

## Honor

Taenya guided Gwyn to the room where Raafe lay. Arriving at the door, she held the princess back, turning her as Taenya crouched down to speak to her.

“Gwyn, you do not have to see him like this, but this is the time to say your goodbyes if you so wish. I will be right with you, if you want to leave, just tug on my hand. You don’t even need to say anything. Alright?”

“Okay.” She said with a whisper.

Steeling her nerves, for Gwyn’s sake, Taenya slowly opened the door and walked in while holding the nine-year-old’s hand.

Keston was standing off to the side, expecting them. He would be there for anything they needed, and he also had the gift that Raafe had asked them to set aside for the princess.

Taenya knew the exact moment Gwyn saw Raafe when she heard the girl attempt and fail to choke back a sob.

She watched as Gwyn rushed over to Raafe and stood next to him, placing her hand on the bed. Staring, as if expecting him to wake up. Thankfully, the town surgeon had cleaned Raafe up and made him presentable.

Taenya moved over and behind the girl, placing a hand on her shoulder. Looking down at her fellow guard who had died protecting a child he had barely known. He maintained the same peaceful look in death as he did in his final moments. Raafe had told them that he didn’t regret his actions—the girl was worth it, he said—someone special.

He had even made Onas promise not to let anyone take her away.

Taenya just stood there and waited. She was letting the girl grieve when she eventually started to whimper followed shortly later by finally allowing herself to weep freely.

They stayed like that for a while, Keston and Taenya respectfully giving the girl all the time she needed. When Gwyn tugged on her hand, she brought the girl out of the room with Keston following closely behind.

Choosing to speak after the door was closed, he stated, “Your Highness, I understand this is a difficult moment, but Raafe asked us to present something to you after you had visited him.”

Gwyn turned and looked up at him with tear-filled eyes. “He did?”

Taenya nodded. “Yes, he wished to bequeath you a legacy of his. An heirloom of his family’s that he felt you would honor.”

Gwyn nodded. “I will. What is it?”

Kneeling, Keston unwrapped Raafe’s saber and presented it to Gwyn. Taking a moment to gather himself, he began. “Your Highness, Princess Gwyneth, I present to you Raafe’s Legacy. A cavalry saber that was bestowed to his Grandfather by the Duke of Tiloral to recognize him for services rendered. Raafe was very honored that he would get the chance to teach you the blade. The effort and desire to learn you exhibited during his sessions made him very proud.”

Gwyn just nodded again, her tears were beginning to well in her eyes. Slowly, she reached out, grasping the hilt with one hand while she placed her other below the blade.

Sniffing, she spoke. “It’s really pretty. Raafe was so good with it. It’s still big for me though.” She looked to Taenya and asked, “Could you please help me keep it safe? I can’t use it yet, but I have to take care of it.”

Taenya placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “I would be honored to teach you how to care for a blade properly. Especially one as beautiful and functional as this. “

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Three days later, Onas had met with the people that were needed to prepare Raafe for transportation to his family back in Strathmore so that they could lay him to rest in their own way. Raafe wasn’t the first guard he had lost in his travels, and while it was never easy, he—with

Taenya's assistance—had come up with a process to ensure the families of the deceased were taken care of. He would send the amount Raafe would have earned from this trip plus an additional amount as Onas's way to contribute to the family. He had written a letter the night prior, and prepared Raafe's personal effects. Onas would personally deliver it all to the parents when he returned to the city.

They would leave in a day or two, but first, he needed to meet with Baron Iemes. After allowing them the customary time to handle their affairs due to Raafe's passing, the baron had requested their attendance for dinner. It was why he and Princess Gwyn were currently riding in a carriage to the baron's castle. Taenya was sitting with the driver, she would meet with the baron's men and prepare things.

As they arrived at the castle, Onas saw that the baron and his small group of knights were already in the courtyard. The carriage stopped at a respectful distance and Onas watched through the window as Taenya got down from the front and walked to meet with the head knight.

The man was a sun elf, his dark brown skin and yellow eyes matching the burgundy and gold colors of the baron's house so well, that it was almost as if the baron had chosen the colors just for the man. His hair was pulled into a bun on the back of his head and his ears were decorated with five loop earrings lined toward the points of his ears. Finally, the only armor he wore was a beautifully engraved breastplate over some fine clothes and had a curved blade attached to his hip.

His head guard spoke with the baron's lead knight after a short bow as expected by a commoner to a low noble. After a brief discussion, the knight's head snapped toward the carriage and then he quickly turned and walked toward his lord. Onas watched as the baron spoke with the knight, followed by the knight gesturing Taenya over.

Onas looked to Gwyn, "I think they're trying to determine how to greet and host you, Princess."

Gwyn scooted to the edge of her seat so that she could see out of the window. "Are those the knights you told me about? Why aren't they wearing knight armor? There are only five. I thought there would be more."

Onas chuckled, “They are just wearing the armor that is more comfortable to use around their hold. They have other armor as well.”

Gwyn considered, “That makes sense I suppose. Other armor would be heavy, I wouldn’t like wearing it all the time. Why are there only five, oh and there are two girl knights! That’s so cool.”

Onas smiled, “Lord Iemes has around eleven knights total, the others are likely doing other duties. Other nobles may have more sworn to them, Your Highness. However, most nobles will have even more men-at-arms under their service. A knight is a more social rank and is the lowest form of nobility, whereas a man, *or woman*, at arms will fill a more martial role and can be a noble or not.”

“What is the difference between a knight and a guard?” Gwyn asked.

“A knight can be of two different distinctions. One, they can be from an Order; these knights are sworn to a higher calling or role and work for the benefit of their cause or nation as a whole. The second is that a knight can be sworn to a lord. These knights are typically given land and will be the elite fighters of a lord. They will also advise the lord in his governance, or even take on some of that responsibility across his domain. These knights are a part of the lord’s House itself and, as such, are seen as extensions of the lord.

“Men-at-arms are professional soldiers that inhabit a lord’s garrison. They aren’t all knights, but all knights will be a man or woman-at-arms. These soldiers are the backbone of any good army. They are far better equipped and trained than simple militia.

“Finally, to answer your question, guards are simply that. They are men or women of different skills that perform a protection role. Whether it is the house guard of a lord, which will focus on protecting the lord’s domicile or specific holdings, or the town guard that focuses on protecting a town. They will do this either from external threats or just by preventing and investigating crime within a town or city. Lastly, we have private guards—like Taenya, Raafe, and Keston—this type of guard is hired by people like me who need strong and brave people to protect either us or our belongings. Do this help?”

“Oh. I didn’t know that. Yes, it does. Thank you.” Gwyn paused for a moment, then added. “Raafe was going to be my knight...” she trailed off.

Onas didn't respond, letting the girl have her thoughts. Taenya finished her discussion with the Baron and then started walking toward the carriage—the Baron and his knights coming behind her. Taenya waited by the door as the knights aligned themselves on either side of the door, two to a side with the lead knight standing at his lord's side.

Nodding, Taenya opened the door and stuck her head in, and addressed them, “They want to greet Her Highness formally. Onas you will exit first, Gwyn you will count to five then exit next. Onas and I will follow behind you to the baron. Walk to him in a straight line, centered between the knights. Don't pause. Only nod your head, he will talk first. Just like we practiced, alright?”

Gwyn straightened out the dress that Onas provided her. He had sent Taenya with a coin purse to get obtain the nicest she could find for the Princess. The dress was a dark blue with buttons going down the entire front. It was of a heavier material and was meant to be worn over a lighter dress. It had a high collar and long sleeves that flared out—which should allow her to use her magic easily enough. It had silver flames embroidered along the bottom edge and followed up the centerline. Underneath, she wore a thinner, black dress that ended at her neckline. She wore quality leather traveler's boots meant for a noble that had three silver buttons for closure.

The outfit had cost a decent amount, but Onas knew it was an investment. Proving his house could support the lifestyle expected of royalty would be quite difficult, especially once word of Gwyn's existence came out.

The Princess slowly nodded, committing the instructions to memory. “Okay, got it. I can do this.”

Onas stepped out of the carriage and moved to the side while Taenya turned and addressed Baron Iemes as Gwyn moved to the open carriage door, “Presenting, Her Royal Highness, Princess Gwyneth Reinhart of Italy and America.”

Gwyn slowly stepped down to the ground with Taenya's assistance and moved in front of them. With a quick glance to ensure Onas and Taenya were prepared, she marched forward toward Baron Iemes. Onas could tell she struggled to not look at the knights as she passed, but she undoubtedly gave the lead knight a once over before facing the baron. Onas and Taenya stopped a few steps behind her, allowing her to greet him.

With a slight nod, while Taenya and Onas gave a bow, exactly as practiced, she greeted the Lord of Larton, “Greetings, Baron Iemes, thank you for the courtesy of your invitation and for allowing Mr. Onas the time to handle the affairs of his brave guard that gave his life protecting my own.”

*She forgot to let him speak first.* Onas still smiled, She had recited the rest of the practiced greeting perfectly. Taenya and Onas stepped forward as the high elf baron smiled. His short blonde hair, goatee, and mustache were all trimmed and styled to perfection. His long tunic was embroidered with golden embellishments and the burgundy dye of the fabric was vibrant and not faded at all. He had a short ceremonial blade attached to his right hip that he rested his hand on.

He brought his hands together and clasped them in front of himself and addressed the princess, “Your Highness, I regret that I was not made aware of your arrival, however, given the circumstances that surrounded the day you were due to arrive, it is completely understandable. I must say that I am appalled that bandits would prey on travelers so close to our humble town. As soon as I heard, I tasked Ser Grisom here with dispatching teams of our town guard out to scour my lands for any sign of more. As lord of this fief, you have my promise, that not a single bandit will draw breath much longer.

“That said, I humbly welcome you to my home. I hope our quaint abode shall meet your expectations, Your Highness. We shall bring out our finest for dinner. Perhaps we can discuss more of your travels and those of my good friend, Onas.”

Gwyn nodded slowly, almost forcibly, she was reaching the extent of what they had practiced. Onas realized that she was going to have to start improvising.

“Thank you, Baron Iemes. Your castle is amazing, no one builds castles anymore where I live. They’re all really old and worn down.” Gwyn explained.

The baron looked a bit surprised but maintained his composure well, he glanced at Onas who gave a small nod to his friend.

Baron Iemes smiled and looked at the merchant, “Onas my old friend! How are you? I am terribly sorry about your guard. We will send something with you for the man’s family. This happened on my lands, and I am incensed at the matter.”

Onas smiled back, "I am well my lord. I am just happy we are finally here in Larton. The trip here was a tense affair. My people and the princess herself handled themselves admirably."

The baron's knight, Ser Grisom, chose that moment to speak up, "I have heard the report," looking to Taenya he continued, "to face nine bandits as just three guards and win despite regrettable loss is beyond commendable. I would be honored to have any of you within our number."

Taenya gave a curt nod. "I am honored, milord. Thank you, I will say that the princess herself was the reason we survived. Her actions were definitive in the resolution to the combat, but perhaps that is something we can all speak on later."

Iemes took the cue, "Of course, of course! Your Highness, my apologies, please follow me inside, we will relax and speak while dinner is prepared."