

## Incidentally Intimidating

Ilyana walked next to Ser Taenya as they made their way to Onas Fenren's business. She had been tasked with acting as the knight's assistant as they prepared to leave for the capital. It was frustrating that she was unable to be there to assist the princess but saw it as a chance to increase her position within the House.

The princess herself was at the market with her friend, Lady Roslyn. It had irked Ilyana slightly that she and the ladies-in-waiting hadn't been able to foster a closer relationship with Princess Gwyn, at first. She had come to realize that there was no way such a relationship would hamper her own influence within the House. As the second-in-line to the Tiloran Duchy, Lady Roslyn was a powerful connection for the House to maintain.

It seemed that the princess, while not inconsiderate, had trouble relating to her two older ladies-in-waiting. *It was to be expected. I'm much older than her.* More and more her interactions with the terran were relegated to formal situations. *That* did irk her. She *wanted* to maintain a closer relationship with the girl. She had such an aura about her. Never mind the actual aura that seemed like a blizzard that the girl had learned to cast just this past week. Ilyana shivered as she remembered how cold the training field had become.

*I wish I could cast magic. Oh, the things I could do.* She could be casting spells side-by-side with Gwyn as they fought against scantily clad barbarians. Flaming balls of fire would rain down around them as Ilyana cast lightning from her fingertips. She smiled as she imagined the barbarians charging them with massive swords and axes with nothing but a loin cloth covering their—

“Lady Ilyana. We are here.”

She jerked from her reverie and lifted a hand to her face as she felt her cheeks heat up. “My apologies, Ser Taenya.”

The knight scrutinized her with a raised brow, but then just shook her head and opened the front doors for her. Ilyana nodded her thanks and walked in. The inside was as she remembered it, and it always amazed her how well off the Fenrens were. They may not be the largest merchant house within the duchy, but they were within the top five wealthiest.

The Fenrens were extremely wealthy and had connections throughout the duchy and into the surrounding nations. That the patriarch had staked his merchant house to the princess had been the deciding factor in her father's decision to pledge her to the rising House. He now only had to look at the soon-to-be Viscount of Larton to realize he had decided well.

Indeed, Baron Iemes had both the Fenrens and the princess to thank for his rising station. She had heard rumors of all that the baron had invested into the House and agreed that

such political gambling had paid itself tenfold. House Reinhart's gains from the Telford Fiasco alone spoke to that.

The man himself was waiting for them as they entered the lobby. The shrewd businessman was dressed impeccably in a bright blue tunic that seemed to be made of silk. He looked more like a noble than a commoner; a fact that constantly warred with her sense of self. *When does the nobility no longer matter if even the commoners can gain more wealth and influence than us?*

"Taenya! Welcome, my friend," Onas Fenren said.

"Hello, Onas. How are you?" Taenya asked, adopting a kind tone and an affable smile.

"I am well!" He grinned. "What brings you here, today? With Lady Ilyana, as well, I see."

Taenya smirked. "You know why I am here, Onas. Have you managed to fill the list Siveril sent?"

"Yes, of course. You know me. Also, it's good you're here, now. I expected you later," he said.

Taenya tilted her head and then slowly asked, "We were in the area. Why?"

"I have to meet with someone about the other item we were hoping to obtain. You joining me will help," he explained.

The knight straightened. "Do they have it?"

Onas nodded. "Yes, and is asking an obscene amount of coin. Your joining will help me negotiate from a better position. Lady Ilyana will just be icing on the cake."

Ser Taenya sighed before giving the merchant a curt nod. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

"Good!"

"I'm not your intimidator anymore, Onas..."

"Yeah, yeah. Now you're the Princess' intimidator. *Everyone* has heard about your duel."

Ilyana's eyes widened. *That* duel was still the talk of the House. The knight had literally challenged a marquess in a duel to the death. She then went and killed his only heir by cutting off his head *and* managed to incinerate a guard with a magical item the princess had given her. Since then, the House guards remained on alert for any reprisals. Ilyana wasn't even allowed to go anywhere without a guard attending her.

It was only a bit unnerving.

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Taenya emerged from the House Reinhart carriage in the port district with Ilyana in tow. Onas' new head guard stood next to another guard off to the side and waited for her and Lady Ilyana. Wailant was a sun elf she knew and one that had been with Onas' family and company for many years. The only reason Taenya had gained the position over him many years ago was that she was more willing to travel with Onas on his annual route. *Former... yearly route. Talani shut that down.*

That same man and all of the other guards kept sneaking peeks at her when they thought she wasn't looking. While she wasn't wearing her full armor, she *was* wearing enough to protect her in case of any attacks. She basically wore the same thing the other House guards wore, except she didn't wear gear with the expectation of using a spear and shield. She did wear her sword and board, though. Her pauldrons were exquisitely decorated with the dragons of the House as well. *I am certainly glad they aren't real. Despite the objections of a certain princess.*

"Ser Taenya," the man nodded at her as she and Ilyana stepped up to the group. She nodded before glancing back, satisfied as the two House guards stepped from the sides of the carriage and neatly fell into step behind them.

She looked over at Onas and narrowed her eyes. "Where are we going, Onas?"

"Just down here. There is a warehouse that sells temporary space to merchants from Maireharbora. He is meeting us there." He turned and started walking down an alley, his head guard moving behind him. Taenya gestured with her head to her people and followed along. The port district was right next to the merchant district of the city and was filled with warehouses and other storage facilities next to the riverfront.

Ilyana looked around before leaning close to Taenya. "Ser Taenya, is this... legal?" she whispered.

Taenya turned, her brow raising at the girl. "Yes, of course, it is. Why wouldn't it be?"

"This all seems really... shady."

She snorted. "It's fine. These types of deals are common. Especially with rare merchandise. It's always a big production and merchants tend to bring the biggest, baddest guard they can to try and intimidate the other."

"Are—are we going to have to fight?"

Remembering what the girl liked to do in her free time, she said, "Lady Ilyana, I do believe you have been reading those books a bit much."

Ilyana's eyes went wide and she mumbled under her breath. "*I thought I kept it secret.*"

Shaking her head, Taenya followed the merchant as they made their way through a second alleyway. It wasn't much further before they reached a particularly worn-down warehouse.

"Onas..."

The man turned slightly and shrugged. "It's fine. The man already had to spend money to travel all the way here. It's likely a coin-saving measure."

Taenya sighed.

The building wasn't *quite* falling apart but it definitely had seen better days. There was a pair of double doors that looked like they would fall off of their hinges at the slightest gust. The roof was made of thatch about two years past needing replaced. The only thing that looked serviceable was the large double doors for wagons.

Onas's head guard walked up and banged on the door three times before stepping back, hand resting on his sword's pommel. Three heartbeats later, the door opened and a big orkun stepped out. "What?"

"We're here to see Stoval. He's expecting us," Onas said.

The man's gaze flicked over Onas and his guards before pausing on Taenya and her group. His eyes widened fractionally before setting into a scowl. "Who's this?"

Taenya stepped forward. "I am Ser Taenya Shavyre of House Reinhart. Onas is one of my liege's retainers. I am here to ensure any deal made is done honorably," she stated.

The man's eyes narrowed further as he looked her over. Finally, he simply nodded before turning and opening the door. Wailant ordered all of Onas' guards to remain outside, and after a gesture, one of Taenya's joined them. The group followed the orkun into the warehouse and Taenya was surprised at how organized it was. Mind you, the structure was by no means better inside than out. However, the operation of those who utilized it was not as shoddy as the building.

There seemed to be four different merchant groups set up inside, with the guard they followed leading them to the area in the back right of the warehouse. There were five more guards present that stood around several crates and a single wagon. A flamboyant moon elf, in a long coat that fell to below knees and a colorful hat, stood with his hands on his hips. The guard that led them in walked over and spoke in the man's ear for a moment that caused the merchant... Stoval to scowl.

"Onas Fenren. This is not what we agreed upon. You did not mention anything about a noble House," he said.

“Stoval, friend. Surely you know better. When the House has an interest in something, they pursue it. She will not interfere with our business unless you give her cause. This is all above board, so of course, that wouldn’t happen. Right?”

The man hesitated and glanced at Taenya. She smirked slightly. His brows scrunched together but then he sighed. “Yes. Of course, of course. You know how it is. People tend to try and change deals last minute.”

“Oh, trust me. I am well aware. Do you have what you promised?”

“I do, over here,” he said and gestured to the side where an elaborate wooden chest was set up. It was glossy, had gold embellishments and hardware, and was completely unnecessary. The moon elf pulled a key out of his coat and opened a lock on the front of the chest. He paused, glanced at Onas one more time then opened the lid and reached in. A small box was retrieved that had a similar glossy sheen to it as the chest. He turned and walked to a table set up next to the crates and set the box down.

Onas and Taenya stepped forward and she looked down at the box. Stoval opened the box, revealing a silver ring. There was a single diamond that was interestingly set flush into the band, the more interesting feature of the ring though was the strange glowing... runes... etched into the band on either side of the diamond. The four symbols of a language she had never seen emitted a soft blue light which proved one thing... *This is going to be ridiculously expensive.*

Onas reached down to grab the ring but the box was shut by the moon elf just before he was able to touch it. “No. You may look,” Stoval said.

“That isn’t how this works, Stoval.”

“It is with this, Mr. Fenren. One hundred gold and you may touch it all you like.”

Onas choked. “O-One hundred? That’s enough to fund a noble House itself!”

The man picked up the box back and narrowed his eyes. “This is *one of a kind* in Avira. I have the supply and there is *plenty* of demand.”

Onas recovered from his initial shock and fired back. “I *know* you did not purchase the ring for one hundred gold. That *is* against the law.”

The merchant’s guards all took a step forward and placed their hands on their weapons. Stoval raised a hand, chuckling. “You can claim whatever you wish. The fact is, you are not getting this *magical* ring without paying. I do not *have* to sell to you. So, are you attempting to steal from me? Because anything less than what I am charging is theft.”

Onas scowled and crossed his arms. “You will *never* sell another thing in the duchy, again,” he sneered.

“You—”

Taenya sighed exaggeratedly, causing the moon elf to pause and look at her. She placed a hand on Onas’ shoulder and gently pulled him back. *Time to take a page from Gwyn’s book.* She focused and channeled magic into her fist, causing her hand to glow with a red mist. She was sure her eyes were shining as well as she slammed the glowing gauntlet onto the table with her **Empowered Strike**. The table shattered beneath her hit, causing everyone around to jump back in surprise. Taenya raised her hand and pointed at the merchant. “I told your guard that I was here to ensure any deal remained honorable. *Let me see the ring.*”

The moon elf’s guards started to draw their blades but Taenya channeled more magic and drew her blade and had it against the nearest guard’s neck before any of them managed to get theirs more than halfway. She narrowed her eyes and swept her gaze over the guards. “*Do not.*”

Taenya slowly withdrew her sword and then returned it to its scabbard. With one more pointed look at the guards, she reached out her hand to the moon elf. The man had wide eyes and was shaking, but he dropped the box into her palm. She nodded at him. “Thank you.”

She opened the box and pulled out the ring. Examining it, Taenya frowned when she realized it would be too big. Setting it back into the box, she took off a gauntlet and handed it to Onas. Taenya picked the ring back up and slipped it onto her index finger wiggling the oversized ring around as it settled onto the digit. She felt movement and her breath hitched when the ring slowly shrunk until it fit perfectly.

Taenya glanced up with slightly widened eyes at Stoval and then Onas who were both transfixed. The moon elf didn’t say anything but had a noticeable scowl on his face.

Onas searched her face questioningly. “Do you feel anything?”

She shrugged but then tried channeling magic *into* the ring and gasped when she felt a surge of magic rushing to her. It suddenly felt as if her ability to use magic were stronger.

“Taenya...”

She looked up at Onas. “What?”

“Your eyes.”

She squinted and gestured for him to continue.

“They’re... glowing red.”

She looked back down and let go of her magic, feeling the connection dissipate to nothing, again. Glancing at the moon elf’s guards, they satisfyingly took a collective step back and she smirked at the fearful expressions on their faces.

With a nod, she took the ring off, placed it back into the box, and then looked up at Stoval. “We will take it.” She turned to Onas. “How much were you prepared to give him?”

“Ten gold.”

Stoval opened his mouth, but Taenya raised a hand. Without looking at Onas, she said, “Pay him twenty, Onas. We’ll take it.” She narrowed her eyes at the moon elf. “Unless you have an objection?”

“Ye—No. No, I do not,” he replied contemptuously.

“Good. Take the money and leave the city. You will not attempt to defraud anyone in Strathmore, again. Her Highness will appreciate the business.”

Stoval’s eyes widened. “H-Her Highness?”

“Did you not do your research before attempting to swindle Fenren Merchant House? They have pledged fealty to Her Highness, Princess Gwyneth of House Reinhart.”

The moon elf paled.

Taenya smirked before continuing, “Also known as the dragon princess.”

*Good. Gwyn’s going to love the ring, incidental intimidation notwithstanding.*