



Rain in the Spring

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





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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





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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



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. “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.



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“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 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 boogieman 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





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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 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.





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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 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 steads 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





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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 stading.”

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 stading,” 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 stading.”

“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





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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





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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.





Rain in the Spring

“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





Rain in the Spring

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. 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.”



“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 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.

“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





then 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.

“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.”

“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





Rain in the Spring

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