would be very difficult to keep you in the fog for long."

"In the fog?"

"Yes, well, that's the term for when your mark, err, someone else, doesn't know who you truly are, they are obscured from your true form by some kind of disguise, or the like."

"Is that something like a thief's cant?"

"Let's just call it rapsallion speak, shall we."

"Call it what you will, but we agree this still is not really you, correct?"

"It is as much me as any, I would say."

The princess frowned. "Riddles will only serve to increase your fast approaching sentence in the cells. I suggest you save them for your fellow fraudsters at whatever pub you frequent."

The Swift held up his hands. "Now, now, my dear princess, there's no need for any of that." He forced out a laugh.

"No? Then I suggest you come clean with me, and quickly, and never again call me your mark, as it were."

He grimaced. "Now, I don't think there's really any need for—"

"Dwydinn! Zolja!" The princess motioned as if she were calling for her guards.

The Swift reached out. "Alright, alright. Please. You want to see who I really am. Fine."

The princess smiled. "Very good, then."

The Swift took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He began to transform again. His height shortened some more, his ears rounded, and his hair turned into dark shoe-leather brown waves, with whips of lighter brown mixed throughout. In the end, a rather ordinary young, human man stood before her in clothes that were now quite a bit too long for him.

"Oh!" She gasped and put a hand to her chest. "A Human? At school here?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Mostly, and well, you asked."

"So this is the real you?" She reached out to his face. "What?"

The Swift grimaced and turned his head to the side, attempting to hide a badly deformed nose, the result of multiple

breaks during his time growing up with multiple older brothers, some full, some half.

She grasped his head and turned it back to face her's. She studied him for a few moments, then released him and put her hands together. "I believe you. But why go through all of the trouble to change yourself into a half-elf?"

Swift swallowed hard. "Well, like you just mentioned, I had very little chance of getting into school here as a human, especially one who looks like a dock worker. And, since the school wouldn't accept me for who I am, I became...who they would accept."

"Hmm." She nodded. "That's understandable. But why not take the form of one of the other students, like you did tonight? That would seem to be an easy way to do what you want without question."

The Swift smiled. "Not really. You saw how that went with Athralaryn. Taking the form of someone else seems like a good idea, but in reality it can be very dangerous. The trick to being somewhere your not supposed to be, or aren't wanted, is to be, well, unnoticed. You can't risk being seen with the real person, or by someone who knows where they are supposed to be. For me to be a student here, I had to be able to just blend in with everyone else. Be almost invisible, as it were."

"My my, you are a clever one." She cocked her head. "Then why not be a full elf? Why a half-elf? It seems you would be much less conspicuous that way, which is what you want, yes?"

"That's true, but as mentioned earlier, the smaller the change the better. It's easier for me to be accurate and hold the form of a half-elf. It would be very difficult to concentrate on being a full-elf, and pay attention in class at the same time. Gerellynth Lightfoot was my compromise."

"So he's not a real person, then, I assume?" She paced, her hands behind her back.

"No, not that I know of." The Swift tracked her movements, keeping himself square to her. "He's a mix of several customers who came into the bakery where I work. Shops are great places to acquire samples, so to speak, especially ones that give out free food."

"Hmm. Interesting. Gross, but interesting." She gasped and spun to look directly at him. "Can you do me?"

The Swift twitched a little. "Do you? What do you mean, 'do

you’?”

“Can you turn yourself into me?”

“Well, I don’t know. I suppose it’s possible. I’ve never turned into a woman before.”

“Oh please.” She smirked. “I’ll bet a thousand pyraan, ten-thousand even, the first thing you did when you learned how to do this was turn into a woman so you could play with your own breasts.”

The Swift flushed and let out a weak laugh. “Well, maybe. I have never been able to successfully turn into a woman. Now, that is true.”

“It didn’t work?”

“No, and it was quite painful, so I haven’t really tried it since.”

“Maybe you just needed a sample, as you said. Wait here.”

The princess ran off and returned with a brush. “Try this. There’s plenty of my hair in here.”

The Swift shrugged. “Are you sure.”

“Oh yes, how exciting!”

The Swift took the brush and started pulling out strands of her golden hair. When he had what he felt was enough, he handed the brush back to her and closed his eyes. He breathed softly and in a few moments his form began to change. Twyllea looked on in wonder as he grew a little taller, and became slender and more fair skinned. His features softened and his hair grew and lightened to a golden brown.

She squinted. “Wait, that doesn’t look right.”

His form shifted some more, but instead of having skin that glowed with a platinum radiance like her’s, he began to look more pale and sickly in color. His eyes grew too far apart and his ears only managed to get about halfway to the full size and shape of an elf. He then let out a groan and doubled over. A few moments later he was his human form again. “Oh, my god that hurts.”

Twyllea knelt down and grabbed him. “Are you alright? What happened?”

He looked up at her, pain in his eyes. “I don’t know. Must have something to do with what’s changing on the inside.”

“But you changed into Athralaryn without any trouble.”

“Yes, but he’s a man. Less of a change in the important parts, I guess.”

She tilted her head for a moment, then grabbed his face with

both of her hands. She looked deep into his eyes, then closed hers and kissed him. She took in a long breath through her nose and wrapped her arms around him. He tensed up at first from the shock of what was happening, but then relaxed into her embrace. The room around him faded away as he sunk deeper and deeper into their passion. He didn't notice as he grew to match her in height exactly, his face thinning. He welcomed her into his grasp with long, slender arms that shimmered with a platinum-colored glow. His clothes sagged on his now svelte, very feminine body. He breathed deeply, then leaned back slowly and opened his eyes.

"Wow."

Twyllea batted her eyes and raised a hand to her chest. "Phew... You're telling me." She then gasped and leaned back to stare directly at The Swift, like she was looking at herself in the mirror. She put a hand on each of his shoulders and looked up and down at him, but in her body. "It worked!"

The Swift pulled away and lifted his hands and then looked down at his new form. He smiled.

She shot the Swift a risqué, rather un-princessly look. "Well, I have to say, I'm a really good kisser. Hmmm?"

The Swift leaned forward and grabbed the princess. "Hard to say for sure, from just the one sample."

Their lips met again and they both let out a soft, identical moan. The two princesses stumbled toward her bedroom, locked together. Magic theory lessons were over for the night, but the princess was about to learn so much more about herself than she could have ever imagined.

Time passed much too quickly for them as they explored each other's bodies as if in a competition to see who was the more curious. Nothing was off limits, and for the first time, they both felt free to push the limits of their desires. Mid-way through the night, with the sky-blue, silk sheets of her bed a jumbled mess and most of the pillows on the floor, Twyllea straddled her twin and leaned over. She bit herself on the ear and whispered, "Change back."

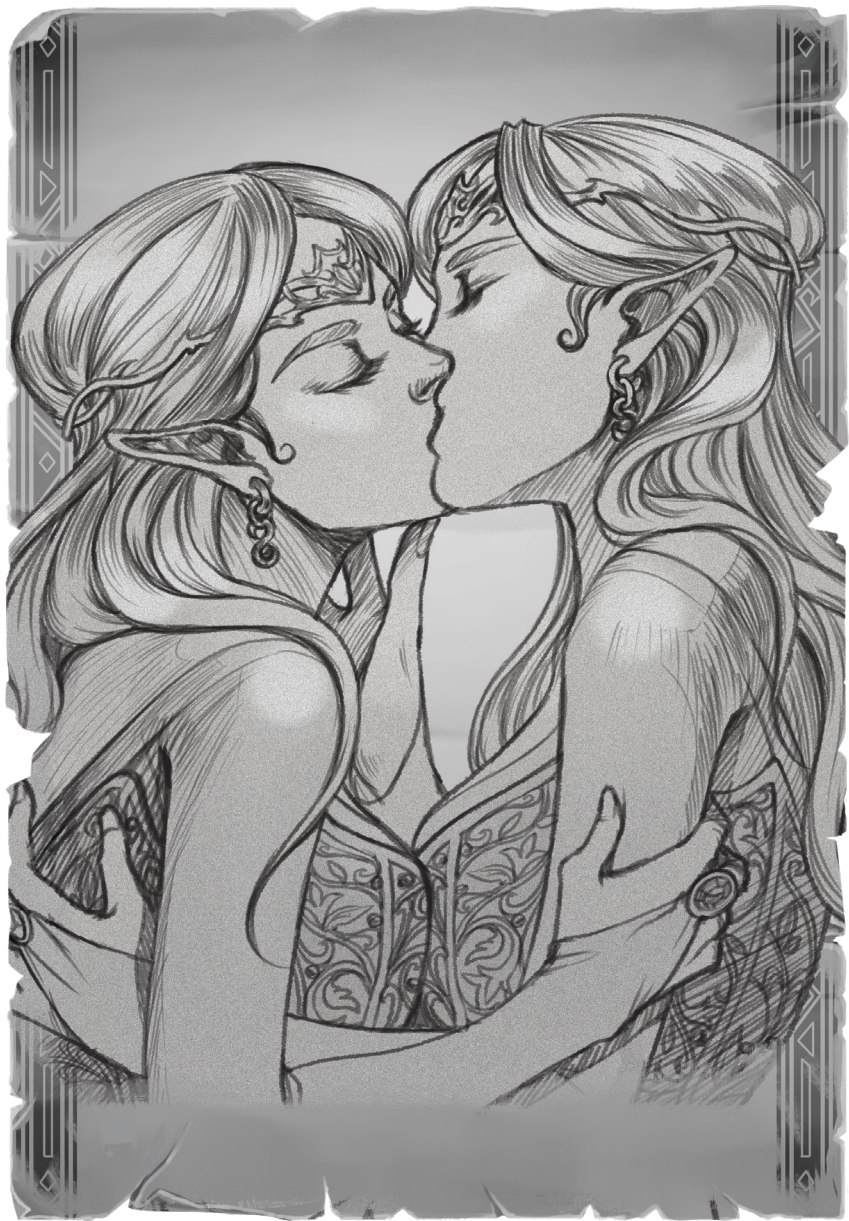
The Swift looked at her unsure with eyes a deep, clear ocean-blue.

"I want you," she continued, "the real you."

The Swift paused. "But, I'm—"

She put a finger to his lips.

The Swift's heart raced with renewed excitement. He let his



mind relax, releasing her image from his consciousness. His body loosed and flowed back into its natural form. In a few seconds, he was the human Swift again. She looked into his dark, chocolate brown eyes and reached behind her, between his legs. He gasped.

"Just making sure," she whispered with a smile.

He sat up, and spun on top of her. Holding himself up over her, he looked up and down, taking in her naked body. A body that until recently was also his. Looking at her now, as himself, she was even more beautiful, even more alluring. No more his twin, but now a complement. No longer two of the same person, in curious exploration of the same body, they were now a couple. Their passion for each other revived with a heightened intensity and renewed eagerness.

As the sun peaked its first light into her her windows, she lay on her side and curled his thick brown hair with the tip of her finger. "That...was amazing. You are a rascalion."

He turned to face her and smiled. "After careful consideration, I think it's safe to say now, you are indeed an amazing kisser."

"Hmmm." She smiled back.

She stared deep into his eyes, studying the spirals of light and dark browns that shimmered back at her, unaware of some commotion at the front door. "Those stories you told me last night, when you were pretending to be Athralaryn. Those were true, weren't they?"

The Swift dropped his eyes and nodded. "Yes, princess, at least partly." He exhaled. "You have to ground every story in some truth, to make it believable. It can open you up to potential gambles, but the added authenticity almost always makes up for it."

"It was more than that, though, wasn't it? I could see the pain in your face. Real pain."

"The Swift took in a short breath and coughed. "Yes, well, I was the youngest of, let's say, a rather large family. I didn't have much help and had to learn how to take care of myself in order to survive."

"Your parents didn't make sure you were included? Usually the youngest gets all the affection."

"Maybe if the family is well off. But when there's barely enough food, an extra mouth is more of an affliction than a blessing. Besides, I didn't see my parents much. I was raised mostly by my grandfather and brothers, and they usually just used

me as their punching bag.”

“Is that how you got this?” She stroked the distinctive configuration of his nose with her finger. He winced and pulled back, but she persisted. “No need to be so shy, donynn. It gives you...character.”

“Is that what you call it?”

She rubbed his nose with hers, and kissed him. “So, how did you learn about magic?”

“Magic?”

“Yes, of course. You clearly have talent. You can’t do high-level transformations like that without some kind of training.”

The Swift sat up onto his elbows. “My grandfather studied here, that’s how I knew about the school. He later specialized in charm and rune magic.”

“Oh, really? He was a human who studied here?”

“No. He was half-elf. I’m actually one-eighth, though it really doesn’t look like it.”

“Oh, so he got you in as a legacy?”

The Swift snorted. “No, he didn’t really care about me that much either. My oldest brother was his favorite. I’m sure he could have gotten a full endorsement if he’d wanted to. I didn’t know about any of his magic studies until I was a teenager. I found a set of rune stones in my brother’s things once, when he made me clean up his room. Apparently, my grandfather had been giving him all sorts of artifacts from his days as a practicing magician.”

“Did he teach you, then?”

“My brother?” Swift snorted again. “Oh no. He didn’t give a shit about the magic. He made fun of the runes and treated it all like it was some kind of a dumb joke.”

“How did you learn, then?”

“I stole them, of course.”

She gasped.

He shrugged. “He wasn’t going to use them. So, I stole everything. The runes, my grandfather’s notebooks, the whole lot.”

“Didn’t your brother get mad at you?”

“I don’t know, maybe? He probably didn’t even notice. I didn’t stick around long enough to find out. I took everything and left that same day. I made my way here. This city, this school were my ticket out. They had to be.”

“Really? They let you in, though, a human with no

experience? You must have shown some real promise.”

The Swift laughed. “No. They slammed the door in my face, too. But I knew I had to be here, like my grandfather. So, I worked various odd jobs in the market district for a few years, while I kept practicing. It took a while really, but being a stock boy was really the perfect cover. I saw all sorts of creatures coming in off boats to unload goods, or to stock up on the latest whatever to take back with them, and was largely ignored. You’d never imagine what kinds of biological material you can find sweeping the floors and taking out the trash.”

“Eww. Yes, so you said.” She recoiled.

Swift shrugged. “Hey, I had to take what I could get. It’s not like experimenting with transmutations was an excepted practice in the streets, but like I said, being a stock boy was excellent cover. I could go behind buildings and in alleyways to be away from the crowds, without raising any suspicions. That was part of my job, after all.” He took in a long breath and shifted his weight. “Eventually, I was able to come up with the half-elf persona you saw earlier. It’s a mix of myself and several of the elves who I would pass by or meet on the streets, like I mentioned earlier. I used that to enroll. Since my grandfather was a half-elf, I assumed that would be good enough, and like I said, was a lot easier to maintain.”

“It seems to have been.”

He scoffed. “Barely.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m always on the edge of being expelled. I think most professors are looking for any opportunity to get rid of me.”

He nuzzled into the nape of her neck and breathed in the sweet smell of her perfume mixed with the musk from the night before. She cradled his head to her chest, a tear running down her cheek. She lifted her head and sighed. “A human.” She laughed. “Who would have thought that it would take a human to show me the truth.”

The Swift tried to ask her what she meant when the front door of her apartment burst open, causing them both to sit up with a start. In a single motion, she spun out of the bed and put on a robe that was hanging on a chair near the bed. She tied the belt and stepped toward the door. She stopped before opening it, and spread her hands over the surface.

“What is it?” The Swift asked as he slid out of the bed.

“It’s Athralaryn. He’s back, and he brought some help. My guards are holding them for now, but I’ll need to get involved soon. We need to find a way to get you out of here.”

She closed her hands and turned to meet The Swift. She gasped to find him mostly dressed right behind her. He smiled and kissed her deeply, his hands cradling the sides of her face. She lay her hands on his and exhaled.

He let her go and opened the window to her bedroom balcony.

She reached for him. “What are you doing?”

He turned to her and winked. “Remember, I always have a backup plan.” He pulled a piece of meat from his leftover dinner out of his jacket, took a bite, and then he leaned back and fell backwards off the thick stone balustrade.

She gasped and ran onto the balcony. She leaned out to see him smiling up at her. “What’s your real name?”

He blew her a kiss and disappeared into the shadows, chewing with a wide grin on his face.



THANK YOU!



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



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