

Rain in the Spring

Part 2

by Thomas Ryan

“That was not Raiders or anything human that did that. At least it is not human any more,” said Grimkhan. “Hand me that shovel and get some water for Rain and the horse.” Grim pointed at Pine. “You get a campsite set up and not near that.” He pointed first at Fir and then at the vomit.

“What about me?” asked Rain.

“Make sure those two don’t run off.”

Rain looked at the two farm boys. Both were older, taller and heavier than her but at that moment both looked at her as if she were their mother and had just caught them trying to sneak into town. “Well, you heard Grim, go Samuel!” she said throwing the water skins to Pine. “I saw water about two hundred paces back. Ezekiel, there was a place about fifty paces that way that looked like it might do for the night.” She kept both the boys busy setting up the camp and getting dinner ready until Grimkhan came back.

“What happened?” Rain asked when Grimkhan had settled into his dinner and the boys were busy with the horse and the bedding.

“Something killed everyone in the steading and not only this steading but the other one nearby. They also killed the horses, pigs, and chickens and burned the crops. I don’t know of any raiders that do that. Only one thing I know does that and I hope to the gods it has not come here.”

“They killed everything? But that was the Anderson’s steading; they had two little boys.”

“Everything and everyone. That is why I said there are things you should not see yet.”

Rain thought for a moment, “Did you bury them?”

“Those I could find. I think there is something in the well, but I did not look closely.”

Rain shuddered, no wonder the boys had come back so shaken and still had not wanted to eat. “What are we going to do now?”

“Eat, sleep and head for the fort tomorrow as fast as we can. We will warn anyone we see of the danger. It is important that we get to safety as soon as possible.”

“But we can’t just do nothing. We need to warn the steadings in this area.”

“No, Little One.” With that Grimkhan got up to wash his dishes. He told Samuel and

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Ezekiel that they would keep first watch, and then he would watch from midnight to dawn. The boys quickly agreed to this but Rain bristled at the thought that she could not contribute. She told Sam to wake her so she could keep watch with Grimkhan. Grimkhan said nothing; he just went to his blankets to sleep.

Rain was too excited to sleep right away. Her first journey away from the town and she had fallen right into an adventure, just like the storytellers told on winter nights at the inn. It was sad about the Andersons; she had always liked them and now they were gone, killed by something that had crept out of some dark hole. Samuel and Ezekiel were talking about the m'teoulin, the boogiemans from childhood that mothers and grandmothers had used to scare little children to sleep. The m'teoulin were said to have inhabited the High Hills. They were vile and evil magicians who would raid and enslave the people of that region until the Emperor and his nobles had come to kill and banish them. They were just stories made up to scare children but the two boys talked earnestly about how they had returned now that the Emperor and his nobles were gone. Rain thought that they may have tried to run back to their steads if it had not been for Grimkhan's presence. They may have been afraid of m'teoulin but whatever Grimkhan had done or said at the stead had scared them even more.

Rain woke up with a start. It was late, much later than she should have been awoken. The sliver of moon out was too low on the horizon but what had awoken her? It was the smell. What was that horrible smell? She looked around and saw Grimkhan's silhouette against the fire. As she started to get up, she heard Grimkhan's rough whisper.

"Do not move, Little One. It has found us."

Rain's eyes went wide as she realized what Grimkhan was talking about. She reached slowly for her dagger. A gift from Grimkhan before they had left on their journey, it was a wonderful knife. It had a wonderful scent of steel, coal and maple. It fit her hand as if she had been using it for years. She had bound the hilt with wire and leather on the first night. It was a perfect fit for her hand. It felt like a part of her. He had said that made it a perfect fighting knife.

Before she could reach it, she heard the horse wicker. She looked but saw nothing. When she looked back, Grimkhan was gone from the fire. She grabbed her knife and started to get up. She smelled it. A sour smell like that of something spoiled, and then it brushed against her, sending her tumbling out of her blankets. She stabbed up blindly and felt the knife make

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contact while something wet sprayed on her hand. She stabbed again and almost stabbed Grimkhan as he followed the thing toward the horse. What stopped her hand was the smell coming from Grimkhan. No, not from him but from the sword he was wielding. It had the smell of earth, oak and wood-smoke. And she could swear that she felt it as though it was alive.

The creature was distracted before it got to the horse by Samuel standing up. It moved quicker than Rain could follow and Samuel was screaming as his chest turned dark and shiny in the firelight.

Grimkhan was on it, fighting the creature with a ferocity that made Rain gasp. She knew he was a tough fighter, she had seen him fight often enough in town to know few could outstay him in a fight. Yet tonight, she could not believe her eyes. The creature towered over Grimkhan and made him appear even shorter than Rain could ever remember. The creature was not as muscular but fought with a ferocity that matched his. They seemed to fight with equal abandon; Grimkhan with sword and dagger and the creature with two knives. The two fought for what seemed like forever. What amazed her most about the fight was that Grimkhan's sword was alive with ghost fire, an eerie light that seemed to crawl along the blade. It made the fight unworldly.

She and Ezekiel were immobilized by the violence of the two combatants. Victory seemed to sway first from one side then to the other. It was difficult for her to tell who was gaining the upper hand. Finally, she saw Grimkhan pierce the creature's stomach with what appeared to be a fatal wound. In return, the creature hit Grimkhan with such a blow to the head that he went reeling into Samuel, who still writhed on the ground in pain. Rain ran forward without thinking and placed herself between Grimkhan and the creature but it had vanished into the darkness.

Rain turned to Samuel who was curled on the ground crying and holding his chest. He appeared to be in a lot of pain. His chest and arms were covered in ragged cuts and he was bleeding a lot. She called Ezekiel over as she moved toward Samuel to start caring for his wounds. Ezekiel moved toward her but as they came into the light from the fire he gasped and pointed toward her hand. It was covered in blood; however she could not remember being cut. Grimkhan recovered from his blow to the head and although he too seemed to be covered in cuts and blood, he ran into the darkness after the creature. As Ezekiel started to treat Samuel's wound, Rain examined her hand. She found no wound as she cleaned the blood off with water

and a cloth but remembered stabbing at the creature and feeling wetness on her hand afterward. Had she really hurt it? That seemed so unlikely but then the evening had seemed so unreal and detached.

Grimkhan returned shortly muttering in a language that sounded like rocks grinding against each other. The first clear thing he said was, “The damned thing got away. It will not get far though, bleeding as much as it is.”

“We need to get Samuel into some shelter,” said Rain as she started packing their belongings. “We should get back to town as soon as possible.”

“They are going, Little One, but to the nearest steading, not to town. Not us, we have work to do and they will only slow us down.”

“What?” asked Ezekiel and Rain together.

“Someone needs to find out what is going on out here. Unfortunately, Little One, that someone is you and me.”

“But Ezekiel can help and I can wait with Samuel,” Rain protested.

“Yes,” nodded Ezekiel.

Grimkhan looked at both of them and shook his head. “Rain, my dear, you would not be able to defend that poor boy if more of those warped creatures showed up. Also, that poor boy will die in two days if those wounds are not treated right. I understand your reluctance to go and I would not ask this of you if there were another choice, but we are the only ones here who can do this.”

Ezekiel and Samuel looked shaken by Grimkhan’s pronouncement. Samuel looked weaker and more drawn after Grimkhan’s words and Ezekiel turned to comfort him. Rain gave Grimkhan a hard look, one she reserved for those occasions that he overstepped social norms in the town.

Grimkhan looked back and shrugged. “I would rather they knew what they faced and made decisions like the adults they want to be. This world, Little One, is a hard place and these two need to learn that lesson fast, as do you.”

Grimkhan turned and moved to the packs they had brought with them. “Help me separate what we can carry and then bury the rest. The boys will need the horse if they are to get to a steading in time.”

Now it was Rain’s turn to shake her head. She doubted any person could understand

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Grimkhan. She saw the generosity and caring in Grimkhan's gesture to give up the horse and risk losing his tools but doubted the boys understood or appreciated what he was doing. Grimkhan's tools were worth more than most steaders made in five years of farming and trading. Burying them here in the wilderness was like throwing away the family steading.

Samuel looked awful. He was in a lot of pain and could barely sit up. Both boys were shaken and afraid. Rain was too but she knew there was too much to do and too little time in which to get it done. So she talked quietly to Samuel and Ezekiel about wound care and the best way to get to the fort, things both boys probably knew better than she did but it was reassuring for all of them to discuss these normal things. She then went to help Grimkhan with the packs.

"Grimkhan, do you know what is going on? Who attacked us last night, and why? Who killed the Anderson's? Where are we going and what is wrong with your sword that it glows with ghost fire?"

"Slow down, Little One. Too many questions and not enough time to answer them all. To answer the simplest question, my sword is a rune sword. In the presence of evil it awakens to its full power and therefore displays its true self. Just like some metals may seem unassuming at first but when tested in the forge they begin to show their true strength or weakness."

Rain understood this for she knew the true character of the metals she had worked and how some metal could look hard and strong but hide a weakness in the makeup that would cause the metal to break and, if a weapon, leave its owner vulnerable. Other metals could look unassuming or even ugly but be so strong as to only break under the most extreme conditions, giving its owner years of service and work.

"As to who attacked us and the Anderson's, that my dear Rain, I do not know but hope to find out. Whoever or whatever it was, it is not human. It may walk like one but having fought it I can say that it is neither man nor beast. On the good side we know that it can bleed and therefore be killed. Sometimes, my dear Rain, that is all we can hope for from the things that assail us."

"Rune sword? Like the runes that the Nobles use? Are you from one of the noble houses?"

"No, Little One, I am not and people have been using the magic of runes long before your nobles thought to use them to bind the powers. My sword is a rune sword. It was crafted by runesmiths of another age to fight the incursions of evil. How I came to possess it is a story

for another time.”

“So we are going to find the creature that attacked us?”

“Yes, we are. I think it was only a scout from the group, so we really need to find out who they are and what they are after. Then we can follow the young men to the steading.”

Rain nodded and finished packing the two backpacks with food and clothes. She grabbed two of the water skins and gave the rest of the food and water to the boys.

“Leave the food and only take the water. You will move faster if you have the horse only carry the two of you and you’ll not starve before you get to the steading,” said Grimkhan as he took the shovel and started to bury the rest of the supplies.

Ezekiel stated, “Sam and I are going to wait here for first light then head for the closest steading.”

“Doubt you will make it to first light with all the blood on the ground. If the creatures don’t come first then every predator and carrion feeder will be here to finish you off before that. Best you leave now and not press your luck.”

Ezekiel and Samuel looked even more shaken but said their goodbyes to Rain and started their journey. Samuel still looked weak and in pain. Rain wished them the Emperor’s speed and good luck. She hoped they’d get to a steading soon for Samuel’s sake.

Rain and Grimkhan finished their preparations and they started out in the direction the creature had escaped. Just as they left camp Rain again smelled that foul odor that had preceded the attack earlier. She stopped and quietly called to Grimkhan.

“Grim, I can smell them.”

“No, Little One, but that may account for what you are feeling,” he said pointing to one of the creatures’ knives that lay ten feet away.

Rain noticed that the smell came from the blade. The knife was of a metal that she had never seen before. Although the blade of the long knife was shiny with an oily sheen, it repulsed her, making her feel nauseated. “What is that knife made of?”

“The metal is tainted. Probably mixed with something best left unknown, but I can feel it, too.”

They moved down the trail, Grimkhan was following some blood trail that Rain could not see in the dark of the predawn. She was surprised at how quietly and quickly he seemed to move down the trail. This journey was showing a different Grimkhan than the one she knew

from town. He was still the same man that had taken her as his apprentice; still the same man that had fostered her gifts and showed her how to use her talent with metals. Still the same man that was generous with his fortune at times but miserly at others. Now, though, she was seeing a different side, one that was at home in the wilderness as any of the experienced hunters from the steadings and as skilled a fighter as any of the professional soldiers she had seen from the Empire. Again, she wondered about Grimkhan's origins; was he from a noble house? An Imperial guardsman? A mercenary from the Middle Kingdom? She wondered how such a kind and generous person could have been the same fierce and wild fighter she had seen earlier that morning. She wondered...

Rain smelled it about the time Grimkhan stopped. One of the creatures was up ahead. She could just barely feel it but definitely smelled it, a nauseating foul smell that seemed to come from ahead.

Grimkhan signed her to stay. He moved forward carefully and quietly. Stopping just at the edge of her vision, Grimkhan motioned her forward. She moved forward. The smell and the nausea increased until she saw the creature. In the half light she saw a man-sized figure dressed in rags and fur with the second dagger in its hand. There were also other metal items. Silver and gold rings and torques made her feel uneasy, but it was a feeling that she could neither place nor understand.

Grimkhan looked the creature over, then pointing to a wound on the thing's right arm remarked, "Seems you did well for your first fight."

"Why do you say that?"

"This wound slowed the creature down," he said pointing to a cut on its right arm. "I think it helped me win the fight."

"You think I helped you win the fight?" Rain was disturbed by the news and ill from the smell. She was proud that she had helped but not sure she liked the idea that she had helped kill something. She was also not sure that Grimkhan was being honest about her contribution to the fight.

Grimkhan looked at her and started moving forward, "Well, no use standing here complimenting each other on a job well done. Let's see where this thing was heading."

Rain was grateful to be moving on but still unsure of how she felt about her current situation. She and Grimkhan had been together for two years and in that time she felt that she

had come to understand the man in front of her, but these last few days had changed how she saw him. Grimkhan was more than he had appeared to be while in town. Maybe this was the Grimkhan that went south every winter. Maybe this was the Grimkhan that traveled and led so much discussion during the winter for the people of the town. Which was the real Grimkhan though?

They traveled for the rest of the morning, Grimkhan not calling a rest until midday. They made camp in the shade of some rocks and brush. Rain did not ask the reason for the stop. She was exhausted. The fight last night and the excitement of the morning had taken its toll on her. She fell asleep as soon as she lay down.

She awoke to find Grimkhan sitting with his back to the rocks, keeping watch. Rain felt guilty about having fallen asleep. She quickly got up and moved towards him. Only as she moved closer did she notice that he was asleep. She chuckled and moved closer, taking over the rest of the watch.

They started again several hours later after a short meal. While they ate they talked of what might happen.

“We are only going to find out where that thing came from and how many of them there are.” Grimkhan said as they munched on jerky and biscuits, “We are not going to fight anyone, I hope, and we are definitely not going to get caught.”

“Why do you think there are more?”

“The tracks at the Andersons and the amount of carnage there spoke of a large group overcoming the steading’s defensives. I doubt it was too large a group but definitely more than a handful.”

“So the one we fought was a stray?”

“More of a scout. Probably seeing who came to check on the steading and then would report back to the main group. The leader would then decide if the group would run or ambush the people coming to look. The scout probably thought we were a small enough group that if it injured one or two and killed the horse it would slow us enough to allow the main group to kill us off. Or at least, that would be how I would do it.”

“How you would do it?” asked Rain looking at Grimkhan as if he had just said the sky was red.

“Ah, Little One, I have not always been a peaceful blacksmith. I have fought in many

wars and battles and done a number of very unsavory jobs in my time.”

Rain was not sure how to take this new information. Grimkhan had never seemed to be a professional soldier until today. Nor did he appear like the raiders and pirates of story and legend she had heard about. If Grimkhan said that he had fought in battles and wars then maybe he was an Imperial Guard like she had thought or maybe, he was a raider from the Isles, or a horseman from the Sea of Grass. At this point it did not seem as unlikely a thing as it had been yesterday. Rain felt that now anything could be true. She could be a fairy princess and a dragon could be flying out of the sky at any minute. She was feeling her world shift. Everything was unsure and anything was possible. It thrilled and scared her. At that moment though, she loved her adventure.

“Little One, I do not want you to misunderstand the situation. I think I know what has happened but one must not always trust what one sees. We must be open to anything that happens and trust only what we can assure ourselves is true. I trust my gut and I trust you and your ‘feelings.’ We will need to rely on both soon, I fear.”

Rain had no idea what Grimkhan was talking about but she knew the creature had smelled awful and she had felt sickened in its presence so she would trust that to let her know if it was anywhere around.

They continued for the rest of the day and into the night. As they traveled they came upon another steading that had been attacked. Grimkhan would not let Rain go near when he went to go look. He was gone for what seemed like a long time.

“It looks like the same group that attacked the Anderson place. They are gone now, but it looks like they were there recently.”

“Any survivors?”

“Maybe. It was difficult to tell, but there may have been prisoners. I do not know how this group works yet so it may have been slaves or prisoners with the group that were kept separate.”

“How will you know which it is?”

“We will have to see them in person, which will be soon if I have read the tracks right. We will need to see how they treat this separate group. Is there another steading around here?”

“I don’t know. This is further than I have ever heard of anyone from the town going. I know of two steadings that were north of the Anderson’s but I do not know where they were.

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This one was probably one of them but as to the other?”

“We will try the next valley to the west. The group appears to be moving in that direction.”

Grimkhan looked at Rain for a minute then continued. “There is something else out here. I do not know what it is, but my gut tells me we have company or a rival in our search for this group.”

to be continued...



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