

Road to Larton

Even after Mana reverberated throughout the world, it took some time before the denizens of Eona realized all that it could accomplish. The discovery of the First Mage created widespread political scrambling over the new status quo and potential. Their origin and heritage was only marginally contested, mainly because all wished to bring the Mage into their sphere. It is believed that the nobility at the time simply wanted any reason to solidify their own standing within society. Acknowledging the status of the Mage was wholly self-serving, even if the benefits it would later provide the First One were profound.

- *A History of Mana. 184 SA*

Taeyna Shavyre had seen nobility, of course, however, she had only had the opportunity to meet and speak with one, once. Onas had brought her along to meet a local lord, the man had been barely a baron on her first route with him. The baron had recently been elevated to the peerage based on services rendered to the kingdom and wanted to establish a more stable trade route within his domain. Onas had managed to come out of that meeting with a much more profitable route than he had expected. One that catapulted the Fenren Merchant House into one of the larger houses in the region.

Onas established a branch of his merchant house within Larton and set up routes for other merchants under his employ. That Onas still performed a route himself while his wife maintained his primary storefront was admirable. Keen on maintaining connections with village and town heads, local knights, or even nobility, he made the most of the circuit that he did once a year. These connections had brought him and the lower nobles he had relations with incredible wealth. His friendship with Baron Iemes had been a foregone conclusion, both men were charismatic to a fault, and hit it off almost immediately when the baron had invited Onas into his small castle hall to discuss a joint venture. Which was why they were heading to Larton now.

Taeyna glanced over at Gwyn... Princess Gwyn again. Raafe sat on the driver's bench for the wagon with Princess Gwyn by his side. Keston was riding the sun elf's horse along the other side of the wagon while Onas sat inside the wagon looking over his books to prepare for Larton.

Taenya knew she should be focusing more on her surroundings, but she had to admit that she was enamored that an actual princess was with them. *And she seemed so normal.* Not anything like she had imagined. She loved that, it made her fantasize about being in such a position. *Maybe that's just how princesses are in the young royal's world though.*

The head guard listened in after she heard Raafe and Princess Gwyn laugh, "Mr. Raafe! That's not nice! Mr. Keston is really kind. You shouldn't make fun of him like that."

"But your highness! If I do not keep Keston on the ground, I fear all the compliments you give him will make him float away!" Raafe teased.

Gwyn giggled, "That's not how it works, silly!"

After a moment, the princess spoke up, "Do you think we'll find my mom in Larton?"

Raafe patted the girl's shoulder, "I don't know milady. If not, I'm sure we can find more information when we arrive back at Strathmore. The city has all sorts of people that should be able to help! Mr. Onas has plenty of connections, I have no doubt he'll be able to come up with a plan to locate your mother. At the very least, I believe we can get a lead."

Gwyn nodded, "I hope so. I really miss her. You think she's okay, right?"

Raafe wrapped his arm around the girl, "I'm sure of it. From what you've told me, your mother is a strong woman. She will be looking for you, while we look for her. If we're lucky, we'll meet somewhere in the middle."

Taenya was completely surprised at the level of familiarity they'd shown just after a bit over a week. The trip was only minimally delayed from its original timeline. She had thought she, herself, was good with children, but the level of empathy and understanding Raafe had shown genuinely impressed her.

Keston sped up a bit to pull alongside the two. "Princess, is Raafe talking about me again?" He asked with a smile on his face.

The girl looked between the two, "Oh no. Nuh-uh. You two won't get me in the middle of this. I'm Switzerland."

Raafe laughed as Keston continued, chuckling. “While I don’t know what Switzerland means, I can guess.” Looking to Raafe, he feigned hurt. “I’m disappointed Raafe, you turned my best cooking friend against me.” He said playfully.

“I would never! The princess has determined that you are the Royal Chef, while I am the Captain of the Royal Guard.” He replied in between laughs. “Plus, we know Her Highness loves to show us more about food than anything about martial prowess.” Looking at the royal in question, “Don’t worry milady, I’ll make a swordswoman of you yet!”

Gwyn’s eyes sparkled with excitement as she responded, “You promise? I can’t wait to kick your butt with a sword.”

“I promise milady!” Raafe managed to respond through his laughter, Taeyna chuckling to herself as well as admiring the determination and surety that poured forth from the girl.

Taeyna looked up at the sky, trying to ascertain how much longer they had until needing to set up camp. She looked around, then at the others. “Keston, let’s find a place to make camp. We’ll continue in the morning, and reach Larton by nightfall. Perhaps Raafe and Her Highness can practice their swordsmanship.”

* * *

Onas stepped out of the wagon as they stopped for camp. Taeyna and Keston were busy setting up the campfire. Meanwhile, Raafe was off to the side with Princess Gwyn showing her how to stand properly with her sword. Onas had allowed his sun elf guard to offer the young girl a training blade that was within his stock. He always kept a few on hand to sell to the children of knights or nobility.

He walked over to those two first, intent on greeting the princess. Onas thought back to the conversation when she had brought up being a princess. He had, of course, asked more questions just to ensure the child wasn’t playing a game. Every young girl pretends to be a princess. But no, he was thoroughly convinced. Especially after she described the size of her home and how her mother was constantly in meetings with important clients and telling them what to do. She spoke of the gated school that she attended. How she had private tutors and

people to clean her home and cook food for her. All of the little details that spoke to someone of influence.

One thing that had stood out though, was the hesitation that Gwyn seemed to show when he had asked about her father. He assumed it was because she had only been with her mother when they had been brought to Ikios. Onas presumed she was likely upset over the potential of never seeing him again.

Princess Gwyn turned as he walked up, “Hi, Mr. Onas! Are you done with your work?”

He gave her a small bow, as one should to a foreign noble. “I am at a stopping point, Your Highness. I wanted to come and see if you needed anything.”

She shook her head, “Nope! I’m good. Mr. Raafe is teaching me how to fight with a sword. It’s really cool!”

“Her Highness takes to the sword quite well, Master Onas. She is a very tenacious young lady.”

Princess Gwyn smiled as she took in the compliment. Onas couldn’t help but smile, Raafe was more than earning his keep with how he had taken a role in looking after the royal child. “As one would expect of such a prodigious child.” Looking to the girl, he added. “Your Highness, when we arrive in Larton tomorrow, we will meet with Baron Iemes. He is a trusted acquaintance that I have worked with for many years now.”

“I will help, Mr. Onas, but I’m not sure what you want me to do.” The girl replied hesitantly.

“Fret not, Baron Iemes is the perfect choice for you to meet the nobility of Avira. He will help us determine what will be needed to establish your status. He is a very nice man, and he has two children around your age, Lady Ryia, who is ten, and Lady Arlette, who is eight.” He explained, hoping to ease her nervousness.

Onas still couldn’t believe the princess was only nine, based on her height and speech he would have guessed eleven or twelve, at least.

He looked to Raafe, “I think it may be time to get ready for dinner, Raafe. Her Highness must be hungry.”

Gwyn perked up, "I am! Oh, and tonight I get to help Mr. Keston cook! Thank you, Mr. Raafe for helping me learn how to use a sword." She said as she reached out to hand Raafe her sword and made to take off her scabbard.

Raafe crossed his arms, "Milady, it's your blade now. Please, wear it with pride. It's a beautiful training sword."

Onas agreed, he had made sure that she had received the best looking of the selection.

Gwyn looked sheepish, "Sorry, Mr. Raafe! It's my first sword, I will remember. Thank you!" She placed the sword in its scabbard at her hip and started toward the campfire where Taenya was.

Raafe stepped next to Onas as they watched the girl walk away. "That girl is going to bring a lot of trouble, boss. Are you sure you can handle it? I mean no disrespect, but you're not exactly a large name."

Onas rubbed his hand through his hair, "You're not wrong Raafe. However, this has the potential to add a lot of clout to the house. We'll have a more firm idea after we meet with the Baron."

Raafe nodded, "I hope so boss, but one thing's for sure. That girl knows exactly what she's doing. I'll make sure she stays safe until we can figure something out or until we find her mother." He scoffed, "Or... until her mother finds *us*. If the nine-year-old daughter can mobilize the four of us to help her, I wonder just who her mother has levied on her side."

Onas thought for a second, "I wonder, indeed."

* * *

Raafe was on his horse, riding a bit ahead of Taenya and the wagon, Keston back to driving with Onas at his side. Princess Gwyn was inside the wagon resting, she had stayed up late telling them stories of her world. The girl had charmed the group, and Raafe was not afraid to admit it. There was something about her; the group had discussed it while she slept one night.

Her very presence seemed to have a... weight to it. Almost, as if the Mother World herself acknowledged the princess's very presence. He had never been around royalty, he was just the son of a soldier, not even a soldier himself. Perhaps they all had the same bearing and poise.

As he kept an eye on his surroundings, he considered the future. The princess would need protection. Even if it wouldn't be reasonable to simply go out and search for the girl's mother, she would need people near her just within Strathmore.

It was proper for nobles to have a personal guard. Maybe he could request to fill this role for her, he didn't think Onas would mind. He would likely want to protect the girl himself, not just out of being the good man that he was, but to protect the investment the princess would inevitably become. Even with the best interests in mind, Onas would have to protect and justify having the princess around.

Nobles would happily swoop in to try and take the girl away, just so they could marry her to some heir somewhere only to have the prestige of their house having a princess attached to it. It disgusted Raafe how the nobility treated their own blood as something to be bartered and traded away.

They continued toward Larton at a reasonable pace, thinking they should be able to arrive by that evening. Taenya was back in her ever-stoic persona. Having the girl around seemed to soften the woman a bit. Not that he was complaining, it was definitely a positive development. He liked Taenya and Keston, they were good people, and anything to improve his work environment he was keen on.

He was mulling over the future when he came around a bend in the road to see a tree had fallen onto the road. He stopped, turning to let the group catch up. He called out to Taenya, "There's an obstruction ahead. A tree fell across the road."