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LICH KING

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CHAPTER 5

A WALK IN THE
WOODS

The Silken Swift touched down on the sidewalk. No rough, uneven cobblestones here in the upper district. This landing was on a smooth granite surface, inlaid with gold and pure, white marble. A simple spell from his first-year, *Introduction to Flying* class helped him float down the last few hundred feet of the fall from the princess' balcony window. The early morning sun lit the upper few floors of the tower with brilliant light. He squinted, and saw what he suspected was the silhouette of the princess still leaning out over the stone railing. In his native human form, he couldn't see well enough to tell for certain, but that had to be her. He spun around on his heels and smiled.

Yessir, Swift, my man, you are the best. It's not even close.

"You there!" A rather unfriendly voice came from down the walkway, near the entrance to the building. The proper, high elvish accent usually meant someone rather important in the city, like one of his professors or a city official, but the slight rough overtone could only be law enforcement.

The Swift turned to see two men walking toward him dressed in armor featuring king Reiklyn's crest. He squinted.

They're here already? Wow, that was quick.

“What are you doing here?” The guards spoke with assumed authority.

The Swift thought for a moment about how to on his charm and talk his way out of why a human was floating down from the top of an elven government building. He did, after all, just spend the night with the princess. How easy would it be to get the best of these two fools? He smiled and waved.

“Hey there. I was just—”

Then he turned and ran the opposite direction, deciding that he’d better take advantage of the distance between them while he could.

“Stop! In the name of King Reiklyn, I command you to stop.”

The Swift ignored their command, of course, and turned at the next corner. He looked up and around at the buildings in the government district.

Wait. Where am I, again?

He heard the loud clomping of heavy boots, and the clanging of armor from the two guards chasing after him.

“Stop!”

As elves, the guards had a distinct advantage over him in most physical activities, including running, but he was betting, likely literally betting his life, that their armor would slow them at least a little bit. He rounded another corner and looked back to see that, while they hadn’t caught up to him yet, it wouldn’t be much longer until they did, even weighed down as they were. He for felt the bag on his hip and grimaced.

No, not enough time to get through a portal.

The Swift looked around. The buildings here sure were beautiful. He had only seen them before though the windows in his classrooms. Now that he was up close, he could see that the construction was flawless. Smooth and sleek with ornamentation so complex he couldn’t believe it was all carved directly into the stone. But he didn’t have time to admire the craftsmanship of the upper district, he needed to find a way out of here, and fast.

“Rygch, don’t rich people have alleys?” He muttered to himself.

There were no alleys to duck into, no drain pipes to climb up. No trash bins or boxes. Not much for someone like him to use in times like these.

“I guess rapsCALLIONS don’t make there way up here very often.”

What he did find, however, was a doorway. Plenty of those. He picked one that recessed off the street a bit, and lay down in it. He then closed his eyes, and focused. He pictured the elf guard he had made contact with the day before, after being thrown out of the princess' theater box. His form began to shift, getting longer and lighter. His ears extended, and his brown matted waves grew into a long mane of straight, golden hair. It wasn't a perfect transformation, he'd only had quick contact with the guard, after all, but it would have to do. When the change was finished, he drew his head back and bashed it into the door. He winced.

Ugh. Well, at least should distract from any discrepancies.

The two elf guards ran around the corner and found him laying in the doorway.

"You there, stay where you are!"

They ran up to elf-guard Swift and picked him up. The Swift groaned, his eyes closed.

"Vartillya?" One of the guards lifted The Swift's elven head, who fluttered his eyes and avoided direct contact. "Is that you?"

The Swift squinted. "Wha—"

The two guards peppered their supposed colleague with questions.

"Vartillya, are you alright?"

"What are you doing out here?"

"Did you see a human run through here?"

The Swift blinked and held his head up half way. "Human? Yes, yes. Little, dark-haired bastard." He rasped his voice as best he could to disguise his less than perfect duplication of the elf guard. "He took me by surprise, attacked me and took my armor. I think he's trying to blend in...so he can get away." The Swift choked and grunted his way through his story. "He's a mage of some sort, so be careful. I think he's quite powerful." He then drooped his head back down.

The guards lowered The Swift back into the doorway. One looked at the bump forming on his head. "You'll be alright. Don't worry. I'll contact base and have someone sent out here to help you. Which way did he go?"

The Swift raised an arm and pointed a weak finger away from where they were. "That way...I think."

"Thanks, Vartillya." They patted his shoulder and ran off the direction he directed.

After they were out of sight, The Swift pressed against the

door, and lifted himself to his feet. He smiled. "Dickheads." He let out a chuckle, then grimaced in pain from the very real bump on his head. He reached up to feel his injury when two more guards came around the corner and approached him. He leaned over and braced himself against the door with one hand, hung his head, and waved.

"Greetings." He pointed, again keeping his eyes down. "He went that way. Two others are in pursuit."

The two guards slowed and looked at The Swift, still disguised as an elf guard. "Do you need help?" One asked.

The Swift waved him off. "No, no. I'll make it back to base. Go help them."

As The Swift started to stumble forward, one of the guards leaned in. "Vartillya? Is that you?"

The Swift nodded. "Yes. Yes, you can tell me all about how a human bested me once we've caught the little bastard."

"Indeed," the guard turned his head and squinted. "I'm just wondering how he attacked you down here, when we just left you with the princess upstairs?" The guard pointed in the general direction of the tower where the princess had her apartment.

The Swift nodded. "Yes. Like I told them, he's a magic-user."

The guard reached for The Swift. "He's also a shape-shifter!"

The Swift twisted out of the way before the guard could grab him. His companion turned to help, but The Swift was an elf, and not wearing heavy armor. Now he had the speed and dexterity advantage over the guards. He bent and twirled away from the two guards and bolted down the street. He heard them give chase, but could tell this time that they were not catching up to him. He smiled again at his ability to outwit the king's guards, but then lurched as he saw two more approaching him.

Whoops.

The Swift leaned to the side and turned down a different street, but within moments saw two more guards running toward him. He turned again, only to see two more. Every direction he looked, the morning streets were empty, save for pairs of armed soldiers running his way.

Thallan help me, how many of these assholes are there? Is the entire upper city made up of guards?

He twisted his head back and forth, then looked up. The morning sky was getting lighter. He focused. His elf eyes caught minor details all across the walls, and even on the tops of buildings

around him, details he could never see with his human eyes. He smiled.

Maybe I just need a different perspective.

The Swift hopped onto the wall and started to scale whatever residential building he was next to. Years of climbing in and out of various bedroom windows had made him quite the little climber, but in an elf body even the polished structures of the upper city were accessible with a little bit of extra effort. The construction may be flawless and showed no overlaps or connective lines between bricks or panels, but the ornate designs gave him plenty of traction and holds to use for the climb up the wall.

Once on top of the building, he could see things were worse than he had thought. The streets were teeming with guards, all pointing and looking at him. He ran across the roof, weaving around pillars, skylights, and other ornamental and functional rooftop features. He jumped to the building next to him, taking a diagonal-ish route across the district to force the guards to have to run around the buildings, slowing their pursuit further.

A few blocks away, he could see the gates to the residential districts getting close, his way out of the upper city. The walls between the districts stood tall, well above most of the buildings. He wouldn't be able to scale that one, he'd have to go through the gates themselves.

He stopped running and looked down at the streets. Several sets of guards swarmed around below. Then behind him, some of the guards had climbed up on the roof tops. They weren't as fast as he was, and they didn't even seem to be coming straight at him. Some were, but others were moving around the sides. At first he thought they were trying to flank him, put a pinch on him, but then he saw they weren't making any effort to come toward him. They must be trying to force him a certain direction, herd him. He looked at the guards, and then behind him. The gates. They wanted him to go to the gates. There must be a welcoming party there waiting for him.

Hmmm. Scratch that idea.

He looked around some more, but all he could see were guards closing in on him. He closed his eyes.

Alright, Thallan Cor. Now would be a good time.

His mind swirled, but nothing came to him. All he heard was the rushing waterfalls. Those damn waterfalls. Always pouring over the ridge, always spraying their waters all over the lower

city. They may be pretty, but he always viewed them as more of a nuisance than anything else. He opened his eyes. The soldiers were almost on him now. Soldiers, and waterfalls. He grunted.

“Thanks for nothing, Cor.”

The soldiers yelled something, but The Swift couldn’t hear them over the roar of the waterfalls. They motioned to him, and made more commands, but again all The Swift could hear was the waterfalls. He tried to form a plan, but his head was filled with thundering water. Non-stop, rushing, pouring, crashing waterfalls.

The Swift put his head in his hands. “Fuck you waterfalls!” He squeezed his eyes closed. “Fuck you, I need to—”

The Swift stiffened and opened his eyes. The guards were closing in, but since they had split up to guide him in the direction of the gates, they had left a wide open path right toward the waterfalls. “Ohhhhhh, the waterfalls! Well, I’ll be—”

“What?” The guards were just a few feet away from him now.

The Swift threw up his hands. “Thank you, Thallan Cor!” He leapt forward and sprinted at the space between the guards. Two soldiers turned to cut him off. One laid out in front of him, while the other lunged forward. The Swift dove over the legs of the stretched out guard, and rolled back to his feet. He looked behind him, smiling, like he was in some game at school.

Three more guards came at The Swift from different angles. He side-stepped one, but right into the path of another. The guard slammed into The Swift, knocking him over. The metal armor felt like he had be run into by a charging rhino. He grunted as he landed on rooftop, bouncing off the side of a small pillar. Before he could collect himself, the guard was on him. The weight of the elf plus his armor pressed down on The Swift. He coughed and rolled his eyes from the pressure. A guard grabbed one of his arms, while another took ahold of his feet. He struggled, but had no leverage the the weight crushing his chest.

Frantic, he imagined a man who came through the bakery a few months before. The size of a child, but a full-sized member of his species. He didn’t know their proper name, but humans referred to them as halflings. More of a derogatory name due to their size, than anything else. The halfling customer could not finish the sandwich he had ordered, so The Swift had “cleaned up” the leftovers for a sample of the man. He focused and began to change. He shrunk to half his size, his arms and legs pulling inward. The guard on top of him began to roll off, as his torso

contracted. The two holding onto him we pulled off balance as his arms and legs shrunk, and ran into the guard laying on top of The Swift. They lost their grip, and The Swift rolled to the side and sprang to his feet. His shirt remained behind him, laying under one of the guards, along with his side bag. His boots were off to one side, and his pants were now big enough to be his bedsheets, or a really long cape.

One of the guards recovered, and scrambled toward The Swift, who jumped back, out of his pants. Naked, he danced around the guards, his bare feet slapping on the smooth, opaque crystalline surface that made up most of the rooftop. Small and nimble, and wearing no clothes to grab ahold of, he scurried away, but then backtracked when he saw more guards closing in on him. Twisting away, we ran back toward the three who were picking themselves up. He slipped a dagger away from one as he skittered by.

The guards surrounded him, but took a more defensive, slightly confused posture, seeing that he was now armed, and, well, naked. The Swift didn't intend to fight with the dagger, however, and thrust down onto the skylight that they were all standing on. The point of the dagger crashed into the crystalline window. Some chips flew off, but the window held firm.

"What?"

"No!"

"Stop!"

The elf guards held out their hands, but The Swift thrust down again, and again. One of the guards rushed in to grab him just as the window cracked. The guard's heavy boot landed on the weakened window finishing the job. The rooftop shattered. The Swift and a half dozen guards fell through the broken rooftop, into the room below, which happened to be the bed chambers of the dean of the school of transmutation magic at Kura Fyannae Calharam.

Heavy metal figures clanged down into the room, and bounced off various pieces of furniture. Naked Swift twisted and flipped as he fell, landing on his feet on top of a dresser. He released the image of his smaller figure and returned to his half-elf, Gerellynth Lightfoot body, a form he had used enough that he could maintain it even during stressful situations like these. Still naked, he hopped off of the dresser onto the bedroom floor.

The dean and her husband sat up, both letting out rather shocked screams, not expecting to be woken by a team of ar-

mored guards toppling into their chambers.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” The Swift smiled, grabbing his shirt and satchel off of the bed. He gathered up the rest of his clothes, kicked one the of the kneeling guards in the head, and ran out of the room. He bound down the stairs as fast as he could, trying to gain as much distance as possible while the guards were gathering themselves from the fall. He knocked over a bookcase, and a few other random pieces of furniture on his way to the front door. He burst out, onto the street to find it free of guards, at least for now. He was, however met with many astonished gasps by several members of the upper city who were getting ready to start their day, and did not expect to see a naked half-elf rush out of the dean’s home.

“Good morning.” The Swift bowed his head and ran of toward the waterfalls that framed the vista for the upper city. Fortunately, the streets in this part of the city were smooth and clean, and he felt perfectly comfortable running at a full-sprint with bare feet. Gasps behind him let him know that the guards had started to join him on the street. He ducked behind a carriage that was taking someone more well to do than himself to an office somewhere in the district. The driver jerked seeing a naked half-elf crouching next to his carriage, and the horses responded in-kind, feeling the anxiety of their driver. The Swift threw his shirt over his shoulders. He kept low and out of sight, but knew his respite would be short-lived, thanks to the rather clamorous antics of the horses. Still holding his pants and boots, he ran out in front of the carriage and raced down the street. He weaved his way between pedestrians, occasionally bumping into one of them, creating as much confusion as he could, to slow down his pursuers.

Built into the side of a mountain, the upper city was more like a collection of micro-districts, rather than a single space. Buildings and houses were constructed where the mountain gave them the space and foundation to do so, and elegant, arched bridges connected the smaller, sub-districts together. Waters from the Lake of Light fell behind each of the bridges down into the Lake of Life below, where the ports to the lower marketing districts, and The Silken Swift, found their homes.

The Swift approached a bridge that connected this district to the Kura Fyannae Calharam univeristy. Several guards navigated through the maze of disorder created by their quarry, and closed on him. He hopped onto the side of the bridge, roughly mid-way

across. Water flowing behind the opposite side of the bridge poured down in a thick, translucent sheet. Ripples in the flow made the rock wall behind them look as though it were swaying to the songs of the cantu water bells that floated in the twin lakes above and below.

The Silken Swift looked down the street to see the armed guards closing in. He raised both fists into the air and waggled his naked hips back and forth, giving his pursuers what he calls his slippery silverfish, suck-on-this salute. The shirt, hanging in one hand swayed along with the rhythm of his vulgar tribute. He chuckled as they slowed, approaching him balancing on the balustrade.

“Well boys, it’s been fun, but I have some very important things to do today.” He spun on the rail and faced the open air in front of him. He closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, and jumped. He spread open his arms and stuck out his chest, then tucked forward at the waist and dove down toward the warm waters of the lake of life. His hands filled with shirt and boots, he was not able to cast a spell to slow his descent, as he had earlier that morning. The Swift struck the surface and plunged a good twenty feet into the lake before straightening his body. He swam what he hoped was out of the sight of the guards toward a large round shadow floating at the surface.

Hundreds of cantu water bells of various sizes floated in twin lakes. A unique feature of the city, ranging in size from a small soup bowl, to almost as large as a house, the bowls filled the air around the city with their songs to convey messages or help set the mood. The morning before, they warned The Swift that his class at the college was about to begin. Now, they were about to provide him with some much needed cover to hide him as he attempted to swim across the lake.

He pulled himself up onto the first cantu he could find that was large enough to hold him. A massive brass bowl, easily twice his size. He collapsed, into the bowl. His wet naked skin slid down the smooth brass surface. His legs flew into the air as he rounded into the base of the cantu. The bell let out a low drone in dispute of him laying out and flopping his arms and legs into the bowl. His boots clamored across to the other side after he finally let them go.

He lay there panting, his eyes closed. He smiled. It was over. He had done it. He had really done it. He got himself into the

princess' room, and well, how could he ever forget last night. Then, despite being chased by dozens of city guards, he had escaped certain capture, and incomprehensible abuse and damnation.

He laughed out loud and screamed into the darkness in triumph, pounding his hands and feet onto the bottom of the cantu.

"Sweet mother of daylight! I. Am. A. God!"

He sat up, a grin filling his face.

"Seriously. Great Thallan Cor will greet me at the brotherhood doors himself. Hell, he'll probably even bow to me and name me the new god of—"

He scrunched up his face and then smiled, "He'll make me the god of rapscallions!" He looked up to the dark early-morning sky and shrugged, smiling.

He really had done it, and in only one day. The only bad thing about it was that no one will ever believe him. But then, who cares? He'd remember. He will always remember. What a night. He sighed and relaxed into the bell and started to get dressed. He was picking up his boots when he heard a splash in the lake not far from where he landed, then another. He froze. His mind raced.

There's no way those knights could swim in their armor. Did they really take it off, and leave it up there? And then jump all the way down into the lake? No. No way they'd be that reckless.

He poked his head over the top of the cantu. Light ripples in the lake lapped up against the side of the bowl. A streak of morning sunlight sparkled on the surface. But he couldn't see anything else. No movement, no more splashing or swimming sounds. He lowered back into the bowl. His hands shook as he pulled on his boots.

Nope. No way. I definitely heard something drop into the lake. They have to be coming. This lake is a death trap.

With one more look over the top of the bowl, The Swift skittered across the cantu and flipped over the side. He lowered himself into the lake and pushed off the side of the bowl. Swimming underwater as much as he could, he moved from cantu to cantu, coming up just enough to catch his breath, and look behind him. The journey was much easier than he had expected. He swam fast, and felt like he could keep pushing himself for hours. When he reached the shore, The Swift rose up out of the Lake of Life. Warm water dripped off of his clothes. He squatted down by the side of the lake, and scanned the water. He flipped open his

satchel, and grimaced seeing no signs of movement on the lake.

“Hrrmm.”

He pulled a belt out of the pack. Woven strips of leather, dyed dark green and blue, and adorned with an elegant dagger and scabbard, the combination looked much too large to fit comfortably in the bag. He wrapped it around his waist, still focused on the water. With a scowl, he spun and ran into the woods behind him.

The Silken Swift tucked himself behind a tree, pressing his back and palms into the bark. Water from his still soaking wet shirt and pants dripped down the trunk. He drew in a long breath and poked his head out to look back, into the woods behind him. A nut clacked off a branch and thunked onto the ground. The Swift spun around to face the clamor, his heart racing. He looked left and right, up then down, but no one was there, at least as far as he could see. He stood as motionless as he could for another hundred heartbeats.

He leaned his head to one side, listening to the sounds of the waking forest. “It’s not my fault! It was all her idea!”

He was lying, of course, and surely they didn’t really care either way. The princess’ guards would be coming for him regardless of who started what, or how many excuses either one of them could come up with. Not only was he, a commoner, a half-elf, a human! Not only was he in her suite uninvited, but he stayed the night in her bed. An offense the king would surely not let go without the harshest, and quietest of punishments. A prompt death behind some random tree in some random woods seemed like just the thing.

He pressed back into his hiding place, and despite his certain, impending doom from an executioner’s blade, he smiled, reminiscing about the previous night with princess Twyllea. While she may have been a willing participant in the prior evening’s lecherous affairs, he had used his most elaborate magical tricks to even be with her in the first place. He wasn’t plain or unpleasant to look at by any stretch, but he still often used his skills to magically change his appearance, to improve his odds in almost every one of his numerous amorous affairs. If nothing else, being in someone else’s skin allowed him to feel more free. He could let himself go because it wasn’t really him saying or doing those things, was it?

But this one was a princess, and an elven one at that. What

an extraordinary trophy she would make. Just being handsome or charming wasn't going to get her anywhere near to opening up her most precious treasure to him, regardless of whose skin he was wearing, but especially not a human one. He needed to pull out all the stops for this one. Skill, cunning, creativity, magic, and some unexpected devious... what did she call him? Ah yes, *rapscallion* exploits.

And his reputation was at stake! That, and, there's no way he was going to leave the school just to satisfy a bet with his rich, arrogant classmates. His future was riding on his studies, so he really needed to use every device he had available to him, no matter how devious or underhanded, to get this star tattooed on his thigh, and what a star it will be. He'll make this one twice as big as any of the other ones, maybe even three times the size. An elven princess. He shook his head, almost in disbelief that he was able to pull this one off. Almost. He smiled again.

She was helpless to resist The Silken Swift. There was never really any reason to doubt I could do it.

He cocked his head around the tree again. "Let's not pretend this was her first time, either!"

Another lie. Probably. Maybe? There's really no way he could know. She was a couple of hundred years old, so surely it wasn't, he presumed. The truth also didn't really matter. It's not like anyone would hear his pleas through the spell of silence he activated on his boots as he slipped off her balcony, blowing a kiss to the waving princess as he fell.

Then again, these were elves chasing him, and not just any common foot soldiers, either. Probably the king's royal hit squad of cruel and heartless assassins. The kind that don't need to wear any armor... and can swim. They could likely cut through his simple little silence spell with those ridiculous pointed ears of theirs, no problem. So, it's a good thing he also covered his tracks with another spell, the runes woven into his boots, making sure he left no footprints, rustled no leaves, and showed no other signs whatsoever that he had ever passed through here, though he had not accounted for being soaking wet at the time he designed the spell.

Even though... he scowled. It was too silent out there. He didn't like it, not at all. The sound of elven hunters, that's what that was. He looked around. Morning sunlight pushed its way through the trees in the dense forest and glistened on dew covered leaves. Light greens and yellows glowed through the branches.

The smell of damp soil filled the air. All certainly seemed clear enough, and so delightfully peaceful.

He took in another deep breath. Just fifteen more minutes, maybe less, and he'd be safely across the boarder into dwarven territory. The elf king wouldn't risk outright war with the dwarves over the honor of his fourth daughter. Probably. Maybe? Then again, this is elves we're talking about. They were sticklers for the rules. Always. Arrogant bastards. That's no matter, though. Once across, he could change his identity again, and there wouldn't be any evidence that anyone named Gerellynth Lightfoot had ever been there. He could then return to the college, in confidence, to claim his prize.

Free tuition and a room in an elven dorm.

He sighed and ran a hand through his thick, matted hair, catching his fingers on knots and various bits of foliage that had hitched a ride during his escape. He laughed.

I must look a right mess.

He took a moment to finally tuck in his shirt, then lifted an arm to wipe off his face. He breathed in, filling his chest. It smelled of the princess, her perfume, the candles, and a mixture of the two of them together from the night before.

Mmm, but, boy do I smell good.

His body tingled with excitement. He then rolled his eyes, seeing that somehow he seemed to be missing a sock. He thought back over his escape and didn't have any definite recollection that he ever put it on. He smiled with a mixture of amusement and pride.

It must still be laying on her floor; or maybe she's holding it close to her heart. Probably using it to tie up her hair.

He tilted his head out and yelled, "I mean, come on. With her skills, whatever crusty, old elf-lord wants to court her will forget all about me once he gets into her bed." He chuckled.

That was a good one.

This time he was not lying, at least he didn't think so. He paused for a moment.

Maybe I should go back. Surely they wouldn't be expecting that, and I could have another round with—

Something rustled in the leaves behind him. His eyes widened and his attention snapped back to the present.

Whoop. Time to go.

He darted away from his hiding place and leapt over the top

of a boulder. His hand squished on cold, wet moss as he planted it and flung his legs over, landing a half-dozen, or so, feet below. He slipped a throwing knife out of a pocket. More rustling came from above, and sounded close to where he had just jumped. He pulled out a dagger with his other hand and closed his eyes to prepare himself for battle.

Here we go Swift. This is it.

With a hard exhale, he re-opened his eyes and stared forward, hard and stern.

“OK, you pointy-eared twats! You want me? Well, here I am, do your worst!”

The Swift pushed away from the rock and was about to turn toward where he heard the rustling when the bushes across from him exploded. A massive figure burst through, spraying leaves and branches in all directions. He recoiled and dropped to one knee, covering his eyes with his forearm. The other hand thrust his dagger out in front of him, waving it back and forth in the air. He peaked out to spot the biggest, ugliest orc he had ever seen leaning back to hurl a spear at him, the wooden shaft looked as thick as his forearm. He screamed and rolled to one side as the spear sailed over his head.

Ha-ha, sucker. Can't hit me!

Scrambling to his feet, he saw the orc ready a hand-axe. At least it was a hand-axe to this beast. The Swift would have needed two hands to wield the damn thing. And it was mean-looking, too. Nasty enough to split him in half with a single swing.

He gripped his dagger with both hands, and pointed it at the orc, who let out a guttural roar and charged. A blur of green and black leapt into the air. The Swift followed the arc of his assailant with the point of his dagger, but the beast soared several feet over his head. His heart racing like the furious beating of a goblin war drum, he watched the orc land on the top of the rocks above him. He cocked his head.

Wha..? He missed?

The Swift stood staring, still pointing his dagger at the top of boulder far over his head, as the orc disappeared from his view. Then, after some more rustling, he heard another loud howl and a squishy thunk. The silhouette of the orc stepped to the end of the rock he had just leapt over. The morning sun streamed a halo of bright light around him. The axe dripped blood in one hand. It's chest heaved with a deep breath. It's head turned and looked

down at the Swift.

The Swift's mind raced, trying to piece together what had just happened when the orc lurched. A wave of purple light washed over the green giant, the rocks, and the entire forest around him, blowing with such violence that it forced the orc to one knee and ripped whole branches from the trees. A blinding white sphere swirled around the orc's hunched-over body, spinning up and down, then broke off toward The Swift, who stood motionless, frozen from a mixture of bewilderment and fear. The bright apparition of a humanoid skull streaked over the rocks, shot up to him, and stopped a spider's thread away from his stunned, open mouth. It hung in the air, bobbing back and forth a few times, like it was examining him. Then it leaned in.

An itchy, scratching sensation irritated The Swift's nose and back of his throat. The scratching quickly became a clawing, tearing, like something was trying to pry its way inside him. He tried to scream from the pain, but could only manage a slight, gurgling cough. He gasped for air, his eyes wide, his lungs burning, aching for oxygen.

What the hell happening?

His chest jerked up as something cold washed through his head, and into his chest. His body lurched back and forth as he felt it tugging at him from the inside. Something like another person? But how? Who? Was this something to do with that orc? Could it do some kind of weird control or possession magic? He wanted to get up, to run away, but he couldn't move. He felt himself being pulled inward, down almost. He tried to resist the pull, grasping and pushing against the force dragging him away.

Overwhelmed, he felt like he was flailing against empty space, swimming in nothingness as he continued to spiral downward. He gasped, reaching for anything he could hold onto for support. His consciousness wavered as he twisted, waves of force driving into him, thrusting against him, over and over. Faint images of the outside world scattering and faded. Darkness spread over him. A taste of cold wetness covered his tongue. It had a bitter, ferrous tang to it, like a blade of rusting iron, mixed with the organic flavor of decay.

Sounds began to echo in his head. At first, they sounded like the low droning of several giant horns made from the tusks of mammoths. The calming notes were then met with harsh metallic screeches, almost like someone was thrashing the point of a dag-

ger against a suit of armor, or scraping a fork across a dry metal plate. Together, they created a dissonant arrangement of phonic torture that reverberated in his skull. He winced as the sounds grew louder and more jarring. The shrill notes vibrated inside him. And then he spoke. His mouth was moving, but again, he wasn't the one doing it. He was making the same kinds of strange sounds, speaking in some weird blend of tones and shrieks, like he was somehow answering the noises in his head. Was he talking to it? But what was it saying? How? No longer in control of his own body, it reverted back to its original, human form.

The Swift tried to collect himself, drive his consciousness forward, to take back control. He strained into the emptiness. Then something pushed back, slamming into him. It pushed him again, and again, like he was being tossed around in a one-sided wrestling match inside his own body. He tried to struggle, to resist whatever this was, but couldn't find anything to fight against.

He gathered his strength and thrust forward with his thoughts, fighting for his body, for his soul. It felt like he was trying to push against a solid stone castle rampart. He strained against the foul, damp darkness. He pushed forward with all of his mental strength. He reset and drove forward again, and again, beating into the invisible barricade. Then, with the crack of a whip, he felt himself forced down. Spent, he was powerless to resist any more.

His body stumbled. He felt it stir, from outside, like it was trying to get up, but he wasn't the one doing it. He tried to regain his balance as he felt like he was riding on himself, like he was a child on a piggy-back ride, watching as someone else tried to stand and move his body forward. He stood upright, but then stumbled.

An eerie shriek filled his mind. He collapsed within himself, cowering from the sounds. The presence that had been pressing against him exploded out of his body with a wet blur of bright light and streaked away, blowing leaves and twigs into the air. He dropped hard to the ground and lay motionless. It was gone.

He coughed.

Am I dead? Is this it? This is how I die, out in the middle of nowhere, alone?

His head pounded with every heartbeat, squeezing his skull. No, he couldn't be dead. If he were, it wouldn't hurt this much. Would it? Certainly not. Wincing from the pain, he barely made out two giant green blurs that approached and crouched over

him. The blurs grew larger. He felt something touch his sides and chest. He rolled his head, trying to find some sense of comfort. Something continued to press against him. Hands, maybe?

Are they robbing me? Is that all this was?

With a sudden jolt, he lurched, sat up, and vomited chunks of finest elven seasoned meats, sliced vegetables, and fresh baked breads, all over the green blurs in front of him.



THANK YOU!



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



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