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LICH KING

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CHAPTER 1

LIGHTFOOT GOES TO COLLEGE

It wasn't a terrible back alley, at least as far as back alleys go. In fact, by most standards, it was a relatively nice one. Sure, it was kind of dark, but that had a lot to do with it still being fairly early in the morning. It also had its own rather unique, somewhat disagreeable aroma, but what back alley doesn't have at least a touch of something that seems at least a little bit off. Plus, the continuous spray from the waterfalls that surrounded half of the city added a measure of clammy wetness and a lingering persistence to the mixture of scents that tend to frequent this, and most other back alleys.

But this was an elf city, and that meant only the highest quality. Quality and attention to detail everywhere and with everything, even in the poorest parts of town, even where the travelers and sailors blended their smells with those of the local townsfolk. Nevertheless, even elf cities have waste, especially in their marketing districts, and in the case of this particular back alley being next to the ports, it did not enjoy many of the magical incantations that provided continuous sanitation services enjoyed by the citizens of the upper district. Every docking ship brought a different crew made up of one or more different species, who all brought their own different languages, customs, goods, and of

course, they brought their own, unique smells.

Like most back alleys, this one was used to collect the daily waste from the shops in front of it. The only people who ever came back here were those dropping off that waste, or those doing something that necessitated that they tolerate whatever collection of distasteful artifacts happened to be fermenting in the various piles. In the dim alleyway, a single source of light flared, revealing the head and torso of one such occupant. The light faded, and then flared again. The figure stood, fiddling with something in its hands.

Bright energy glowed on the surface of a small, white disc. Hand-carved runes gleamed in greens and yellows and blues, swirling colorful patterns through the small glyphs etched in a ring around the outer rim of the disc, and into a few larger markings at its center. Sparks of vibrant light arced between the different characters that swept across the face of the disc, and bent around to similar carvings on the opposite side, causing the characters to shimmer and vibrate. The runes on the disc pulsed and hummed with reverberant color, flickering and glinting, as if they were alive with the energy.

“Beichm.” A young half-elf, half-human muttered to himself, reading the name of the largest, central rune on the disc, which flared out its bright, colorful reply.

Waves of crackling light weaved and snaked their way from the disc to the neck and chin of the half-elf who stared down at the disc, holding it in his fingers. The glow of light slipped around his face and out into the space behind him, a sparkling river of luminescence that glistened like a glittery liquid, shining out into the otherwise dull and gloomy alleyway.

Wandering splotches of light slipped along the glossy surfaces of dampened cobblestones in the alley where the figure stood, reflecting the flowing glow from the disc in swirling, wet colors. The light danced in the spray from the nearby waterfalls that surrounded the lower marketing district of the city. Bright energy twisted around the tips of his fingers and thumb where he held onto the small disc, vibrating as it absorbed into his flesh.

He scowled and stuffed the disc into a pouch hanging from his shoulder. He then sifted a finger, still tingling from the charged



energies, through a collection of similar sized discs he had spread out in his other hand. Each was roughly twice the size of a standard silver dyrn coin, and some were quite a bit thicker too. They were made out of everything from different types of woods, to various metals, to the gloss, white porcelain he had just been holding. The discs shuffled and scraped against each other as he foraged through the set. He paused and held up another white disc, then pursed his lips.

“Yiehm.” He muttered to himself, and into the empty alleyway around him. Bright green light flashed from the disc, lighting up the alley and casting a giant shadow of the half-elf against the shops behind him.

“Kotae!” He closed his eyes. “Corsh, I hate that!”

He blinked a few times, clearing the glare from his eyes, while he put the disc into his pouch.

He found another white disc, but this time he did not separate it away from the others. “Draich yfid? No, that’s not it.” He put the disc in his pouch.

Then another. “Bayd yfid? No. Ergh, where is it?”

Focused as he was on his search, he did not notice the back door of the Aran Artisan Bread Shoppe open behind him. A portly elf, at least as portly as elves tend to get, pressed the door open with his hindquarters and backed into the alley behind his shop. He held a large box in his hands, pressed firmly up against his apron that, as usual, was speckled white with flour, and accented with a black and gold pin that read *Mr Aran*. Why the master baker didn’t just wear a white apron was anyone’s guess, but the favorite speculation going around with the staff in the bakery was that he wears the white flour blotches as badges of honor. Each day was a new battle in the kitchen, and the dough was his challenger. To him, it’s not just that a messy baker is a happy baker, but that if you didn’t have a few sacrifices while you worked, you just weren’t trying hard enough. Today, it was still early in the morning in that alley behind the bakery, but he was already showing the markings of a full day’s work.

The young half-elf smiled. “Ah, here it is.” He lifted a polished, white disc into the air.

“Ysgol.”

A flash a bright blue light lit up the alley for an instant like a bolt of lightning, revealing a scowling figure, shadows painting half of its face, staring down at the half-elf.

“Whaa!” The half-elf screamed and jerked back from the unexpected, menacing glare that disappeared back into the darkness of the alleyway.

“Gerellynth Lightfoot!” The silhouette of the baker roared at the half-elf. “Are you using magic outside of the university?”

The half-elf took a step back, cowering his head, disoriented from the flash, and now panicked to find that he was no longer alone in what he thought was an alleyway that was safe from any unwanted attention. He lost his focus on the porcelain disc in his hand, and the energy he had just activated in the runes was now loose to take whatever form it wanted.

Free-flowing sparks of deep blue energy crackled from the disc into the alley. One particularly large bolt shot past the baker’s head, who, being an elf, twisted away just in time to avoid being struck by the energy. The crates stacked up behind him, however, were not so fleet of foot, and took the full force of the blow, scattering bits of broken wood, rotting food, and various other discarded waste into the alley.

Gerellynth and the baker leapt away from the eruption of garbage to avoid being covered by the flying debris. Unfortunately, they both reacted in the same direction and butted heads, bouncing off of each other and plunging the alley floor. The baker dropped the box he had been carrying, adding various day-old breads and pastries to the list of unwanted goods littering the alleyway, while Gerellynth opened his hand to brace his fall, throwing the remaining discs out into the shadowy alley.

The discs clanged and clanked as they rained down onto the cobblestones. The gross, uneven surfaces of the alleyway stones caused the discs to ricochet away in various different directions, their size and composition determining the distance each traveled in their attempted get-aways, and the noises they made whilst doing so.

“Kotae!” Gerellynth scuttered to his knees and scrambled in the alley, searching for the runaway discs.

The baker rose back to his feet in a singular, smooth motion.

He may have been a baker, and not a warrior or a hunter, but he was still an elf, and that meant that every movement he made was effortless and graceful. He towered over the struggling half-elf, who winced as his knees battled with the cobblestones.

“Gerellynth! Stop this right now.”

The half-elf looked up, but did not stop his search. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Aran, but I—”

“But nothing, boy.” Mr. Aran reached down and picked up Gerellynth by the arm.

“Look at me.” The baker grabbed Gerellynth by the sides of his face. “Look at this place. Look at what you’ve done.”

They both gazed at the mess that had become of the alley in just a few seconds.

“This...” Mr. Aran waved at the debris scattered throughout the alley. “This is why magic is forbidden outside of the university.”

“Yes, Mr. Aran, I know. I’m very sorry, but I will be late if I—”

“You’ll be banished!” The baker slapped himself on the chest. “And so will I.” He shook his head. “What am I supposed to tell the other shopkeepers? Surely someone else heard that and will report it.”

“Yes, Mr. Aran.” Gerellynth lowered his head.

The baker smirked. “You’ve really put me in a spot here, boy.”

His lecture was interrupted by a lovely chorus of sounds that rose up around them.

Gerellynth pointed to the air. “That’s the cantu water bells, Mr. Aran—”

“I know what they are.” The baker shot a look at the half-elf, his eyes stern.

“Yes, of course, but that’s the school song. I need to get to class,” Gerellynth swallowed hard, “or I’ll be expelled.”

Mr. Aran shook his head again. “You still don’t get it, do you?”

“Yes, yes, I do, Mr. Aran, but I—”

The baker lifted a hand to reveal one of the discs that he had picked up while regaining his feet. He spun it around in his

fingers. Black obsidian and rough to the touch, he flipped in from side to side, examining the disc. “Runes.” He scowled and exhaled. “I should have known. That would be why mages from the agency aren’t here already, taking you away, bound and gagged, or in stasis.”

Gerellynth twitched. “Maybe. I don’t really—”

Mr. Aran glared at Gerellynth. “I may be no magician, boy, but I know the rune for fire when I see it, and I also know better than to speak it out loud. Dwyuhan protect us, you really are young and foolish, aren’t you? You’re playing around with forces you can’t even begin to understand.”

“Yes, Mr. Aran, that’s why I’m in school here, isn’t it?” Gerellynth reached for the disc, but Mr. Aran closed his fist around it and snarled at the half-elf. “You must be kidding me. You’re a frost giant in a volcano, here, boy. Don’t turn me into your enemy, too.”

The baker stood still with a look of deep thought, while the half-elf’s heart raced, partly because he was about to be late for class, but also because his secret was now out and scattered all over the alley. Mr. Aran was right. If word spread to the authorities that he was using magic, and rune magic on top of that, outside of the university, he would be expelled from the university and kicked out of the city, for sure. The young student shifted from side to side, anxious about the idea of being back on the streets of some random, rundown city somewhere, fighting, stealing, running, hiding, just surviving. These magic discs had gotten him out of that life, and he would not let them put him right back there. While Mr. Aran thought, Gerellynth glanced down, looking for any of the remaining discs on the ground.

The baker motioned toward the main street. “Go. Get to class. You’re late as it is. There’s no way you’ll make it to the upper city in time. Go and salvage what you can out of the day, but this isn’t over. Do you understand me?” The baker pointed a finger at Gerellynth. “We will continue this conversation later, when you return.”

“Yes, Mr. Aran.” Gerellynth leaned over to pick up a nearby disc only to be met by the thump of a hard-crust roll connecting with the side of his head.

“Go, boy! I’ll take care of those, and I’ll do what I can with the agency, but you can bet they’ll be down here to take a closer look soon enough.”

Gerellynth continued to apologize as he ran off toward the main street of the market district. When he reached the front of Mr. Aran’s bakery, however, instead of going toward the gates that led to the residential districts, the route that would lead him to the college, he ran straight across the street into another alley. Mr. Aran was right again. There was no way he would make it to his class on time. Sneaking into the back of a concert hall would be a rather simple, and probably an exciting task for someone as resourceful as Gerellynth, but this was Kura Fyannae Calharam, the renowned elven College of Light and Life. The large hall where they held the second-year *Magic Theory* class was monitored by spells far beyond his second-year understanding. Either you were on time, or you weren’t. There was no amount of sneaking around that could change that, even up in the balcony where he usually sat.

He had no way to make it to his class on time, on foot, even if he took a shortcut though the sewers, which he had done a few times before on desperate occasions. But this time, he didn’t have the ten minutes that would take, any more than he had the full fifteen to twenty it takes to travel on the city streets. Today, with the water bells having almost finished singing their song to announce the beginning of the next class period, he had roughly thirty seconds, after which he would be late.

Gerellynth crept into the alley behind some more shops across from the Aran Artisan Bread Shoppe and crouched down behind a storage shed. He looked around him, but could see no one on this side of the street. He squinted and stared out as hard as he could to make sure all was clear. Satisfied, he closed his eyes, focused, and exhaled. Pressing the disc between his two hands, he spoke, “Vidh Khu’ech.”

The words awoke the magic runes carved into the disc making it feel warm in his palms. Not an actual magic phrase to begin a spell, the words were disregarded by the city’s protective incantations and set off no warning signals with the thaumaturgic enforcement agency, who monitored the city for any illegal admin-

istration of magic. The full power and technique of the spell were engraved into the runes themselves, with the caster needing only to know the phrase that activates the first rune.

Rune magic activations can be any single word in any language, or any combination of words from any combination of languages, or even just random sounds from no language at all. They could be so varied and so ambiguous that it was impossible for a listening spell to detect when a rune was being activated, much less guess what that activation might be. In this case, Gerellynth spoke *open medium* from a language in a human colony far from this city, two words that could be used in any regular conversation, and under most circumstances were nothing more than that, just two regular words.

Gerellynth rubbed the activated disc in his hands, his concentration now fixed. The air in front of him shimmered. A dot of bright energy flickered, and then quickly expanded into rippling waves that were about half as big as he was. Inside the pulsating light, the storage shed in front of him dissolved away, replaced with the back of a particularly virtuous toilet. Solid white porcelain, shined to a mirror-like finish, typical of those found in the upper city lavatories. He squinted at the contrast of the bright, reflective white toilet compared to the dark alley where he was hiding his illicit magical activity. Gerellynth then sighed in relief to see that no-one was currently using that particular stall, the one where, a few months before, he had drawn a small receptor rune, hidden on the back wall, targeting that space as the opening point of the portal that was created by the runes on the disc in his hands. He crawled through the portal onto the toilet, and turned around to see the storage shed in the dark alley, and fortunately, no more curious onlookers, and especially no Mr. Aran. He stepped to the floor and spoke, "Duin!" The portal contracted and popped out of existence.

"Hello? What was that?"

Gerellynth froze, hearing a voice coming from someone else in the bathroom. He ducked down and saw a pair of boots in the stall next to him. He straightened up and faked a cough. But then, something familiar caught his attention. He ducked down and looked again. Dark blue suede with a crest indented into the top,

one he'd seen before. He shot up straight, his eyes wide. His professor's family, Thyllenthalin, Thyssenthal, something like that. That was his crest. He saw a ten foot tall, spinning version of it every day hovering in the hall at the beginning of class.

Oh shit! He has to know I just used a portal to get here.

Once again, Gerellynth's heart raced. He coughed again, but this time it was more of a nervous reaction than as an feeble cover-up effort. He reached up and pulled the handle above him to flush the toilet, burst through the stall door, and ran out of the bathroom. He ducked into a nearby stairwell and bound up to the first balcony. As the final chords of the cantu water song rendition of the school hymn faded into the morning air, Gerellynth slid into an empty seat in one of the auditorium's upper balconies.

"Lightfoot!" called out one of the high-born elf students nearby, "Look at you, you made it, and just at that. Now, isn't that a shame? I thought for sure we'd be rid of you for good this time." The elf turned to another student in the row. "I guess that's 100 more I owe you now, isn't it, Thanyll?"

Some of the surrounding students murmured and chuckled.

"Yeah." Gerellynth pushed back a lock of his hair. "Your sister just wouldn't let me go," he motioned to his chest, "and who am I to deny my betters, right?" He winked. "But here I am."

The chuckling turned into laughter.

The elf held up his hand and scoffed. "Please. As if she'd think about entertaining a half-elf."

Gerellynth tilted his head and shrugged.

The elf squinted, then shook his head. "No. Not a chance."

Gerellynth didn't move.

The elf turned to the side. "No. No, you didn't." He paused. "Did you?"

Gerellynth smiled and held up two fingers. He then mouthed the word, "twice."

The other elves all laughed and bumped their friend. "Don't listen to him, Lloreal, it's just another of his stupid stories."

Lloreal looked at Gerellynth with a skeptical squint, then turned back to the front of the room. "Yeah. You're right."

They settled in their seats and focused on the front of the hall, as the lecture had just begun. The professor cleared his throat as

the image of his family crest faded away, revealing the outline for the day's lesson. Gerellynth watched him closely, but he wasn't listening to the class presentation. Instead, he focused on the professor himself. Was he showing any extra attention to Gerellynth? Did he look distracted from his course delivery? After a few minutes of intense study, Gerellynth smiled. It looks like he had done it. He had gotten away with his teleportation spell, even in front of a tenured professor from the university. He relaxed and sighed as he turned his attention to one of the luxury boxes high up on the opposite side of the room. The box that just happened to be occupied by Princess Twyllea, positioned away from the crowd of other students, who, while most of them were high-born elves, were not members of the royal family. Her security detail accompanied her in her box, a handful of elf warriors clad in very elaborate plate armor and brandishing long elven military spears, along with a variety of other rather elegant, but nasty-looking weapons.

One of the other boys nudged him. "You'd better pay attention, Lightfoot."

Gerellynth turned to the elf. "Huh?" He looked at the professor. "Oh, sure." He waved a hand. "No sweat." He turned his attention back to the box, which was probably where close to half of the room was also looking. She was rather far away, a bit off to the side, and shrouded by the shadows of the box, but he could still see her as plainly as if she were right in front of him. It was as if she had a glow about her that resisted the darkness.

"Forget about it, Lightfoot. You think Llorean's sister was out of your league, the princess isn't even in your plane of existence."

"Ha!" Llorean snorted, drawing the attention of the class.

"Yes?" The professor paused and looked up to the balcony. "Does someone up there find something humorous about the Llysdon quadrant, tertiary grouping of the life-magic, gesture-phrasing lattice?"

The students in the upper level shifted uncomfortably as they jostled over who would take responsibility for the outburst.

"Sorry, sir. Just my allergies." One of the elf students finally called out.

Laughter rumbled through the class.

The professor returned his attention to his presentation. "Yes,

well, please excuse yourself before you find it necessary to disrupt my class again.”

“Yessir. Sorry, sir,” replied the student.

The professor continued, and Gerellynth smiled, looking back at the box where the princess was seated. After a few moments, he leaned to the side. “Who’s that with her? I thought she didn’t have a suitor?”

Thanyll stared at the box. “That’s her security team, of course.”

“No, no, the guy sitting next to her, on the far side. There’s someone else up there.”

They all looked at the box again. Llolean squinted and said, “Oh, that’s Athro.”

“Who?” Gerellynth and Thanyll asked in unison.

“Athralaryn. He’s a grad student on the school’s mylln team.”

“What’s he doing up there with her?” Gerellynth asked.

“What do you think?” Llolean laughed. “Now there’s someone in her league. Elf. Athlete. Prominent family. Check, check, check.”

“No, that’s not it.” Gerellynth continued, “They aren’t sitting close.”

“He’s one of her tutors,” one of the other students interjected.

“Tutors?” Gerellynth asked.

“Of course. She’s the princess. How do you think she got to be the top student in every one of her classes? She has a different private tutor for each one.”

Gerellynth shrugged. “I assumed it was just because she’s the princess, if you know what I mean.”

“Ha. Well, I’m sure she does get some special treatment, but it’s really because of her tutors, not just a free ride. You ever see her at a party or out socializing with the likes of you jackholes?”

Gerellynth grinned and thought for a moment. “No, I guess not.”

“She studies with them every night, from what I hear. Papa’s orders.”

Llolean frowned at Gerellynth. “Stop with your pestering already. You have some nerve on you to even be looking at the princess. I should let my uncle know, and he’ll have you removed

from this class.” He paused. “From the school, from the entire country, for that matter.”

Gerellynth rolled his eyes. “Your uncle, your uncle, your uncle. Please Lloreat. With the number of times you’ve invoked the name of your uncle, you’d think he was the king himself.”

Lloreat scowled, sat back, and crossed his arms. “Well, he’s a lot closer to the king than you’ll ever be.”

Gerellynth looked back at the box. “Maybe.”

Lloreat turned his body toward the smiling half-elf. “Now look here, Lightfoot—”

Thanyll leaned between the two rivals. “Calm down now, Lloreat. Let’s not get into any more trouble over our ridiculous, little, over-confident friend here, shall we?”

Lloreat scoffed the kind of scoff that suggested he was more suited for a life in politics than one studying magic. “Over-confident? I’d say so. More like criminally insolent, if you ask me.”

Gerellynth smirked as though he had plenty of practice seeing through the disingenuous performances of those who consider themselves elite. “Criminal? You would know something about that, wouldn’t you, Lloreat?”

The elf gasped. “Why, I’ve never been so—”

The professor stopped his lecture again. “If I hear one more outburst from up there, I’ll have you all removed for a week. Need I remind you that the mid-term exam is in two.” The older elf on the stage held up two fingers.

Several of the other members of the class who were also sitting in the upper level glared at the feuding mates.

“Apologies, sir.” Thanyll interjected for them both. He nudged Gerellynth. “Why don’t you move before you get us all expelled?” He pointed toward a dark, empty end of the balcony. “There’s plenty of room over there.”

Gerellynth squinted at the elf. “Why do I have to be the one—”

“Just go.” Thanyll exclaimed in a loud whisper. “Or it won’t only be Lloreat’s uncle calling the headmaster.”

Gerellynth frowned. “Fine.” He stood up to leave, but turned to look at the princess’ box, and then back at Lloreat. “Hey, you know what? You want me gone? Like, really gone? Forever?”

Llorean scoffed. "I could think of nothing better for the reputation of this school, and the sanity of us all."

Gerellynth smiled. "Then how about we settle this once and for all? Like gentlemen."

Llorean stifled a laugh. He blinked and looked at Gerellynth. "You, a gentleman? That's a bit of a stretch, don't you think? What are you suggesting, a duel at dawn? I'd be happy to loan you a sword if you can't afford one."

Gerellynth scrunched up his face and waved his hands. "Oh no, nothing so droll as that."

Llorean shrugged. "What then?"

Gerellynth waved a thumb toward the box seats. "Her."

Llorean leaned to see where the young half-elf was pointing. "The princess? I think you have disgraced her quite enough for one day."

"Maybe, but the day's just getting started." Gerellynth winked. "So, what do you say to the first one of us to, well, how do I say it, become availed to her most gracious form of hospitality, wins?"

Llorean screwed up his face. "What are you—" He then withdrew with a look of disgust. "Do you mean? Now look here—"

Thanyll placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Now hold on, Llorean." He turned his attention toward Gerellynth. "Are you suggesting that you think you can bed the princess?"

Gerellynth shrugged. "Well, it would be rude of me to say no, wouldn't it? That is, once she starts begging."

The students around them gasped and snickered, while simultaneously shushing each other.

Llorean tried to stand, but was held down by his friend. "Just a moment, Llorean. What exactly are the terms of your proposal?" Thanyll asked.

"Well, let's see." Gerellynth tapped his chin. "If I win, Llorean...and his uncle...will pay my tuition for the rest of the year—"

"I will do what?" Llorean twisted in his seat.

Thanyll held up his hands to calm his friend.

"You will pay my tuition, including room and board," Gerellynth held up a finger, "at an elf dormitory." He then counted on

his hand. “Books, food, a weekly entertainment stipend, the lot.”

“I will do nothing—”

Gerellynth leaned toward Llolean. “But if you win...I will drop out of Kura Fyannae Calharam,” he recited the name the college in his best, yet slightly mocking, rendition of the Southern, high-elf accent, “and I will leave the twin lakes, never to return.”

Llolean pursed his lips and thought for a moment. “As delightful as that would be, I will not sit here and listen to you defile the name of our princess any longer.”

“Oh?” Gerellynth smirked. “Are you sure you’re not just worried that I’ll be successful? I thought you guys said that she was out of my league. What was it? Not even in my plane of existence. Should be an easy win for you, yes?”

Llolean rolled his eyes. “Pssht. That may be so, but your thinking about it is insult enough. I’d have you executed if it were up to me.”

Gerellynth shrugged. “Well. Then I guess it’s a good thing for me that it’s not up to you. So, that’s a *no* then?”

“Of course not.” Llolean scowled.

Gerellynth sighed. “Oh well, I tried.” He stood up to leave, then turned and sat back down. “Now, if you don’t think I have any legitimate chance—”

Llolean stared forward. “Of course you don’t—”

Gerellynth flipped his hands back and forth in the air. “Yeah, yeah...as I was saying. If you don’t think I have a chance with the princess, and you’re not really worried about me winning, then maybe you’re so hesitant because you don’t think you can win, either.”

Llolean turned toward the half-elf and puffed up his chest. “Now look here. I was very clear that I would not tolerate any such insinuation—”

Gerellynth held up a hand toward Llolean. “Horse. Shit.” He leaned forward. “If you thought you had a chance in hell of getting in with the royal family, you wouldn’t care one bit about the princess’ virtue, and seeing me exit the city would just be a delightful little bonus.”

Llolean blushed and did not respond. He relaxed and sat back. Gerellynth smiled and nodded. “I’ll take that as a confirmation.”

He paused for a moment. “Well, how about we make it easier for you, then, yes?” He put his hand on his chest. “I’ll keep up my end, because I’m, well, me.”

Students around the two grumbled. Some snickering and some moaning. Gerellynth continued, “But for you, you just need to get her to invite you into her room.”

Lloreaan didn’t move.

“Share a meal with you?”

Lloreaan still gave no reaction.

“Say your name in public?”

A look of pain spread across Lloreaan’s face. It was as if his lifelong sanctuary of protection and feelings of invulnerability, provided by his family name and species, had been pulled back like a curtain, revealing him bare in front of his classmates, showing him as nothing more than just another one of them, another random soul in this room, in this world, no better than any of rest of them, not even any more so than a lowly half-elf. The sudden exposure in front of his peers grew from a look of painful embarrassment to raw, uncontrolled anger.

Lloreaan lunged forward, reaching for Gerellynth. Before his outstretched hands could get to the half-elf’s throat, however, Thanyll grabbed his friend and restrained him, muffling the sound as best he could.

Gerellynth jerked back. “Control yourself, good man. We’re just having a civil conversation.”

Thanyll glared at Gerellynth. “There’s nothing civil about this, nor you.”

Gerellynth pressed forward. “Then take my bet and beat me, or accept your place as no better than any of the rest of us. Including me.”

Gasps arose from around them. Lloreaan stared daggers at Gerellynth, but remained silent. Thanyll leaned over and whispered into his friend’s ear. The two held a short, private conversation. Lloreaan faced the front of the room.

Gerellynth repositioned himself in his seat. “What’ll it be, gentlemen?”

Thanyll turned to Gerellynth. “Alright, Lightfoot. We’ll take your bet. You show indisputable evidence that you shared intima-

cy with the princess, and if you do, Llorean will provide for your needs for the rest of the school year.”

“And get me a room in an elf dormitory?”

Thanyll exhaled. “Yes, and find you a room in an elf dormitory. And if Llorean can get the princess to say his name,” he held up a finger, “be it in good humor or ill—”

Gerellynth smirked, but did not object.

“—then you will leave this college, this city, and this kingdom forever.”

Gerellynth tilted his head and paused. He looked back at Llorean and Thanyll. “Since the stakes between us are so, let’s say, unbalanced, I think the results should be adjusted too, yes?”

Thanyll glared at him.

“For example, rather than paying for my tuition and boarding for just this year, Llorean should have to pay for the rest of my studies—”

Llorean lurched in his seat.

Thanyll held up a hand. “Don’t push it, Lightfoot. You’re lucky enough not to be thrown out as it is, already.”

Gerellynth shrugged. “I had to try. Gentlemen, you have yourselves an agreement.” He held out his hand.

Thanyll grasped his forearm. “Enjoy your last few weeks at this school. Now, I suggest you find yourself somewhere else to sit,” he waved to the empty seats, “over there.”

Gerellynth smiled. “Gladly.”

The half-elf stood and worked his way out of the row where he had been sitting. He climbed up the steps, but instead of moving to one of the unoccupied areas in the balcony, as they agreed, he slipped out of the back of the hall. He trotted through the wide, semi-circular hallway that ringed the auditorium. About halfway around, he darted up a set of stairs, two steps at a time, and stopped at the exit to the next level. He paused and took in a deep breath.

Here we go, Lightfoot. Free tuition.

He picked up his head and took a confident step out into the hallway, walking directly toward a closed set of double-doors flanked by two guards, each bedecked in a glimmering, gold and silver-colored suit of the king’s royal armor, and leaning on a

spear that stood another head tall above the tips of their comically large helms. As he approached, they stood at attention and readied their spears.

“Good morning, gentlemen.” He panted, pretending to be out of breath, and pulled out a notebook. “I was told,” he took a couple of shallow breaths, “to bring this to the princess. Apparently she brought the wrong one to class today.” He wiped his forehead as though he was sweating from running.

The helmet on one of the guards tilted, his expression hidden behind an elaborate steel visor. Gerellynth assumed it was one of curious skepticism and continued. “I ran all the way here—”

The guard reached out a hand. “Hand me the book.”

Gerellynth chuckled. “I’m sorry, I was told to give it directly to her and report back to her tutor that she has it.”

The guard squared his shoulders and pointed his spear toward Gerellynth. “Her tutor is here with her.” The other guard took a step to the side and lowered his spear.

Gerellynth held up his hands. “Gentlemen, please. I assure you I am unarmed. I’m simply making a delivery. This is not from her magic theory tutor, of course he’s here with her, but the one from her energies class. She said they must have gotten the books mixed up. I have her theory book here. See?” He waved the book in front of them and pointed to *Magic Theory* scribbled on the spine.

He looked back and forth at the two guards who did not seem to be satisfied with his assurances. “Look, I don’t have time for the two of you to figure out that I’m just trying to get her book to her so her notes aren’t mixed up. I’ll tell you what, you can come with me if that will make you feel any better, and I’ll hand the book to the tutor. I don’t even have to look at the princess, if you don’t want me to, and then my duties will be satisfactorily completed.” He shrugged. “Yes?”

The two guards looked at each other. One returned to his post while the other grabbed Gerellynth by the upper-arm. He dragged the half-elf up the narrow hallway to where the princess and her tutor attended class.

“Whoa. Alright, then. I guess we’re going.” Gerellynth did his best to keep up with the guard.

As they approached, he could smell a sweetness in the air, like a field filled with summer wildflowers. Two more soldiers stood at the entrance to the special box seats, blocking their way. Gerellynth's escort held up a hand in front of the half-elf to stop him a few feet from the entrance to the princess' box. He then approached the other two members of the security team. After a few moments, one of the guards leaned into the box. Gerellynth peaked his head around to see the guard talking with the princess' tutor.

Gerellynth tilted to see around the sentries, who might as well have been statues for all of the life that they showed. And then, there she was, at least there was the back of her head, but that was enough to know she was as much of the worldly treasure as the rumors made her out to be. Even in the small, darkened box seats, her beauty sang out, refusing to be caged. Her long golden hair was woven into a single, thick braid that ran down as much of her back as he could see. Small light-blue and red gems glittered throughout the weave, and blended beautifully with her deep, azure-blue and yellow velvet dress. He followed the braid halfway down her back and imagined the curves of her waist and hips. His breath stopped short with each image he conjured of what her figure must have looked like. He envisioned what their inevitable encounter would be. An encounter that began with a simple conversation, but one that he designed as the lead-in to her bedchamber. He smiled, and a flood of hormones rushed through him, making him think for a moment that he was happy.

Yeah. This is going to make me a goddamned legend.

Then, a slap to the side of his head from a hard, metal gauntlet brought him back to the present. In front of him stood his older brother. Older, bigger, stronger, and much meaner. Gerellynth raised a hand to cover his face to protect from the inevitable punch that was to follow.

"How did you get—"

He blinked a few times and shook his head. His vision cleared. No, no, it wasn't him, of course, it wasn't his older brother who had hit him, at least not this time. The guard who had brought him to the box glared down at him, his hand raised for a second strike. Standing next to him was the princess' magic

theory tutor, with an unpleasant scowl on his face.

“What’s the meaning of this?” The tutor stared hard at Gerellynth, who was still trying to shake off the pain in his head from being hit rather hard by a hand covered in elven steel. He sized up the tutor, a high-born elf, of course, slightly taller and more slender than Gerellynth, and quite attractive in his own right. It wouldn’t be that difficult to assume he was indeed having an affair with the princess, and not just her tutor. He was dressed head to toe in a patterned green silk shirt and pants, half covered by a dark grey robe lined in burgundy, the colors of the school’s mylln team.

Of course he’s wearing the team colors. What a blowhard, muttonhead.

“Now look here. You have about two seconds—”

Gerellynth squinted and launched himself at the tutor. In one motion, he grasped the elf around the shoulders and head-butted him on the bridge of his nose. The tutor recoiled and shouted a slew of words in a language that Gerellynth did not understand directly, but gathered their meaning well enough. Hot breath from the tutor flushed out onto the half-elf, and spittle sprinkled into his face. Blood trickled out of the tutor’s nose, some dripping onto Gerellynth’s shirt.

All three guards dashed in and separated the two scuffling students. The soldiers positioned at the box escorted the tutor back to his seat, where Gerellynth heard the princess gasp while the elf continued to shout curses. Gerellynth chuckled to himself as he was thrown back down the hallway, followed by the guard who had brought him there. The guard shoved him again forcing him to stumble out into the main hallway of the level. Years of similar abuse, being shoved around the hallways of his home by his older brothers, had prepared him for just this occasion. He wasn’t nearly as hurt nor stunned as he made himself out to be, but rather quite in control. He grabbed the guard at the entrance by the hand as he fell forward, pulling on the elaborate design of his gauntlet. A slight gap opened up between the pieces of armor, and the skin of the two touched for a slight moment, but the straps of the gauntlet held tight. Gerellynth lost his grip and fell into the hallway.

The two guards had a quick exchange and then turned to see an elderly human walking away from them in the auditorium hallway.

“You there, halt!” yelled one of the guards.

The man turned and bowed his head. “Yes, sir.”

“Did you see a student just now? A, erm, Half-elf?”

The man didn’t look up and pointed to the staircase. “Yessir. He ran there, down the stairs.”

The guard followed the man’s directions and approached the stairs, but didn’t see anyone. “I’m going to have his head for this!” He looked back at the man. “This is a restricted floor. You must leave immediately.”

The man shuffled in place. “I’m just here to collect the litter, sir...from the toilets, sir.”

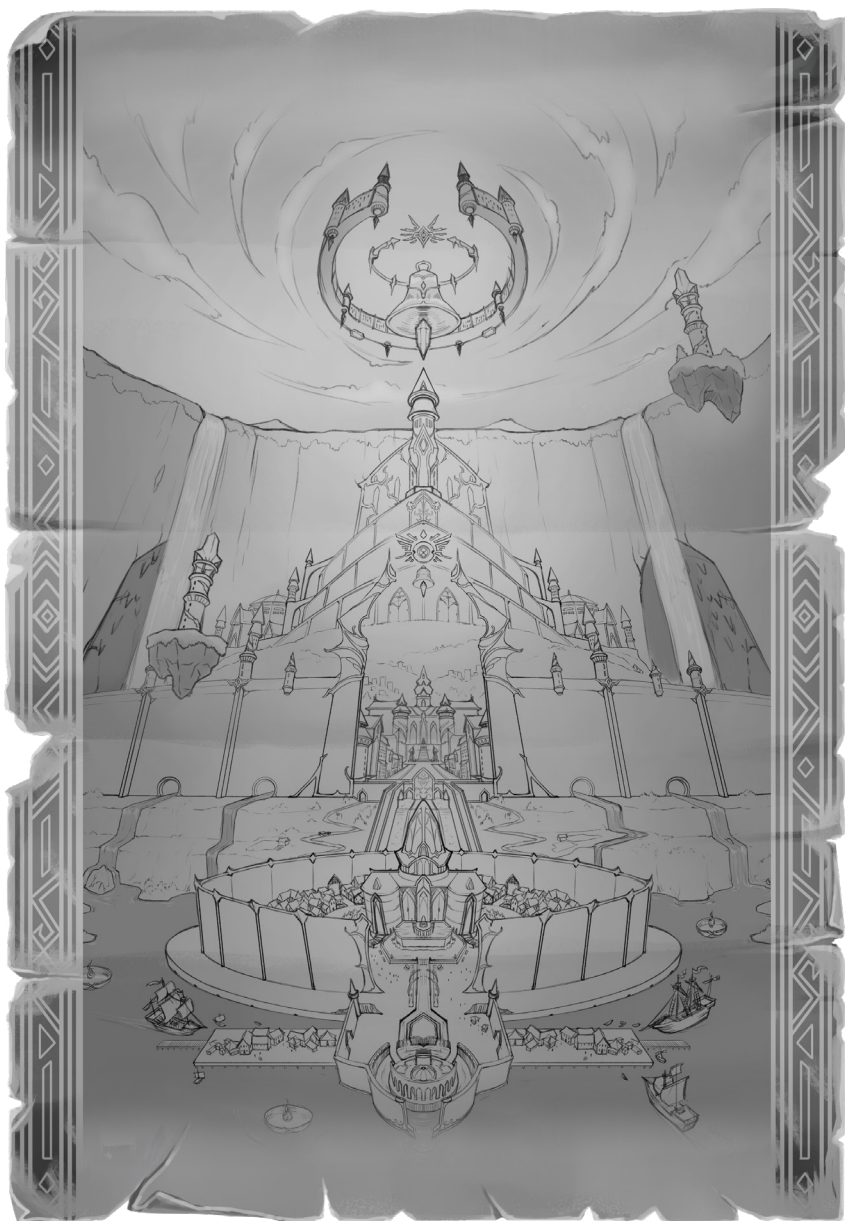
The guard by the stairs pointed to his colleague before running down after the half-elf. The remaining guard lowered his spear at the man. “You must leave, immediately. You can deal with that later.”

“But—”

“Now!”

“Yes, sir.” The man jerked back and shuffled away toward the exit. Once out of view, a smile spread across his lips, and he skipped down the stairs, two at a time.





TAVA CARAID LLYNN
THE ELVEN CITY OF THE TWIN

THANK YOU!



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



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