



## *Rain in the Spring* Part 3

by Thomas Ryan

“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 that we have company or a rival in our search for this group.”

“Who do you think it is?” Rain asked as she searched her memory trying to figure out who else could be out here.

Grimkhan looked thoughtful for a minute, “Not sure who or what. No tracks or sign, just a feeling, Little One.”

They continued on through the night, stopping just before dawn to rest and eat again. Rain was tired, dirty, and hungry and she was starting to feel scared again.

This time she stayed awake to keep watch and woke Grimkhan at midday. Rain fell asleep quickly as tired as she was. She had dreams that were confusing and scary, but when she awoke she could not remember them.

Grimkhan woke her up just before sundown. They moved quietly through the night, advancing into the valley. Twice, Grimkhan stopped their movement and peered around as if expecting someone or something to come out of the night. Both times the only thing Rain could see was an old owl that appeared to look at her but quickly lost interest, and the second time a fox that seemed to wink at her.

They heard them before they saw anything or Rain smelt them. They heard a low rumble and a pounding ahead. Grimkhan stopped them, pointed to a nearby tree, and they climbed high enough to check out the noise.

The first thing they saw was the steading. It stood out in the clearing, old, grand, and untouched. The steading was large, and had obviously held a large family at one time, but now appeared empty. Nothing moved in the compound or in the house. It appeared as if it were a painting. However, Rain felt there was something odd about the house. She could somehow tell that it was not deserted. It did not have the look of an abandoned steading or, somehow, the feel of one.

The creatures making all the noise were gathered about 500 yards from the clearing. It was hard to determine their numbers or what they looked like due to the trees, brush, and



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darkness. They seemed to be gathered into a group and were trying to get organized.

“Something has them spooked. Seems like their leaders are trying to get them motivated. Any idea who lives there?”

“No, although it is an old steading, which means it belongs to one of the old families. They have never come into town that I know of. Maybe they use the fort for their trading. How do you know the creatures are spooked?” asked Rain looking down at Grimkhan. She was higher up because she was lighter and Grimkhan could not climb as high in his armor.

“I hear the one voice followed by the response from the crowd. That means some leader is trying to get his troops to do something they do not want to do. The leader is shouting at them and they are responding to his shouts. And whatever it is that these guys do not want to face must be pretty spooky. Nothing yet has stopped them from attacking a steading.”

“What do you think it is, Grim?”

“Hard to know at this point, Little One. We, though, need to stick to our original plan. We need to find out where these guys came from and where they are going.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Well, the easiest way would be to find one of those things and ask it some questions. Based on our last encounter with one of the creatures, I imagine it would be a short conversation. Probably involving a lot of blood, followed by a fast run out of this valley with most of those things on our tails.”

“Why?”

“We make a much more tempting target than that steading, I bet. And their leaders are probably looking for an excuse to leave this place since it has the troops so spooked.”

Rain looked down again at Grimkhan who appeared to be looking at the terrain. “What are you doing now?”

“Trying to judge our best escape route. We know where they are but I am sure they have scouts out there. We just need to figure out where they are so we can avoid them.”

“When will we make our move?”

“Sooner than we may want,” said Grimkhan pointing toward a group of the creatures moving toward them. Grimkhan moved slowly down the tree. He got to about ten feet above the ground and waited for the group. There appeared to be four of them approaching. Again Rain smelled the foul stench. It was much stronger this time. She assumed it was because there

were more of them. At least she hoped that was the case.

It was dark under the tree so she was not sure what happened first when Grimkhan dropped down into the group. She knew that two were down before the creatures could respond to Grimkhan's furious attacks. Again she smelled the earth, oak and wood-smoke of Grimkhan's sword, which flashed with ghost fire. It seemed to disperse the foul smell coming from the weapons of the creatures.

The two creatures that were left started to push Grimkhan back toward the base of the tree. Rain was sure if Grimkhan did not do something soon one or the other would think to raise the alarm. Then they would be in a lot of trouble. Rain started to move so she could help Grimkhan.

Rain quickly slid down the tree and leapt onto one of the creatures. The smell from the creatures' weapons was almost overwhelming being this close and with this many. The smell of Grimkhan's sword was a comfort and an anchor. She focused on that as she used her knife to stab the creature. She kept stabbing as the creature went down under her, stopping only when her knees hit the ground and she was forced to roll away from the creature's grabbing arms.

She heard a roaring as she came up and saw the creature towering over her. The thing was hurt, and covered in blood. It raised its dagger, roaring its anger and pain at her as it swung down.

Then Grimkhan was between her and the creature. The dagger sliced into his upper arm through the chain sleeve. Grimkhan roared back and Rain was truly afraid. Grimkhan trapped the creature's dagger in his arm and rammed his own dagger into the thing's belly. Rain was amazed by his strength as his blow lifted the creature off the ground. She was sure the blow was fatal.

Grimkhan turned and screamed at Rain, "You stupid girl, get back up that tree!" He hit her with a backhand blow that sent her tumbling toward the tree as he turned to face the last creature. It was sure that it had an easy kill as Grimkhan was wounded and distracted.

Rain was too astonished to be scared. Grimkhan had yelled at her and hit her. He had never done either of those things. Ever. Not even when she first started and made mistakes that would have gotten her those rewards in any other apprenticeship. Why had he hit her like that? She was helping, preventing them from being found out by the main group.

The creature never did land its blow on Grimkhan for an arrow suddenly sprouted from

its throat. Grimkhan took advantage of its discomfort to sever its neck.

Rain looked around to see what this new threat was. Who or what did they have to fight now? She was starting to feel defeated. Would they ever get out of this place alive? She saw something in the brush and moved to the tree.

“Well, mikumwess, what are we to do with you?” asked a female voice from the brush.

“I’m not sure who or what you are talking to but thanks for the assist, madam,” replied Grimkhan moving toward Rain and the tree. Grimkhan harshly whispered to Rain. “You stupid, stupid girl, if you ever do that again I will beat you until your mother will not even recognize you.”

The woman who came out of the brush looked older than anyone Rain had ever known but appeared to move like someone in their prime. She was dressed in buckskins with elaborate embroidering on the sleeves and leggings. She carried a bow with an arrow nocked.

“You from that steading?” Grimkhan asked as he bound up his wounds. “Any idea where these foul things came from?”

Rain looked at Grimkhan as if he were one of the creatures. He had never said such mean and ugly things to her before. She was too confused at that moment to even assist him in binding his wounds. She did not know what had happened that he had gotten so angry with her and did not want to provoke his anger again.

Who was this man? Was this the real Grimkhan? A vicious killer who only was nice to her because he was in town? Was he the type of man that her aunt had warned her about before she left on this adventure? Did her aunt have some way of knowing that Grimkhan could have been this type of person?

“Yes and maybe. We need to move now.”

“Aye, that would be a good plan.”

The woman turned and moved back into the brush. Grimkhan grabbed Rain and followed the woman, but Grimkhan moved a little slower letting her get a bit ahead. Just as Rain was wondering why, Grimkhan stopped.

“Think we will stop here.”

“Why? Don’t trust me?”

“Not sure yet, but I definitely do not trust that.” Grimkhan gestured at a bear that Rain had not seen until Grimkhan pointed to it, about 10 yards right of the path they were on.

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“You are good, mikumwess. Quiet, too. You might live long but the girl is not as skilled.”  
“She is my apprentice and not skilled in much. She is not worth your notice.”

The woman looked Rain over as if she were an animal brought to market. It made her feel very uncomfortable. Something else was making her totally uncomfortable; it was a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that started when she came close to the woman. Who was this woman and what did the woman want with she and Grimkhan? And why was Grimkhan acting as if nothing had happened back at the fight?

“You said you might know where those creatures are from,” said Grimkhan. “Oh, and whatever that is, it should stop now before I get upset.” Rain noticed the bear had started moving toward them, but she had not seen Grimkhan move his head in its direction or even indicate that he had heard it move. Now, why was he calling the bear an ‘it’?

“You really do not trust us, do you, mikumwess? Well, yes, I do think I know where these creatures came from. The m’teoulin come from the White Hills. Not sure why they have decided to come down. When the Emperor finds out that they have, he will probably send his guardsmen to put them back there and punish them harshly.”

“You seem to be a little behind the times,” said Rain. “The Emperor has been missing along with most of the nobles on the Emperor’s Isle. I know this because my mother had been a servant in one of the noble houses. She was recalled to service when the Destruction happened. The Emperor has not been heard from for the last seven years. No one has heard from any of those nobles, either. Here, in the High Hills, we are on our own.”

“That explains much, Little One, both about this incursion and the absence. It also means that I will have to change my tactics. I was hoping for a squad or two of Imperial Guard to be here in a week or two, but now...”

Grimkhan cocked his head to the left and said, “I am really glad we now know who these creatures are and where they are from. Now, though, it is time to go.”

“Yes, I heard them, too. You should go warn the other steadings. If you head south for a day and then move west toward the fort, you should be able to avoid this group. We can delay them for a while.”

“Thanks, but we will not be able to move fast right now,” replied Grimkhan. “Rain, follow that,” Grimkhan said pointing to the bear, “and stay out of trouble.”

Rain followed the bear although she did not want to do so. It gave the same odd feeling

that the woman gave her. She was reluctant to be far away from Grimkhan because she did not trust these strangers. Then she saw three of the m'teoulin come out of the woods.

Grimkhan met the first one as another sprouted an arrow from its left shoulder. The third looked confused as to which it should attack, Grimkhan or the old woman, but decided the old woman made the easier target.

Again, Grimkhan's ferocity in battle was frightening to Rain. He became something else when he fought and his rune sword made it unworldly with its presence and ghost fire.

Grimkhan quickly killed his opponent and turned to help the woman dispatch hers.

Both moved away from the carnage but as they approached Rain and the bear, the woman quickly outpaced Grimkhan. He took Rain's hand and started running south. They ran past the woman who smiled at Rain and murmured something that sounded like, "Kokothas blessing on you, Little One."

They moved south as quickly as they could. Grimkhan would not let them stop for more than an hour. They finally stopped when Rain fell asleep walking.

They reached a steading on the second day. Warnings were given and the steading sent out runners. Grimkhan and Rain kept moving toward the fort. They stopped at steadings along the way spreading the warning and alerting the people. Listening to Grimkhan recount their pursuit and encounters with the creatures reminded Rain of how Grimkhan had ill treated her. Rain asked but no one seemed to know who was in the steading from nights ago. Most said it was an old steading and that no one had lived there in centuries.

They reached the fort on the fifth day. Several of the steadings had offered to take Rain in but Grimkhan always refused, stating, "I brought her out here; I will make sure she gets home safe." Rain would not have wanted to be separated from Grimkhan. She was not sure she was safe with him but being with him made her feel safer than anything since her mother left. This confused her. This new Grimkhan confused her.

When they got to the fort it was bustling with activity. Many of the outlying steadings had sent in the old and the young for protection. Rain made inquiries about the boys while Grimkhan went off to talk to the fort commander.

Fortunately, they both had made it, although it was touch and go for a while. Grimkhan had been right about Sam's blood drawing all the predators in the woods on to the trail of the two. They even thought that one of the m'teoulin had followed them for a while. Rain thought it

was probably a pack of wolves but was glad that they had made it safely to the fort. Samuel was still recovering from his wounds, which now just looked ugly, raw and pink. Ezekiel was giving Sam a hard time about how his battle scars would make even his ugly face look handsome to the girls. They all talked about how strange it was that creatures from their childhood nightmares the m'teoulin had come back.

She also tried to learn more about the steading that she and Grimkhan had visited and about the woman who lived there. It troubled her when she learned from one of the wise women that the word 'mikumwess' meant children of the earth. It was an old word. Why that woman at the steading applied it to Grimkhan she did not understand. 'The Kokothas' was an old word for mother of the owls. Kokothas was also the name of an old minor noble family that was said to have lived in this area centuries ago. Most people thought the line had died out long ago, or moved to the Emperor's Isle. None thought any of the family had lived in this area in a generation or more. Rain thought she must have misheard what the woman had said to her; "Kokothas blessing on you, Little One." She had been so preoccupied with the events of the fight she could easily have done that.

Grimkhan came back from the commander's office hours later looking preoccupied and unhappy. "The commander wants me take a group from the fort and show them where the m'teoulin have been. Not something I want to do right now. I would rather stay here and do the job we were hired for. Plus, I will not be able to keep you safe if I am not here."

"Grim, I think I should go back to town with Samuel. You do not want me as your apprentice anymore and I should go back to my Aunt and Uncle as soon as I can."

"What are you talking about, Little One? When did I say I did not want you as my apprentice?"

"You think I am stupid and unskilled. Obviously, I am not worth anyone's notice and I should leave your service so you can get a better apprentice."

Grimkhan looked puzzled and angry for a few minutes, looking at her and trying to think of something to say. He then smiled and started laughing. Rain was at first confused, and then as Grimkhan continued to laugh, she got very angry.

"Why are you laughing at me? I really hate you, you old fool!" yelled Rain at Grimkhan and then started hitting him. But the harder she hit him, the harder he laughed. She stopped when he collapsed on the ground, crying with laughter and gasping for breath.

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“Yes, Little One, you are unskilled as an apprentice should be, and at times can be stupid, but then, so can I. You are mature in ways that I forget that you are only 12 summers. You know that I take my word very seriously, so when I give it I will do all in my power to fulfill my word. I gave your Uncle and your Aunt my word that I would keep you safe no matter where you were or what we were doing. You scared me out of my wits when you attacked that m’teoulin. I thought you were safe in the tree and then I see you like a wildcat taking on a creature twice your size. I did not think I would get to you in time to protect you. If you had been hurt I would not have been able to face your Uncle. I did not send you with Samuel for the same reason. I did not think those boys would make it safely to a steading. I gave them the horse because it gave them a chance, but it also would attract any m’teoulin scouts, and allow us to get away unnoticed. Do not get me wrong, I am glad they are safe, but you, Rain, are the one I will do what I need to do to protect.”

Rain was now more confused than ever. She thought she had understood what had happened during their trip. Now though, she was no longer sure what had really happened in the wood. She understood from what Samuel and Ezekiel had said that they had a rough time getting back, and that without the horse they would not have made it. But for Grimkhan to use them to keep her safe?

“You must understand, Rain. We have an obligation to each other as master and apprentice. Also, I hope, as friends. I have tried a number of jobs in my long life and hope to do many more in the years to come. I hope that we will be friends during those years. Now, if you still want to leave my service I will not stop you.”

“I do not want to leave your service. I have never been happier than in the past two years. I did not think you wanted me after that fight at the steading. You yelled at me, and hit me. Then you called me stupid and told that woman that I was not worth anyone’s notice.”

“I apologize for hitting you. I, too, can be stupid at times. About the lady, I did not trust her and did not want her taking notice of you for your own safety.”

Rain looked at Grimkhan lying on the ground with his tear stained cheeks, and then pounced on him, hugging him as hard as she could.

“Stop that, you hellion! You will hurt yourself trying to squeeze me out of my armor!”

“Then I will stay as your apprentice, Grimkhan, and I will wait here for you to get back. I will be safe here at the fort.”

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“True, most of the steadings are sending their people in and you can keep those blocks of wood out of trouble,” Grimkhan chuckled. “You can start seeing what we need to do to the gate to get it ready. Also, look over the rest of the fort to see if we need to make any other repairs while we are here. I will take the horse so I can collect my tools and the rest of our stuff.”

Not too long after, Grimkhan left with the patrol from the fort. Rain watched him go until she could not see him, and then turned to her new job in the fort. Rain frowned as she felt the sadness of the gate’s iron hinges. This would be a big job, and the sooner Grimkhan returned the better it would be. Especially for me, thought Rain.

*The End*



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