

Respect The Fire Within

Taenya heard Raafe call out about the fallen tree and instantly went on alert. She looked to Keston and Onas, “Potential trouble, stay alert, be ready for action. Onas, can you take over driving the wagon? Keston, hang onto the back of the wagon, watch for anything and yell if you see anything.”

Keston handed the reins to Onas and leaped to comply. “Understood.” As he stepped up onto the back of the wagon designed for the purpose, he pulled out his sword, with his shield on his back to grab as needed.

Taenya pulled on her reins to turn and guide her horse toward where Raafe was, grabbed her shield off its place on the side of the saddle, and pulled out her sword. It would be much more effective if she could fight on horseback, but she wasn’t sure if they would have room for it. There was a ditch to their left and trees to their right. It was an ideal ambush position.

When they caught up with Raafe she looked at him, “Pull your sword. Do you see anything?”

Raafe looked around, “Nothing. You think the tree was deliberate?”

She nodded, “I do. Stay close to the wagon, don’t get separated. We’ll need to try and stay close, it’s likely we’ll be outnumbered. We’ll get through this. If it gets bad, I need you to get the princess out of here. No hesitation, you hear me?”

“I understand. I will keep her safe.”

“Good. Don’t dismount yet, slowly move around, and scan the ditch. I’ll look to the trees.” she ordered.

They split up, and just as she was getting closer to the treeline, Keston called out. “Boss! We have trouble.” She turned and looked to the rear of the wagon. Coming from the trees were four men. The three telv and an orkun were armed with crude short swords and wore gambesons. She turned to look at them, realizing it was probably a distraction she turned back so she could see both them and in the front where the downed tree lay.

She noticed the second group first, but Raafe called out, “Taenya, second group. Collapse to the wagon?”

She looked to him and then the wagon, “Yes, don’t turn your back to them. Fall back, I’ll address them.”

He nodded as she took in the second group. The orkun in the center seemed to be the leader of the bandits, he was wearing a leather cuirass and was armed with a longsword. There was a raithe and another telv on either side of him.

Not wanting to give him satisfaction, she addressed them first. “Good morning, gentlemen. We are just passing through and it is fortuitous that you are also here, as it seems we have come upon a fallen tree. Perhaps you all could help us clear it from the road so that we can all safely go about our day? In fact, we’re willing to pay you a fee for the trouble.”

The orkun laughed, “That’s good. Sure! We’ll help you, however, I’m sure you understand if we would like to be compensated a bit more than a simple fee. Let’s say, you give us everything you own, and maybe a little attention, then we’ll help you move it.”

Taenya sneered in disgust, “This won’t end the way you think it will. Just let us pass, and we’ll not tell anyone we saw you.”

With another laugh, the bandit leader replied. “That’s not going to work for us. Either your men drop their weapons and start unloading everything from your wagon while you come and talk to me privately, or we will simply go through you. You won’t like that option. It ends with everyone on your side dead. Trust me, even if you do kill us, our first act will be to kill your horses, so you’ll lose the wagon and everything in it anyways. Take the wise path here.”

Taenya considered their chances. While Onas could probably hold his own against one of the bandits, he may not *win*. However, she believed he could keep one busy while the guards finished the rest off. That still left two bandits each. She winced. It did not look good.

She sighed, lifting her sword and shield into position. “Yeah, we’re going to have to decline. Run along now, and you will get to live.”

The smile the leader showed gave her only the answer she needed as she spurred her horse into motion. She rushed right toward the telv on the left of the orkun, hoping to at least limit the numbers her group would need to fight at once. The bandit leader leaped away with the

raithe. The telv tried, but he wasn't nearly quick enough. Just before he could jump away, Taenya leaned toward him and swung her sword as she passed. She did not get a clean hit but she managed to catch him across his shoulder, her blade cutting to the bone. He screamed as he fell, out of the fight, and thus, out of her mind for the time being. She turned just as she saw the orkun throw a javelin straight at her horse. She tried to pull on her horse to cause him to rear, but just as his front feet left the ground, the javelin caught him in his shoulder. With a squeal, her horse started falling to the side. Not wanting to get crushed, she leaped from the saddle, landing in a crash. Her sword and shield fell from her hands as the wind was knocked from her lungs.

She looked up and saw the other four bandits rush toward the wagon. Raafe had gotten off his horse and was moving to put himself next to the wagon's entrance at the rear. Keston had moved to the side of the wagon to the opposite side of Onas, keeping the merchant between himself and Raafe.

Taenya looked for her sword, seeing it far from where she currently was. Cursing, she ignored her shield, which had dropped just out of reach, and pulled out her longsword from the scabbard on her back. She swung at the approaching raithe to get him to move back, then immediately brought the sword up to block a downward swing from the bandit leader.

She thrust toward him, causing him to back off, and followed her thrust with a reverse cut toward the raithe, who caught it on his blade. She pulled back and immediately kicked out at the raithe, catching him in the knee. However, she had to block a diagonal slice from the orkun, while stepping back toward the wagon. The orkun was trying to overpower her with hard overhead attacks, while the raithe tried to keep her off balance and unable to press any opening she could take advantage of in either bandit's sloppy forms.

Their exchange continued; she was maybe seven meters from the wagon when she heard a yell from behind the wagon, one with a decidedly young pitch.

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Raafe was being pressed hard, he was barely managing to stay ahead of the two bandits attacking him. Keston was busy with one of the telv, while the Onas was acquitting himself well against the last. The problem in front of Raafe right now was the other orkun. He was doubtlessly the second in command of this group, which made sense, orkun were well known for their natural martial ability. This one wasn't *great* but it was enough that Raafe wasn't able to push them back while fighting both at the same time. He needed help.

Looking over to Keston, he yelled, "Hey! Need a little help over here!"

Keston responded, "I'm trying! Just hang on."

At which the orkun in front of him laughed, "You won't last long enough, whelp. I can tell you're tiring out. Give up now, and I'll give you a merciful death."

Raafe replied with his sword, catching the telv's arm in a superficial cut, causing the man to curse, while immediately flipping and swinging his blade back toward the orkun. The bandit managed to block, but he backed off, clearly not expecting the move.

He was about to press forward when he heard the wagon's rear door opening. *Oh no, don't come out!* His head turned slightly to look at the wagon, just as a little head emerged, eyes widening as she took in the sight in front of her.

"Raafe? What's happening?" Her brows furrowed as she took in the two bandits with swords. "Stop! Go away! You're going to hurt him!"

With the orkun back and pressing him, Raafe couldn't do much else, but he called out to her, "Gwyn! Go back inside, and lock the door! Now!"

Before the princess could go back, the telv turned away from Raafe and tried to get to her. "Come here, you!" He snarled.

Raafe panicked, he swung hard at the orkun, and even though his blow was blocked, it managed to push the bandit back enough. He immediately pivoted and lunged at the telv, catching him in the back. His blade plunged into the man, and he pulled it out to turn back to the orkun. He almost got his sword in place just as he felt a stabbing pain in his stomach.

He looked into the bandit's eyes as the man yanked out his sword and shoved him down to his knees. He turned his head toward Princess Gwyn, intent on calling out to her, but finding he couldn't. Coughing up blood, he turned back toward the man that would kill him.

"I told you whelp, you wouldn't last." The orkun sneered at him, raising his blade.

Raafe felt a wash of emotions, all the things he wanted to do. Everything he had promised himself. Protecting Gwyn. He had failed. Raafe Sarkas looked at the young girl one last time, with tears in his eyes, he forced himself to speak. "I'm sorry, milady. I—" he hesitated as he coughed. "—I failed you."

He looked back toward the orkun, intent on meeting his death with his head held high.

Raafe heard a shrill scream, "Nooo!"

Before he could react, he saw a ball of fire explode against the orkun's face. The flash was blinding, and when he could see again, the bandit was dead on the ground, his face partially melted.

Gwyn rushed over to him, getting in front of him to try and hold him up. He smiled at her as his eyes closed and he slumped forward onto her shoulder. The last thing he heard was the princess screaming his name.

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Taenya heard the Princess's sharp cry out of Raafe's name. Jarred, Taenya, and the two bandits she had been fighting turned toward the source. Seeing Raafe on the ground with the two bandits lying next to him, she hesitated.

The bandit leader did not. Looking at the raithe, he ordered, "Get that girl! I'll deal with this bitch."

Taenya's eyes went wide, the orkun reeled back for another powerful overhand swing as the raithe started running toward Gwyn. Taenya knew she had to stop him, and she quickly made a decision. As the orkun's swing came down, she dropped her sword while ducking under

his blade and getting closer to him. Her move completely surprised him and he was slow to react. She hit him as hard as possible with a palm strike aimed just under his chin, followed by a swift elbow to his jaw. *Should have aimed for the nose. Damn it.*

As the orkun fell backward, she turned toward the raithe, pulling her knife out and throwing it. The blade sailed through the air and Taenya realized she had completely missed where she had been aiming just as the blade embedded itself into the spine just below his neck. She immediately felt pain as the bandit leader struck her head from behind.

Falling forward, she caught herself and rolled to her back. Pulling her dagger from the sheath at her lower back, she looked up at the orkun as he stood above her. Glaring as he snarled down at her. “Bitch, you’re going to pay for all you’ve done. When I’m done, we’re going to take that little girl too. I bet she’ll make us plenty of money selling her off.”

She readied herself to try and fight him off, but then she heard a wail of pure terror followed by a scream, “Get away from her!” Taenya looked over towards Gwyn. She was standing protectively above Raafe, and not a moment later, the girl physically threw a ball of fire that was as big as her head from her bare hand. It shot toward the bandit leader, who had no chance to dodge it. He tried to cover his face with his hands, but the fire caught him right in the throat. His eyes went wide as the flame washed over him. Pressing his hands to the wound, he tried to hold together his melted throat, gurgling as he swayed. She saw him start to sag, and he fell with one last glazed-over look down at Taenya.

Everything in the area stopped. All fighting, talking, there was even a collective holding of breath as everyone looked at the little girl. A girl who held a hand up off to her side at chest level, with a ball of fire floating above it. A girl who was standing there with a look of pure anger. A look that said that dared anyone to try and hurt someone else she cared for.

Taenya got up and looked at the remaining two bandits that were slowly backing away from the group. “Drop your weapons. Now.”

The two telv complied and instantly turned and ran. Taenya let them. She looked over to Gwyn, just as the girl yelled out to her. “Taenya! Raafe needs help! Hurry! He’s hurt really bad!”

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Onas watched as Taenya rushed over to where Raafe was. He had seen the man get run through by the sword but was unable to do anything. He looked over to Keston, "Help her, I'll get the Princess and the wagon. We need to get to Larton!"

Keston looked at him, "Don't forget the tree!"

Onas looked over at the tree in question, it didn't look large. He should be able to do it. Looking at the princess, he got an idea. "Princess, I may need your help and your ... fire. We have to move this tree so we can get the wagon moving to the town. The quicker we can get there, the quicker we can help Raafe. You understand?"

Gwyn nodded, "Okay, Mr. Onas. We have to hurry. He's bleeding a lot. We have to save my friend."

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They were rushing along the road toward Larton and Onas's mind was reeling. Princess Gwyn quietly sobbed next to him, occasionally muttering to herself in that other language, interspersed with desperate pleas for him to go faster. He recognized the area and knew they would soon be reaching the fields that surrounded the town.

Just as the farms came into view, he heard Taenya call out from the back, "Onas! We need to hurry! Now!"

Onas yelled back, "We're almost there! Keep him stable and alert!"

It took another ten minutes, the whole time both him and the princess yelling for people to get off of the road, but they caught sight of the gate. Town guardsmen rushed out toward them on horseback.

When they neared, the lead rider turned and pushed his horse to keep up. He called out, "What's the emergency? What can we do?"

Onas appreciated their ability to read the situation. He yelled back, “Bandits! My guard took a sword to the stomach! He needs a surgeon!”

Nodding, the guard yelled back, “Follow us straight to the guard barracks! We have a surgeon on call!” They immediately rushed ahead of the wagon and yelled out, clearing the path.

They quickly arrived at the barracks right inside the gate. A team of guards rushed out with a stretcher and placed Raafe on it before dashing back inside with him. Keston ran inside with them.

Taenya walked up to him covered in blood, shaking her head. With tear-filled eyes, she looked at him. “Onas, I’m not sure—“

“Wait. Let the surgeons work. He’s a fighter.” He interrupted as he glanced at the princess who stood next to him, who looked up at them.

She was mumbling, trying to reassure herself. “He’s going to be okay. He promised. He has to teach me to be the greatest sword fighter ever. He’s going to be my knight.”

Taenya Shavyre and Onas Fenren looked at each other, their hearts dropping as they listened to the girl. Not knowing how to respond, Taenya just grabbed the girl and hugged her. The princess crying for the man, a man she had barely known, but one she called a friend.

One thing that was seared into his mind, was the look of the girl that had called forth the fires of the Father against those bandits. Fiends that only wished to raid and kill.

He looked over to the two as they held each other, Taenya unable to see the Princess’s face.

Onas felt both fear and awe as he watched Gwyn stare off in quiet introspection while in the telv’s embrace. For as she did, her irises burned, crackling and flaming like a red sun. The only thing that broke up the fires in her eyes were the eclipses that were her pupils.

A look that could only command respect and fear in those who may try to harm any she cared for.