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LICH KING

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CHAPTER 2

THE ORCS MEET THE
NEIGHBORS

They thrust her spear forward using a technique she had learned from her mother. The black leather boot on her front foot slipped on some ice, forcing her into a split that just about had her ass-deep in a thick bank of fresh, wind-swept snow.

“Vich!” She shrieked out a word she had learned from her father. A word that was common across all dialects of the different orc clans, with little variation between them.

She spun back to her feet, and slammed the butt of her spear to the ice. She took a few steps in a circle, looked up at the sky, and sighed. Steam rose out of her mouth into the frigid air. “Vich. Fhortach.”

Every orc clan has a hundred warriors who practice every day, two-hundred who can fight.

Part of a reprimand her mother had once given her after she slipped in the mud while training as a child. The words still rang in her head every time she made a misstep during practice. She couldn’t remember how many times her mother had lectured her about how much bigger the boys were going to be than her, how much stronger they would be, once they reached adulthood, how she needed to work harder, be better, if she wanted to have a chance in a real battle.

So she practiced. An hour before school, two hours after, and double sets on days off. Even when traveling around her home or village, she didn't just walk, but stepped in the patterns of her offensive and defensive footwork. It's a good thing she did, because her mother had been right. They were bigger, and a lot stronger. While most of her fellow ka warrior-women did their best to add bulk and strength, in an attempt to keep up with their male counterparts, she kept her figure lithe on purpose, to feed the over-confidence of the kor-warriors, especially the biggest ones.

Mey watched them, old and young alike. She studied them, all throughout training as a child, and then in weekly militia sessions. They were always the same, full of fury and brute force. She learned their tactics, and knew what counter she was going to use before they even started a maneuver. But if she ever let down just once, or let herself slip, then it would be all over.

She could have worn her warmer, fur-lined boots and armor. She would have been a lot more comfortable if she had, that's for sure, and would also have a good deal more grip on the ice. But that's not how her mother did it. She always said that the thick lining would slow her down just a little bit, and that could make all the difference in battle. "A little discomfort means you're still alive," she would say, "and that's better than being warm, and dead." And now that her mother's memorial ceremony was just a day away, Mey needed to do everything she could to not only honor her sacrifice but to show that she could carry on the name of her family.

She grimaced. With a shake of her arms and legs, she took a few random steps in the snow. She had to be better, she had to be perfect. Her mother was sure to be watching, and she needed to show that she was good enough to carry her name. "In a battle, even a slight mistake," her mother would say, "or the smallest distraction would mean not only your death but also that of everyone else on your team." She would then lean down close to Mey's face. "Never, never fail your team."

Mey took in a deep breath through her nose. The crisp air smelled fresh, like newly fallen snow. It cooled her sinuses and lungs. Orc territories didn't always have the most beautiful landscapes, they were often rocky and barren, but they did have some of the cleanest air you'd find anywhere in the world. Their traditional focus on a simpler existence, living off the land, preserved the purity of what they do have, at least that's what their shamans

liked to tell them on what seemed like a daily basis. She closed her eyes, letting the brisk air cleanse her mind.

“Honor in action, action from honor.” She recited into the morning, beginning a chant her mother had passed on to her. A chant she now repeated with her father during their daily exercises. “Honor in action, action from honor. To do a thing is to do it with honor.”

She spun the spear in her hands. “Clear mind, clear actions. Clear actions, clear purpose.” She took in another breath. “Clear purpose, clear path to honor.” She repeated the narration, taking in more of the cool air. She emptied her mind of the snow and ice.

Re-focused, Mey thrust forward again with a loud grunt. She stepped onto a sheet of clear ice. This time, the placement of her foot and balance were perfect. Her weight pushed straight down, securing her foot on the slick surface as though she were practicing in a thick grassy field. She then spun her spear vertically, bringing the butt of the shaft up under the chin of her imaginary foe, probably some hapless warrior from that rival clan up north. Those fools were more goblin than orc these days, enslaving their own children until they had earned the right to be part of the clan. Barbaric and cruel.

She twisted her head and thrust the point of her spear back behind her, into another phantom opponent, before planting the point into some snow and flipping her legs over her fallen imaginary enemies, only to reset her position, ready to strike again.

These moves were all part of a series of skills that had made her mother famous in her clan, a sequence that was now included in the advanced spear techniques that they learned in school. She had been practicing the form daily for the last several months so she could perform it in front of the clan during her mother’s memorial celebration. While only a few months past her day of blood rites, she was taller than most her age, thanks to her father. She was also more skilled as a warrior than her peers, thanks to her mother, and seasoned enough to perform complex techniques such as these. And that’s what it would take for her to become the first female chieftain of not only her clan, but of any throughout the orc dominion. It was an honor they all expected to have gone to her mother, but it seems the gods had other plans for her. So now it was Mey’s turn, and she was determined to finish her mother’s work, to make her proud.

Mey knocked her boots together and prepared for another

pass through the sequence when she tilted her head back, catching the smell of something on the air that reminded her stomach that she had not yet had anything to eat. She paused half-way into her stance and sniffed again, tweaking her eyebrows. After all, one does need sustenance to perform at the peak of one's abilities. A hungry warrior is a desperate warrior, and prone to mistakes. Sure, that made sense. She picked up the rest of her gear that was lying in the snow and jogged toward her home.

She kicked at the heavy wooden front door, causing it to crash open with a thud. Snowflakes flitted off the roof into the empty doorway.

"Hey Unngk, whatcha got cookin' in here? The house always smells so good when you're in the kitchen."

Mey stepped in, her feet mottled white and brown from snow and mud. She backed against the edge of the door, her hands filled with a spear, a sword, and a shield. A helmet hooked onto two of her fingers and dangled at her waist. With a flick of her hips, the door slammed shut again. She shook. "Mother Goddess, it's cold out there."

Mey paced away from the front door across the main living area. Her fingers tap-danced across the back of the couch. Coarse stitching bound together various patches of leather. A mixture of hides collected during hunts over the years. Each used to have a unique color and texture, but after years of wear, they were all now smooth and worn. Then there was the crack in the frame where she had accidentally, or at least that's what she said, thrown her brother into the back of the couch while they were wrestling.

She dropped her equipment on the floor near a fire that burned under a clay oven. Stretching her arms over her head, she arched her back, the black leather armor shimmering with melting snow. With a quick flip on the metal buckles, she loosed the straps on her breastplate and let the wet leather slide to the floor. Picking up a fur-lined coat, she scanned the wall in front of her. High up and in the middle, perched on the mottled grey rocks, hung a worn, dark brown leather breastplate, accentuated by a dark hole right about where someone's heart would be. A wreath of violet flowers draped across it like a sash. She stepped forward.

Just below the armor, two weathered and rather nasty-looking spearheads, each still with several inches of their original shafts, formed an X-shaped cross. One was very familiar, of a similar style and make to her own spear that she practiced with every

day. Hand-made by the master poleturner of the clan. Durable, balanced, and deadly. Her mother's favorite weapon due its reach, speed, and versatility over a sword or axe. Not as terrifying to look at, maybe, but just as lethal in the hands of someone who knew how to use it.

The other was a foreign design. Thicker and more crude. Mass produced. Designed for an army that plays the numbers game over skill and tactics. "Throw enough bodies at someone and you can take down even the most seasoned warrior," her mother had warned her.

She reached a hand toward the cruder of the two spears but stopped before she touched it. Her fingers twitched in the space just above the point, still stained with dark, dried blood. She stared at the spears and remembered a day she was practicing in the woods with her mother. She had just finished a series of thrusts when she looked up to see a pair of yellow eyes piercing the darkness in front of her. Her face flushed. Just a young girl, she had never seen a wolf before. It stared, motionless. Without saying a word, those eyes commanded her, controlled her. She froze with fear. Then, a yelp from behind her, and then another to the side. Her mother bound in front of her, fresh blood dripping off the point of her spear. Mey huddled behind her mother while she fought off the rest of the pack.

When it was over, Mey wept, a mixture of fear and shame. What kind of warrior was she going to make if she turned to stone at the first sign of danger?

"No, neyg'gen, don't shut out your fear, don't try to turn it off," her mother instructed her. "Fear is a tool, one of the most important ones you have. It tells you when danger is near, and where to focus your attention and actions."

Fear is my guide, my awareness.

It wakes me in times of need.

Fear shows me the hand of danger.

It directs me where to act to protect my clan.

And if my body may fall, my ancestors will welcome my soul into their halls.

She recited the verse every day since. Her thoughts then turned to the day they brought her mother home on the back of her father's horse. Her vision blurred, a tear ran down her cheek.



She was a little older, but still just a young girl, and excited to celebrate the honor of another victory with her family. She beamed with joy to see her father leading his horse and ran up to him, disregarding the mud, sweat, and blood that caked his armor and skin. After embracing him, she looked around for her mother, confused as to why she wasn't at his side. Strange, they always returned together. But that was no matter, she recalled, for she was surely here somewhere.

That's when her father knelt in front of her and described the battle. How her mother was the first to recognize an error in their strategy that had left a flank exposed. How, without hesitation, she had led a small band of brave members of their clan to close the gap in their defenses before the enemy could take full advantage. How they had all fought with such skill and ferocity that just a handful of them were able to hold off the overwhelming flanking maneuver long enough for the rest of their force to redeploy their defenses. How they had saved the clan. And finally, how, while it was a it was a assault of great honor, and how the clan will sing about what they had done for generations to come, none of those who took part in the brave act will ever hear the words that will be written about them.

Not fully understanding, her eyes looked behind him to the mound atop his sturdy draft horse. Wrapped in a cloak, she had assumed it was a deer or a boar for the night's feast. But then she saw that it was not just an ordinary cloak, but that of her mother, a pile of violet-colored flowers resting on top, the same flowers that now adorned the armor hanging on display in a position of the highest honor in her living room.

She remained there in the living room, captured in the thoughts of that day when a voice came from behind her. "Hey, Mey! Why don't you help me out and go get that firewood I asked you for?"

She didn't hear, her attention still fixed on the spear. Her brother, who had been but a toddler on that day, took such great care every year to honor their mother. Surely, he had no real memories of her, tall and lean. A fighting machine, they called her. Smart and vicious, as beautiful as she was skilled.

He couldn't even hold even a small dagger, then. It seemed like only yesterday, but was now almost ten years ago. Ten years ago, already. She exhaled and shook her head. That day when their mother brought such honor to their family. He had been

raised by their grandmother, not able to learn from their mother's thoughtful lessons. He had missed out on the sweet sounds of her singing old folk songs, and never felt her caring touch when he scraped an elbow or knee. Yet, he spent weeks designing and crafting decorations and planning a feast, not for himself, not for his father or sister, but for her, a woman he had barely known.

"Mey!" the shout came again.

She felt something squish against the back of her head. Mey blinked and turned to see her younger brother, covered in white flour, a ball of dough in his hand. He leaned back for another toss. She held up her hands. "Don't, you'll hit this amazing display you made."

He pointed to the floor. She looked down to see a trail of mud and snow that she had left from the door to the fireplace where she stood. She grimaced. "Sorry, gifth."

He smirked, but relaxed a little. She took advantage and leapt forward. He recoiled, but being much smaller and of a build made more for wrestling with pigs than fighting, he was far too slow to avoid her rush. She grabbed him and picked him up.

"Please, Mey." He groaned as she squeezed. "I...still have a lot to do."

She laughed and placed him back down. "Of course you do, gifth. I know you want to honor ka, and it smells delicious." She cupped his slightly chubby cheeks and kissed him on the forehead. "Messy chefs are always the best, right?"

He flailed his arms and wiped at his head where she had just kissed him. With a scowl, he threw the ball of the dough in his hand. She side stepped, and laughed as it flew across the room and squished against the wall next to the front door. He looked around and grabbed a potato. With a thud, it hit the wall behind her.

She held up her hands. "Calm down now, gifth. Who's making the mess now? Though, you could use the practice, to work on your accuracy. That is, if you want to join the rest of us in Morg's mead hall some day."

He snarled and threw another potato. She ducked and retreated toward the door. He picked up his rolling pin, but stopped suddenly and stood up straight. Mey continued to laugh and turned her head just in time to run straight into a very large, very serious looking orc. She bounced off his chest and coughed. Taking a step back, she bowed her head. "Sorry, kor, I didn't see you there."

She rubbed her nose.

Silent, he squinted and surveyed the room. “Mey, Unngk, grab your gear. Outside. Ten minutes.”

“Yessir,” Mey replied.

Unngk raised his arms in protest. “Kor, I have to make the pies for ka.”

He glared at them both, a stare so intense it felt like it would shatter the stones in the fireplace. “Is that what you call this? Pies are your answer to get you into Morg’s hall of honor with your ka?” He grunted. “With this lack of focus, neither of you are going anywhere.”

The two younger orcs looked down.

“Rather than making a mess of my house, you can honor your ka by showing me how you plan to earn the mark of the clan and follow her example.” He snarled. “Pies.”

Their father stepped outside and slammed the door behind him. Mey turned to go down the hallway, but stopped when she saw Unngk return to the kitchen. She poked her head around the corner. “Umm..Unngk, what are you doing? You just heard kor.”

“Yes, I heard him.” Unngk pulled out a well-used cleaver and started chopping an onion, the blade brushing against his knuckles with every stroke.

“Then, come on. Let’s go.”

Unngk ignored her and continued chopping.

Mey stepped into the kitchen. “Hey, Unngk. Come on, really. You need to come practice so you’ll be prepared for when you go into battle, like kor just said.” Unngk finished turning the onion into a pile of small bits and moved on to some tomatoes, his hands shaking slightly.

“No Mey, I’m not going.” Unngk’s voice trembled as he protested.

Mey felt tension rise inside her. She let out a slight laugh. “Don’t be silly, gifth. What do you mean you’re not going?”

“I’m not going, Mey. Now leave me alone, I have a lot to do.” He focused on the block, chopping harder and faster, his hands a blur of green and steel grey.

“Work? What can be more important work than learning to fight for the clan?”

Unngk slammed the cleaver on the table. “What’s more important? What’s more important? How about ka?”

“Well, of course ka is important, gifth, but whole reason why

are we having the festival is because of what she did for the clan.” She moved in closer.

“Honor in all things. To do a thing—”

“—is to do it with honor.” Unngk finished her quote. “Yes, I know.”

“Yes! That’s right, so let’s go so you can be prepared to fight with honor.”

“What’s so honorable about fighting?”

Mey lurched back, confused and a bit shocked to hear what her brother had just said. “Ummm.”

“What’s so honorable about stabbing someone in the chest, or slitting their guts open, and then having someone else do it right back to you?” He picked his cleaver back up and returned to dicing tomatoes.

“What?” Mey tilted her head. “Well—” She searched for an explanation.

“Honor in all things, right?”

She nodded. “Yes, exactly.”

“All things. Not just fighting. Like the celebration for ka tomorrow. That’s what we’re doing, right? We’re honoring ka.”

“Yes, of course.”

“We’re not fighting. We’re celebrating. You want to—”

“Yes, but we’re celebrating her achievements in battle.”

“No Mey. Maybe you’re celebrating a battle, but I’m honoring her, our ka. She is what was important to me, not some battle she was in. That’s why I need to stay here, and that’s why I need to finish. Sharing a meal with someone is showing them honor. Killing someone’s mother isn’t.”

Mey stepped back for a moment. “Alright, sure. A banquet is a great way to honor someone. Of course. But defending the clan is what we do, it’s who we are. It’s who ka was. And to be honest, gifth, I’m really kind of worried about you. If you don’t practice with kor, you won’t be ready when it’s your time. You can’t go into battle like this.” She stepped forward and poked at his round belly.

Unngk stared at his sister. “Practice? You mean so I can be safe in a battle?”

“Yes!” She exhaled with relief. She was finally getting through to him. “So you can be another great warrior for the clan.”

Unngk scowled and went back to his work. “Ka was one of

the best warriors in the clan, how safe did that make her?" His voice shook as he spoke.

Mey smirked. "Um, well." She blinked, watching him chop. "Hey, gifth, you...you really should be careful."

As if in protest, he intensified his work even more. He slid the tomatoes aside, switched to a long, pointed knife, and stabbed a head of cauliflower. With a flip it thunked on the table. He spun the cauliflower in his off hand and cut down hard with the knife.

"Argh!" A chunk of the cauliflower slid to the side. Dark green streaks on the face of the cut. He grabbed his hand. "Fhort-ach!"

Mey straightened. "Whoa, are you alright?"

Green blood oozed from a thin slice on his palm. Mey looked around for something to help while Unngk grabbed a towel from his waist and started to wrap his hand.

"See what you made me do!"

"Me?" Mey put her hand to her chest.

"Yes, you! Who do you think?"

"How did I—"

Unngk walked away toward the fireplace, grasping his hand and muttering.

"Five minutes!" Their father's voice was so loud, half of the town had surely heard him.

Mey stepped in front of Unngk. "Look, I'm sorry, and I'm sure that hurts, but we have to go."

Unngk stared daggers at his sister. "Really?" He laughed. "You really expect me to go practice now?"

"Yes, Unngk. I do. We need to go. Getting hurt is not an excuse, in fact, I'm sure kor will treat it as a part of the lesson. I've had to practice hurt many times. Now let's get going before he comes back inside and really gets angry."

Unngk laughed again. "You still don't get it, do you?" He grabbed a ladle hanging by the fireplace and then reached for the lid of a heavy clay pot that hung over the fire. His hand sizzled when he touched it without using a protective cloth or glove.

"Fhortach!" He flung the lid behind him. Mey ducked to avoid the scalding hot missile. Unngk kicked the pot. "Why can't you just leave me alone?" He growled and kicked it again. The hanger broke, and the pot fell into the fire. Cinders sprayed into the room. Mey recoiled, protecting her face. The pot cracked. Chunks of half-cooked meat and vegetables flowed onto the floor. Steam

filled the air as the stew boiled in the fire.

“Fhortach! Mey! You want me to practice hurt? Here!” He picked up the pot and hurled it at his sister, ignoring the blistering heat of the pot and stew. It crashed into the wall behind her, littering the hallway and kitchen with bits of the smashed cauldron and what was left of its contents.

The back of her neck burned from the spray of soup. She stared at her brother. Standing several inches taller, she moved toward him with purpose. “Now, that’s enough. We’re going now, and you’re going to practice, even if you have blisters on your hands.”

“No, I am not!”

“Yes, you are. You’re the one who doesn’t understand. War isn’t a game. That cut on your palm is just a scratch. You have to be ready to handle a whole lot worse if you’re going to—”

“I don’t want to be a great warrior and fight for the clan!” Mey jolted a bit as her brother screamed at her. She turned her head, trying to process what she had just heard. “You...what?”

“I don’t want to fight, Mey.”

Mey stood fixed. “But that’s how we bring honor to the family. Yes, ka was killed in battle, but look at what she did for herself, for all of us? She saved the clan. We have an entire day devoted just to her, and she is waiting for us in Morg’s great hall. Don’t you want to honor her, like kor said? Pick up the mark of the clan and earn your place in Morg’s mead hall, to be with her?”

“Of course I do.”

Mey threw out her hands. “Then come practice and earn your place by her side. I assure you, no one is better to teach you than kor.

“But I don’t want to grow up and fight in wars and bring honor to the family...at least not in that way. Not in your way, and definitely not in dad’s way.”

She nodded. “Look, Unngk. I get it, I really do,” Mey protested, “but kor. He wants you out there. Really, he just wants what’s best for you.”

Her brother scoffed. “What does he know about what’s best for me?”

“He’s our father, Unngk. He’s been around a long time.” She grabbed his arms. “Has he ever been wrong? Have you ever seen him tell us to do something that wasn’t the right thing to do?”

Unngk stopped and thought.

“About something important.”

Unngk nodded. “No, I guess not.”

“Right. So trust him, and do what you need to do.”

“But I really need to do this.”

Mey sighed. “I’ll tell you what. Come with kor and me now, and I’ll help you finish your preparations.”

Unngk paused.

She gave her brother a reassuring look. “It’s just a couple of hours, that’s all, and then we’ll come back and do this together. You and me. We’ll honor ka together. You come with me now, then I’ll help you, all night if I have to. And in both cases, it’s all for ka.”

Mey saw Unngk’s posture relax. “Alright, but I have to make some sandwiches first.”

“Sandwiches? What do you need to make sandwiches for?”

“Can’t workout on an empty stomach.”

Mey shook her head, but then smiled and nodded.

Morg help this crazy boy.

“Fine. I’ll go get your stuff.” She laughed to herself and ran down the hallway toward the armory.

A few minutes later she stood outside with her father, ankle-deep in snow, a wooden practice spear in one hand, a sword and shield in the other. He squinted and exhaled. Feeling his indignation, she squirmed a little, adjusting her leather armor.

“I’m sure he—”

He shot her a look that froze her colder than the ice in her boots. “Get him.”

“Haech, kor.” She bowed her head and ran back inside.

Mey found her younger brother still in the kitchen. His coat half on, he hovered over a roast, sprinkling it with herbs.

“Unngk! Let’s go. Kor is outside waiting.”

“Just a minute, I need to—”

She ran up and grabbed him. She looked him in the eye. “Remember our deal?” She touched her forehead to his. “Together.”

Unngk nodded. “Yeah, alright. Let’s go.”

She returned to her father’s side, her brother in tow. He stumbled down the steps into the snow. “Morg! it’s cold out here.”

He looked up at the discontent on his father’s face. “Do we really have to do this today? The shaman says the weather will warm up next week.”

His father turned to the road in front of their house. “In line!”

Leaning over, half covered in snow, Unngk turned to his sister with a look of hopeless despair. She grabbed his shoulders and lifted him up. "Hang in there, gifth, you'll be fine.

"But tomorrow is ka's day of remembrance, and it's year ten. The whole clan will come by to pay their respects. Even the chief will bow to her. We need to be ready to receive them."

"And we will be." Remember, it's only a couple of hours, and then you'll be back in front of your toasty warm ovens. Don't worry. Kor knows. He was there, remember. He wouldn't do anything that will risk embarrassing ka in front of the clan."

Unngk smiled and stood up. "I guess you're right."

They marched in silence away from their village through snow, half-frozen streams, mud, muck, and what seemed like every type of foul and vile terrain their father could find, when he finally broke up the sounds of the crunching snow.

"Mey. Why do we practice in the snow?"

"Kor! We practice in day, night, sun, rain, fog, ice, and snow because we never know when or where an enemy will attack."

"Very good. Unngk. Do you understand?"

"Yes, kor."

"Why do you practice in the snow?"

Unngk exhaled. "We practice in," his eyes looked up, "umm, sun...night...fog—"

Their father spun and stared at his son. The head of his spear flashed and stopped a hair's breadth away from his son's nose. "This is no foolish child's game, Unngk. Do not just parrot your sister. Understand the meaning of what she said. This is important, probably the most important lesson I can teach you." Their father stepped away and dropped his sword and shield into the snow. "The enemy is everywhere. You never know when or where they will strike. You have to not only be ready and willing, but also be practiced and skilled, to meet them in all conditions."

Unngk's shoulders drooped as he nodded. "Yes, kor."

Mey tapped him on the back with the shaft of her spear. She leaned in. "You can do this, gifth. If you think you'd rather be home baking, then do it for ka." She motioned her spear up. "She's watching, wanting to see us join her in Morg's hall. Now come on, buck up. For the clan!"

Unngk took in a deep breath and straightened up. "Yes, pi'tar." He looked up and smiled. "For the clan."

She gave him a stern nod and tilted her head toward their

father. “Now go get ‘im.”

He jolted. “What? Here? Now?”

She looked at their father who stood several paces in front of them in a small clearing surround by snow-covered evergreen trees. Grasped in his hand, spear stood straight and tall beside him. “It looks like today, this is the where the enemy is.”

Unngk smirked. He crunched a few steps through snow that reached half way up his lower leg toward his father, who stood like a gigantic statue of martial prowess. Unngk hopped a couple of times and then lunged as fast as he could. He took a broad swing with his metal, but not sharpened, practice sword. His father easily parried the attack and cracked his son on the back of the head with his spear.

“Don’t forget your footwork, boy. Just because your feet are under snow, that doesn’t give you an excuse to be lazy. Mine are in the snow, too. You’re way out of position and reaching. I barely felt that.”

Mey tucked her practice sword under her arm and cupped her hands over her mouth to cheer him on. “Come on Unngk. Step in and use your legs. Put that ogre belly of yours to good use. Whack him with all you got! For the clan!”

Unngk shuffled his feet and took another swing. The blow was parried again, but this time with a loud crack on the wooden shaft of his father’s spear.

“Was I out of position that time, old man?”

“Calm down and focus. You still haven’t hit me. Remember, if you get cocky, you get killed.”

Unngk scowled and then looked at his sister. She smiled, giving him a subtle nod. While his father continued to lecture about the dangers of an actual battle Unngk stepped left, then spun back to the right and swung down hard with his sword.

“Whoa!” Caught off guard, the older orc hopped to the side and spun his spear to deflect the blow. The sword snapped the shaft in half and landed with a thud on his thigh.

The boy laughed. “Don’t lose your focus, kor.”

His father grimaced and leaned to the other side, then stood up and shook his leg. “I see you and your sister have been practicing without me.” He flipped the two halves of the spear in his hands, now armed with twin short-sword sized clubs, one with a nasty point on the end. “Alright, gach’pari. Let’s see if her lessons have made your mother proud.” He cracked the two simple pieces of

wood together and then moved them in elegant, sweeping movements. His son's eyes darted back and forth, trying to track the weapons, but found the maneuvers were unpredictable.

"What are you looking at?"

Unngk blinked. "Huh?"

The larger orc stepped forward and struck down with an obvious attack to the right hand. When Unngk moved to block the attack, he shifted his weight and attacked his son's midsection with his left hand. The stick collided with the boy's side and slid across his core. The older orc stood up. "You're dead. Say hello to your ka for me."

"But that's not fair," Unngk complained. "You have two weapons." He winced and held his side.

His father spun the sticks and shrugged. "You don't get to choose what weapons your opponent has. You need to be ready for anything."

"You're the one who split his spear in half!" His sister laughed.

Their father pointed one of his weapons at her. "Mey's right. A battle is a flow, constantly changing. If you want to survive, you need to be able to adapt, sometimes even in mid-strike. You never know what's going to happen, but you can be damn sure it won't be how it started, and it will not be what you expect, or want." He then stepped back a few paces and leaned into a defensive posture. He waved the sticks at his son. "Come again. You're going to practice against a dual-wielding opponent today."

His son took in a breath and shook out his shoulders. He hopped a few times and stretched his neck. "Alright, I'm ready for—" He stood up straight. Mey came to attention and grasped her own practice sword.

Their father tilted his head, then also straighten up, and looked around. "What is it?"

Mey pointed her sword to the forest behind them. He spun around twitched. "Well, well, what have we here. Speaking of the unexpected." He turned to face the woods and spread his arms. "Get behind me."

In front of him a giant wolverine, as big as a rhino, strode into the field. Three more crashed out of the forest. Snow sprayed around them.

He squinted. "What are you doing all the way down here?" he whispered, "This isn't your normal hunting grounds. And four

of you, together? No, there's something more going on here." He watched as the wolverines slowed and formed a semi-circle. They sniffed and crouched toward the ground.

"Mey, what's our back look like?"

She turned her head to look behind them. "All clear, kor."

"Mmm, hmm. How do pack animals attack?"

"Pack animals, kor? But these are wolverines."

"Don't let your expectations cloud your judgement. Look at what's in front of you."

"Yes, kor. Pack animals try to surround, distract, and attack from behind."

"Right. So far, we have a group of four, four animals that are normally solitary hunters. That is your first sign that something, or someone else, is involved. So far, they aren't making any effort to surround us. Mey, keep watching our back. Let me know if anything changes." He pointed his spearhead at the wolverines. "Unngk, which one is the alpha?"

The boy studied the animals in front of them. They remained still, staring back at the orcs. "I...I can't tell."

His father exhaled. "Agreed. They are acting unnatural, like they've been trained. Mey, keep your eyes sharp. Someone is about to join our little outing."

As they watched the wolverines, more rustling came from the forest, and then two more figures jogged out of the trees, into the clearing. Barely half the height of the beasts, two men slowed and strode forward, the snow coming up to their knees. They wore black leather pants and boots, but were completely bare from the waist up. Each decorated their exposed, steel-grey skin with a collection of tattoos, brands, scars, and piercings. Some of the markings were similar, including a large, square, woven-knot design that looked like stone carved into their chest.

"Dvergr." The larger orc dropped one half of his spear and drew a hand-axe from a belt around his waist.

One of the dvergr strode up to a wolverine in the middle and stroked the side of its neck, staring at the orcs.

Mey glanced over her shoulder. "Movement behind us, kor."

The larger orc nodded. "That will be a third scout, I expect."

"Dvergr, kor. Just one, and he's naked above the waist. Just a single, one-handed hammer. With tattoos and some other markings."

The orc patriarch stood up straight. "Mey these are dvergr

warrior-scouts, and I use the term ‘warrior’ sparingly. Do you know how I know they are scouts?”

Mey watched the dvergr behind them. “No. How’s that, kor?”

“First of all, they’re predictable. They always come in groups of three, and they always send one around back, no different from what, Unngk?”

“Pack animals, kor?”

“Right. Simple-minded pack animals.” He stepped back with one foot. “They also don’t have the shiny armor and heavy weapons of true dvergr warriors, but most of all,” he grimaced and looked at the leader, “they’re just plain ugly.”

The dvergr leader rubbed the wolverine’s fur and chuckled. “Well, now that’s amusing,” he stared at the family across from him, “coming from an orc.”

The elder orc stared back and flexed. “What are you doing here? You’re in orc territory. Talk fast, or you’ll go home in the belly of a bear.”

The dvergr looked around and rasped, “There’s seven of us, and well,” he smirked, “really only one of you.”

In a flash, the orc threw his axe. It whistled through the air and sunk into the forehead of the wolverine next to the dvergr. Red blood flowed through its dark brown fur. Mist from its final breath rose out of its nostrils as it slumped into the snow, dead. The orc drew another axe from his belt. “Six.”

The dvergr scout howled in anger and charged.

The orc spun the other half of his spear in his hand and pointed it at the charging dvergr. He turned his head slightly toward his daughter. “Mey, takkach’vor!”

She focused her attention behind her father and brother, where one dvergr advanced toward her. “Jak, kor.”

Her father turned his head half-way toward his daughter. “Remember, these are scouts, not warriors. With your defensive skills, you can delay a few of them indefinitely. Just hold them off for a bit, while I thin their numbers.”

Mey faced the dvergr who advanced behind the family. Two of the wolverines joined the scout. “Aye, kor. Still just the one, right now, with two tub buckets.”

Unngk spun his head between his father and his sister, his eyes wide. Two dvergr and a wolverine on one side, two wolverines and one scout on the other. “Mey. What do I do?” His voice cracked, sounding anxious.

She leaned back toward her brother. “Honestly, Unngk. Just stay right behind me. I can take care of them as long as you’re not in the way.”

The scout facing Mey stepped to the side and directed the two wolverines to advance. Mey smiled and relaxed. She had fought animals many times, hunting and practicing with her father. She wasn’t afraid of a couple of wolverines, even if they were nearly as big as her living room. But she had never fought a dvergr before. Regardless of whether they were ‘just scouts,’ as her father said, dvergr were something new and different, and that emptiness in her understanding scared her.

Seeing the wolverines advance, Mey predicted their moves easily. She lifted her wooden practice spear and threw it. While not a hunting spear, it didn’t even have a sharp point on the end, it still hurt when thrown as hard and as accurately as she just did. In addition, she wasn’t trying to kill it, just slow it down a little. The spear found its mark in the shoulder causing the wolverine to hobble as something snapped in the joint. It didn’t let up, but was now a few paces behind the other wolverine and more lumbering forward now, than charging.

She reached back, “Unngk, give me your sword.” Her hand floated in the air. The full strength wolverine was almost on her. She flexed her hand. “Unngk! Your sword,” but still nothing came. She spun to avoid the charging wolverine and looked behind her.

Her father was engaged with the leader of the scouts. The dvergr was enraged, swinging wildly with his hammer. Her father easily deflected and avoided his blows. It screamed at him with words she didn’t understand, but could guess his meaning well enough. Her father barely moved as the scout bounced around in the snow like some kind of crazed kangaroo.

What’s kor doing?

The dvergr stopped, breathing heavily. It snarled and looked around, its chest heaving. Frothy steam gushed from his mouth with every breath. The remaining scout and wolverine stood a few feet away. They weren’t attacking, looked more like they were in a defensive posture.

What’s going on here? Where’s Unngk?

She turned her head, scanning the field. “Unngk!”

The scout leader perked up, watching her. Then, they both locked onto the same position. It smiled. As it started its move





toward her brother, her father sprang into action. He leapt toward the dvergr to block its path toward Unngk. The defensive scout and wolverine moved their position, but still stayed away from the fight.

The dvergr leader dove ahead of Mey's father, using its smaller size to its advantage. It darted between the giant orc's legs, rolled in the snow and leapt back into a full run toward Unngk. She pushed into the snow to counter him when her father darted forward. With speed far greater than his massive size would suggest, he reached his son before the scout and with a hard shoulder to his chest, propelled Unngk far out of reach. He turned to face the surprised dvergr, his axe raised.

As the scout tried to stop himself in the middle of a full sprint, her father knelt, tucked his axe facing backwards, the back of the head resting against his forearm. He twisted, and sliced the blade across, horizontally. Without even slowing, the axe head cut through the dvergr's neck. With his follow through, he spun, rested his hand in the snow, and kicked back, connecting with the scout square in the chest. Its body launched through the air, snow billowing up where it landed. The dvergr's head dropped cleanly into the snow next to her father, staring up at him with a nasty scowl. He scowled back and stood up.

She relaxed in relief. Her father was right, they should make quick work of this team. She thought about what they would report back to the town council. But then, she twitched. Something where the scout's body had landed. A kind of a flicker? She squinted.

What is that?

She pointed and was about to yell to her father when, without warning, a fountain of bright purple light burst forth from the snow. She recoiled and fell to one knee, covering her eyes. She planted her sword in the ground to stop her from falling over. A harrowing screech filled the air around them. She screamed and twisted in a futile attempt to rebuke the sound. She peeked one eye out above her arm to see what was happening, but was met with a blinding white glare that overwhelmed her senses. Dazed by the light and an echoing reverberation, she pushed up on her sword, struggled to her feet, and stumbled forward.

"What—" she whispered, her mind trying to find anything to grasp on to. She stammered another step forward, the grip on her sword loosed and it dropped to the snow. Her hand fell from

her face as she stood, barely conscious. Instinctively, she blinked trying to bring focus to the blur she saw in front of her. A spray of sparkling purple mixed with streaks of the brightest white smeared what was left of her vision. And that noise. She swayed back and forth, unable to find any focus to ground herself, and then fell forward into the snow.

She lay there still, her face half-buried in snow. A large green blur on the other side of the field moved in and out of a couple of larger blackish blurs. Slowly, the cold on her face brought her back into focus. She blinked a few times and watched as her father fended off two massive wolverines with nothing but a half of a broken spear and a hand axe. He manipulated the battle like he was leading them in a dance. Through thrusts and feints, he continually repositioned himself between them and her brother. With each maneuver, he moved them where he wanted, preparing to strike when he had them properly separated.

“Kor.” She tried to shout out to him, but her voice was muffled by the snow. She raised her head to get up and help him, but she could not move. Her arms were fixed at her sides. It felt like some kind of twine, rough and tight, held her hands together behind her back. Her legs were also held fast, the rope digging into her ankles. She sucked in a shallow breath and thrashed about in the snow, like a fish gasping for life on a hot, sun-dried dock. Her heart raced as she pulled against her restraints, burning the skin on her wrists.

One of the dvergr scouts leaned into her view. “No use struggling now, missy, we’ve got you tied up so tight a musk ox couldn’t get free.”

She winced as the scout pull on the rope even tighter, wrenching her feet and shoulders up. She thrashed about again, but could not find any leverage with her bindings. The dvergr slapped her face. She grimaced, the cold amplifying the sting on her cheek. “Hold still, or I’ll have to cut you.”

“You’ll be lucky my father doesn’t skin you alive!”

The dvergr-scout chuckled. “I don’t think he’ll be a problem for much longer.” He punched her in the gut so hard, her breath stuck in her throat. She choked, gasping for air, her stomach cramping.

“Now stay still!” The scout lifted her shoulders, while another picked up her feet. She did not obey her captors, twisting and thrashing as best she could.

“KOR!” This time her voice was free and rang through the field.

She dropped to the ground with a hard thud. Unable to brace herself, her head bounced off the frozen, icy ground. Her eyes flashed with white light as dizzying pain filled her consciousness. She gasped as a boot hammered into her ribs. The dvergr leaned in again. “Next time, I’ll just bash in your skull. Understand? We don’t need you to be alive.”

She coughed out dark blood, unable to speak.

“Good.”

The dvergr picked her back up, flipped her onto her side, and threw her onto the back of a wolverine. She shook her head, blowing away damp, matted fur. Looking sideways at the field, she saw her father. His defensive dance with the two wolverines he was fighting had taken on a much more aggressive tone. He lunged forward and struck one of the wolverines on the leg with his axe. Already wounded by her spear earlier, its leg gave out and it fell forward. Her father leapt on top of the beast, and drove down with what remained of his spear. The wolverine lurched as the point drove into its neck and severed its spine. He jumped down, but was cut off by the other wolverine before he could advance to help her.

One of the dvergr climbed up on the wolverine in front of where Mey was strapped down. The other slapped the haunches of the beast next to her cheek. “Go! Meet the rest at the village.”

The rider urged his mount forward. Mey’s head bounced with the rhythm of the wolverine’s stride, but she did her best to hold it still. She watched as her father thrust down with his axe, nearly chopping the final wolverine in half with a single blow. He let out a guttural howl as he tore the beast in half and rushed forward, giving chase. The last of the dvergr sprinted toward him, but he swatted it aside as if it were no more than an annoying housefly.

Her captor leaned in, and their mount sprinted ahead leaving her father and brother helplessly running after them in the distance. Within just a few moments, they had faded from her sight and she lay there, helpless watching as the woods rushed by. She took in a deep breath and recited to herself, ignoring her head bouncing against the leg of the wolverine.

Fear is my guide, my awareness.
It wakes me in times of need.
Fear shows me the hand of danger.
It directs me where to act to protect my clan.
And if my body may fall, my ancestors will welcome my soul
into their halls.

Flashes of purple light flared on the horizon, back from where
they had just been. She wondered if her father had let Unngk
make the final, killing blow.



THANK YOU!



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



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