



## *Rain in the Spring* Part 1

by Thomas Ryan

Rain came into the forge and started the business of getting the fires going. She loved the morning routine. It made her feel warm and comfortable on cold mornings like today. This was the place she had felt most at home for the last two years. The smells of the forge were her favorites. Each metal seemed to have its own smell and feel but few people understood what she talked about when she mentioned these things. The forge was filled with the smell of iron, copper, bronze, gold, silver, coal, wood smoke and always something new.

She made as much noise as she could, hoping to get the occupant of the forge to wake. She stoked the coals and got the water set up for cooling. He appeared to be ignoring her so she tossed a lump of coal at the collection of blankets and furs in the corner.

“Wake up, you old fool,” she said.

“I hope for your sake that was not my breakfast you just tossed at me,” replied the lump under the blankets.

“Your breakfast is whatever you did not eat last night,” she replied.

“Guess we go hungry today then.” The lump shifted. A short, stout man rose from the collection of blankets and furs. He was naked from the waist up with a long beard and hair. His chest was covered in scars and tattoos, some blending to make new designs that the makers of both never imagined. He appeared to be as wide as he was tall. His height was not much taller than Rain’s, about the height of Rain’s aunt but considerably shorter than her uncle.

“Grimkhan, you have a meeting this morning with the mayor,” Rain said. “Maybe he has a job for us.”

“Gods, what does he want?” Grimkhan headed to the bucket of water by the door. Rain missed the rest of what he said when he plunged his face into the cold water.

“Well, we need to work if you want to eat.”

Rain liked this funny old man. She liked him from the moment she saw him two years ago when her uncle brought her to town to trade the furs and crops they had.

Rain had lived with her Aunt Ivy and Uncle Ben for 10 years. Her mother had come from the Middle Kingdom to be with them and had left her in their care when she was recalled to her House duties. Rain had liked the steading but was not really part of the life there. She never really fit into the life of a farmer.



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When she had met Grim, he had noticed her silver-wire necklace. He had asked if she had made it. When she said yes he had given her both silver and gold wire to weave. He was so impressed by her skill that he hired her as his apprentice then and there.

Grimkhan maintained that she must have some dwarf in her, as her skill with the metal was magical. The last two years apprenticed to him had been the most fun she had for as long as she could remember.

Life with Grimkhan was exciting; there were always new things to learn and see. Grimkhan knew a lot about metals and metalworking. The only sad part was that Grimkhan left town and traveled every winter. He said life was too dull in the High Hills during the cold season so he would head south. Rain felt lonely without him during those times. She spent the winters with her aunt, uncle and cousins, which was some consolation.

Everyone in the town had different opinions on where he went and that was part of the fun of being apprenticed to Grimkhan. People in the village spent much of the winter discussing their blacksmith. Where he came from, where he went every winter and would he come back? Rain knew he would return for he always said he would and he never gave his word lightly.

Rain also wondered where Grimkhan would go. He would always return with a gift for her. Payment, he said, for keeping the forge in order. It was always some exotic trinket from some far part of the kingdom, the Illuminated Peaks or the Sea of Grass or the Isles.

Because of those gifts, some people thought Grimkhan went to the Middle Kingdoms and spent the winters drinking in the bars of some port city. Others thought he would go back home to the Isles, for many people thought he was from there but had been too short and too thick to be a good sailor. Being short was why he had left his home there and found a trade as a blacksmith. Although from what most folk knew about the people from the Isles they were not well known for their skill with metals.

Grimkhan insisted that he was not from the lands of the Empire at all; he was from lands far away and considered most people who talked about his origins to be foolish. He maintained that he had been on a black ship sailing the seas (although he could never or would never say which seas) and had been washed overboard. He had washed up on the shores of Gallidon and made his way to the High Hills to settle with the people there.

People did not believe his story but few stated so to Grimkhan. The few that had made

their views known about where he came from and why they thought he was hiding in their town had ended up fighting with him after they had voiced it. This had led to the town agreeing to never voice their views as to his origin when he was present so as not to lose their good blacksmith.

“Greetings, Master Grimkhan,” said the Mayor walking into the forge. The Mayor of Kilnford was a large man. Tall and imposing with a slight paunch developing now that he spent most of his time running the town and not his former business of furs and pottery.

Grimkhan was just pulling his face out of the water and washing off his chest and stomach. “And a good morning to you, Mayor Abel, what can I do for you this morning?”

The mayor looked uncomfortable and cleared his throat before speaking. “We need you...” started the mayor.

“I am not going to like this, am I?” Grimkhan interrupted.

“Well that depends,” the Mayor looked uncomfortable. “We, I mean the town, need you to go to the fort to repair the gates.”

“Why?”

“Well, the gates are in need of repair and we promised to do it.”

“No, why am I going? I did not agree to do anything about the fort.”

“Well, you are part of this town and are therefore obliged to render aid in the upkeep of the fort and local defenses,” the Mayor used his speech-making voice. It didn’t work on Grimkhan.

“Sorry, when did I become a part of Kilnford? I seem to remember a conversation we had two springs ago where you stated that, as I was not part of the town and therefore not going to be required to spend time at the fort as others do, I would be required to pay a ‘special tax’ to make up for my lack of military service. Now, as I have paid my ‘special tax’ every year, I do not see this as an obligation I have, Mayor Abel,” Grimkhan stated as he moved closer to the Mayor.

Rain thought it was amusing that even though the Mayor towered over Grimkhan and was heavier, he appeared to be afraid of the shorter man.

“Well if you are going to be difficult, we, I mean the town, can allow you to forgo the tax this year for this service.” The Mayor backed slightly away from the irritated Grimkhan.

“Oh no, none of that foolishness,” roared Grim. “You will pay me. I will not have the

excuse that I did not pay my ‘special tax’ held against me and be forced to do something else that I did not want to do.”

“Look,” the Mayor fired back. “This town has defended your forge here for the last two years...”

Grimkhan moved closer to the Mayor. “Do I look like I need some fool to defend what is mine? Did I ask the town to defend my forge?”

Rain noticed that Grimkhan was getting close to being dangerous. She had seen him get angry with people before, strangers who either questioned his claim to being a master blacksmith or tried to insist that they were owed some special consideration because of status or class.

“What do you want for breakfast, Master Grimkhan?” Rain interjected in a quiet but forceful voice.

Both men looked at her, the Mayor with anger and Grimkhan first with a spark of anger which quickly died and was replaced with calm.

Before the Mayor could say anything Grimkhan asked her to go work her ‘magic’ on the innkeeper and get him some sausages and beer.

Rain laughed as she ran out. Grimkhan always talked about her magic but he never really explained what he meant and it always seemed to be a different sort of magic. The magic of the High Hills was shape shifting and animal husbandry and she had neither. It had been one of the reasons her Aunt and Uncle had apprenticed her to him. She had no feel for animals. Not like her cousins. They all seemed to know when the animals were not feeling well or needed to migrate to a different landscape, but not her. Give her metal and she could see the design of it, feel it in her hands. This was the skill that he had noticed and taken her in as his apprentice. She did not seem to have the same feel for metal like him, who seemed to know it like an old friend, but she did not feel so out of place in the forge as she did on the stading. The magic she knew Grimkhan wanted her to work was to get breakfast for credit. That was never an easy thing with Madame Belladonna, the widow who ran the inn.

When Rain returned with the breakfast of sausages and beer for Grimkhan, the men were calmly discussing the repairs needed at the fort.

“The hinges on the gates need to be remade. They have been there for over a hundred years and have not fared well this last winter,” said the Mayor. “We have to replace them this

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year according to the administrator who reviewed the fort defenses last summer.”

Grimkhan snorted, “Typical work for you people if it only lasted one hundred years. If that had been made by one of my people, the smith and his clan would have been shamed for a generation.”

The mayor bit back a retort and started to discuss payment for Grimkhan’s services. Grimkhan demanded the rest of the hog that the Mayor had been using for trade with him over the last year.

“I want sausages made from everything inside the pig,” Grimkhan said.

“That leaves me just the head, tail and feet,” the Mayor pointed out.

“I am sure you will find a use for those,” Grimkhan shot back.

The Mayor shook his head in frustration and turned to leave. “Be ready to leave tomorrow at first light,” said the Mayor. “Couple of the boys will be going with you. Samuel and Ezekiel need to go do their tour at the fort.”

“Why are you always fighting with the Mayor?” asked Rain after the mayor had left.

“If I didn’t he would think I was going soft. The man loves to argue, which is why he is the mayor. No one could argue him out of taking the job,” replied Grimkhan chuckling.

Rain laughed too as she started getting Grimkhan’s tools ready for the trip, while he started on breakfast. He was right about no one being able to argue the mayor out of much. She had everything ready by the time he had finished eating and was cleaning his plate and cup. Grimkhan looked at her and then at the items she had packed.

“Where is your stuff?” he asked.

“My stuff?” blurted Rain.

“Yeah, you do not think I am going on this fool’s errand alone? Get your things, it is time you saw more of your world than this town.”

Rain laughed and ran to the inn to get her belongings. This was the first time that Grimkhan had agreed to take her on a trip out of town. He normally left her to run the forge and make deals with the townsfolk or steads for his services. It would be wonderful to go as far as the fort and see what the world was like outside the town and the local steadings. She had been to the fort once when she was three years old.

When she returned with her bundle she saw that Grimkhan had changed into armor, and what marvelous armor! She had never seen him in this armor before! Bright rings of chain

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for a shirt, and embossed leg and armguards of iron, with a helm of iron chased with gold. He also had a long sword on his hip. This was a rarity in the High Hills where the people preferred weapons that could double as work tools, the knife and the hand axe. And few wore any armor other than leathers. Grimkhan looked like one of the Emperor's Guard in his armor. "What are you all dressed up for? Are you expecting an attack?"

"My little Rain, in my travels I have found it is better to be prepared for a fight than not and better to be well provisioned than not. I do not like the way the Empire has been going in the last few years," replied Grimkhan as he adjusted his armor. He tightened some straps and loosened others. "Go get the horse; I will get the traveling anvil and the rest of the tools together."

This was another contradiction in Grimkhan. He owned a horse, such an obvious sign of wealth, and wore many rings and torques of gold and silver, but rarely seemed to have any money. He always worked in trade with people in the town and outlying steadings. The only time he took money for work was when strangers came from outside the High Hills seeking a sword or piece of armor from him. He had told Rain once, why would he pay gold for something his hands could earn. Rain's Uncle had said at the time that this was wise advice and it had reinforced for her Uncle the wisdom of his decision to apprentice Rain to this strange man. Rain just could not understand his reluctance to be separated from his gold.

She returned shortly with the horse in tow. Grimkhan had gotten a pack harness from his storage and started loading the horse.

"Go to your Aunt and Uncle's place. See how they are and let them know you are going to the fort with me," stated Grimkhan. "We may be gone a month or so. Ask your Uncle to check on the forge for me and make sure it does not get rented out by the scoundrel of a Mayor."

Rain started to laugh but protested that she should stay and help.

Grimkhan gave her a look, "The best help for me is to know that your relatives will not worry about you while we are gone and that I still have a business when I return. Now run off, you imp."

Rain laughed again and ran to the inn to pick up some treats for her cousins and Aunt. By the time she came back, Grimkhan had unloaded the horse and was rearranging the load to get better balance from the supplies. He waved distractedly in her direction as she left the

town.

As she was returning later that evening, she reflected on what her Aunt had said to her. Aunt Ivy had seemed concerned about her being out in the wide world. She had talked about rumors of raids and creatures of legend returning to the High Hills. Her Aunt had also talked to her about her soon becoming a woman and how men would begin to look at her differently.

She could not shake the feelings of dread that her Aunt had left her with, but Uncle Ben had said that if anyone was going to keep her safe it would be Grimkhan. Uncle Ben said there were few people he knew as strong as Grim or as good with their fists. Still, it was exciting to be on such a great adventure to see more of her world.

She found Grimkhan sitting in the forge halfway through a meal of rabbit and some potatoes. A plate of the same fare was laid out for her. She could hardly eat or sleep due to her excitement.

It was late in the second day of the journey when they saw the smoke. The journey had been very uneventful to that point. It was hard to tell from the distance what the smoke meant. It was early in the year for steaders to be burning their fields, so Grimkhan decided to go take a look. Pine and Fir (Grimkhan had renamed Samuel and Ezekiel so, saying they were as useful as blocks of wood) had agreed, as steaders tended to look out for each other. The nobles did not interfere in the affairs of the commoners so the commoners took care of each other. There had been an increase in raids for the last two years. Nothing really major according to the adults in town, but still it was better to check and make sure everyone was safe.

When they were approaching the valley where the steading was, Grimkhan stopped the group. He sniffed the air and told Rain, “Stay here, Little One, and make sure my horse does not bolt.”

“Why? What is going on?” asked Rain.

“The steading is not burning its crops.”

The two farmers looked at each other then looked at Grimkhan. “What do you mean?”

“Can’t you smell it?” he asked as he started running through the woods toward the steading. The two farmers headed after him with long loping strides. Although they could have quickly outpaced the shorter man neither seemed willing to be the first to the steading.

Rain stared at the trail they had just headed down and smelled the air. There was a hint of something in it. A smell of iron, steel, burning wood and something else. It smelled

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something like when Uncle Ben would kill the pigs or chickens for dinner. She could not place what the smell was, but it was there. She started moving down the path toward the steading. She led the horse on a tight rein as she moved forward. She did not know much about horses but she knew it would not have willingly gone forward with her. Something up ahead had the poor animal spooked.

Pine was the first to come running back. He was white and shaking. He stopped when he saw her and almost immediately threw up his lunch. She asked what had happened, but he would just gag and shake. Fir came back next, stumbling and crying.

“Where is Grim?” Rain almost shouted at him. “What happened? What is wrong with you two?”

As she started down the path they had just come from, Grimkhan stepped into her way.

“Ah, Little One you may not go that way.”

“Why?” Rain was puzzled and afraid now.

“What is there, you should not see at your age. Everyone is dead. Looks like someone made sure that no one survived.”

The two farmers looked at Grimkhan as if he were mad. “What could have done that?”

“Raiders, I bet,” said Pine.

“That was not Raiders or anything human that did that. At least it is not human any more,” said Grimkhan.

*to be continued...*



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First Published December, 2008.