

Avoiding Delays

"Taenya."

The telv knight stirred in her bed, ignoring the voice calling out to her.

"Taenya. Wake up," the voice hissed. Closer this time.

Taenya opened her eyes and looked at her friend's face which was nearly touching hers. She groaned. "What is it, Sabina?"

"Get up."

Taenya lifted her head enough to look past Sabina at the window, seeing nothing except darkness.

"Why? It's still night, and why are you in my room?"

"I have a bad feeling. I think... I think we need to leave as soon as possible," the high elf stated seriously. That yanked Taenya free of any last vestiges of sleep, and she sat up.

"What is wrong?"

Sabina stood up from her crouched position and went over to the oil lamp, lighting and turning it up. The elf turned around. "I do not know. I just have a feeling that we need to move."

Taenya nodded. She trusted her friend, and whether it was wrong or not, did not matter. If the woman was just being paranoid, well they added more time to get further.

"Let's get everyone up. Do you want to deal with a grumpy princess or should I?"

Sabina sniffed in response. "I don't want to be the bad guy, so please feel free."

The knight-captain of House Reinhart rolled her eyes. "Fine. Have Oren get the guards ready and you get the others."

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Taenya yawned as she looked around the caravan from atop her horse. The first rays of the morning were coming up above the horizon and they had already been on the road for easily a bell or two. Her guards were quiet, but alert and the distant sounds of birds or the occasional snort from the horses were the only noises coming from the Caravan.

She knew that most of the passengers were asleep again in the carriages, although she caught small flashes of light coming from the one in which Gwyn resided. *The girl is practicing her magic early.*

Who was she kidding, nearly every waking moment that didn't involve duties saw the girl either with her nose in another book or improving her magic.

Sabina rode ahead, her paranoia from before keeping the woman focused. The telltale signs of the woman's magic emanating from where she rode. Two of the Wynvers rode alongside her as silent protectors. The elf had jerked her head several times as if reacting to feelings, but soon after she had refocused ahead of her. Taenya had asked after the first time, but Sabina had just waved her off, telling her she would alert the group at the first sign of trouble.

An inability to predict or to give enough warning of the attack on the manor had sat uneasily with her friend.

The caravan continued moving along the road, and as the sun started to rise, the conversations began. They broke for breakfast soon after that. It was a quick thing, simply some porridge one of the servants made for the group. While the food wasn't bad, it wasn't something fantastic or even really fitting for a princess. Gwyn though had made it seem like the perfect breakfast with how much she had eaten and thanked the chef.

Taenya smiled knowingly. The girl was simply starving from her magic training. She was aware that Gwyn had been working more on control, rather than large and flashy spells. The princess had confided that the process itself was frustrating and took more out of her. She had also encouraged Taenya to work at it. Something the knight had taken to heart. *I can't let a child constantly outdo me.*

They were currently on the way to the final town before the pass, a small town called Mardale. It was also where she expected to meet the paladin, Amari.

Turning her head as she heard a horse coming alongside her, she looked over to see Oren approach. "Ser Taenya?"

"Yes, Oren?"

“I would like to request that we use the spare time we will have in Mardale to rest, instead of immediately moving on. I believe it would be prudent for everyone to be at their best before we enter the pass, Ser.”

She nodded. “I agree. While I doubt there will be an incursion, it does help to be ready.”

He glanced to the side. “Not just the Valeni, Ser Taenya. We were talking this morning, and we believe the entrance to the pass may be the most likely place to—”

“To arms!”

Taenya’s head jerked toward Sabina who was in mid-turn. The woman’s eyes were pure black and filled with alarm.

Taenya looked at Oren. “It seems that the pass was too obvious. Get archers onto the carriages. Have them tie themselves down.”

The man nodded. “Understood.”

As he rode off, she turned to the approaching Sabina. “What is it?”

“Riders. I make at least twenty.”

“Where?” Taenya asked as she searched the still-dim morning light.

“They will be coming from behind that hill rise shortly.”

Sure enough, a group of horses came trotting from around the distant hill in formation. The force itself numbered closer to forty than twenty. The caravan hadn’t been spotted yet, but Taenya was wary. The guards were already moving to get ready. They hadn’t identified the force yet, but Taenya knew that cavalry didn’t just move on a whim and the last she knew, the duchy wasn’t relocating any of its soldiers.

Taenya quietly called for the caravan to move slower, and hopefully quieter. She knew it was a long shot because carriages, wagons, and animals were anything but. Sure enough, it was not long until they were spotted.

She called out to the guards, *“Prepare yourselves!”* Looking over at the four guards that had tied themselves down to the top of the carriages, she was satisfied that they had set shields up that they could hide behind if needed.

Oren shouted orders to the archers, *“Do not fire unless you hear me or Ser Taenya call the command! This could be nothing.”*

Taenya nodded. No matter how much she believed otherwise, it was good to keep everyone focused on potential outcomes. If she *was* wrong, it would not do her House service to have an archer fire at an innocent man-at-arms.

The column of horses turned and started riding over the field of grass that lay between them directly toward the caravan. The morning light was still somewhat dim, so she was unable to make out any details of the group, but it was clear that they all had similar armor. Luckily, it did not seem like the full plate of knights such as what she and Sabina wore.

“Let’s move!” she called out and started picking up the pace. The carriages and wagons started bouncing and Taenya swore she heard a shriek from inside one of them.

She kept her eyes on the approaching riders and pulled out her shield. Oren must have seen her because the telv called out for the rest of the guards to do the same. As soon as the riders came within range, she saw a number of them pull out bows and nock arrows.

“Arrows! Cover!”

All of the exposed guardsmen watched as the first volley was released. Taenya observed the arch of the arrows and moved to avoid where they would hit. She squinted her eyes as she realized that the aim was extremely poor.

Another volley was released and it too was poorly fired. Every arrow missed completely. The senior guardsman in charge of the archers called for a return volley and the four on top of the carriages, and the other six on horseback with bows all fired. Her people’s aim was much better and of the ten arrows, six found a target. Unfortunately, of those six, only one managed to hit something other than a shield. One of the riders’ horses went down as the arrow hit it right in the shoulder.

She heard a voice yelling at the riders and the group turned as one and moved to stay parallel with the caravan but at an extreme range. What came next was a back-and-forth firing of arrows. After five volleys from her men and only two more of the riders hit, she yelled for a cease-fire. The riders kept taking individual shots at them, but they weren’t moving closer.

Taenya turned her head. *Sabina! Can you hear me?*

The elf responded quickly. *~Yes! What is it?~*

I need you to read their minds. What are they thinking?

Sabina called out for her wynvers to all move in formation around her. Taenya couldn’t see the woman but it did not take long for Sabina to give her an answer.

~They are corraling us! We're heading toward a large force directly ahead of us.~

Shit.

~What should we do?~

How far?

Sabina took a moment to respond, but when she did, it sounded alarmed.

~We're almost there. We need to stop or turn back now! They know about Gwyn's fire.~

Taenya's eyes widened and looked forward. All she saw was an early morning fog in the still dim light. Most people would just be getting to work now, how did this force prepare for this?

How did they know? She asked, referring to their travel plans.

~These do not know, they were simply told to meet with the force today and would be used to ride down anyone trying to run. This group did not expect to find us. They're using what they see as good fortune to ensure we cannot escape.~

She turned and called out. *"Slow! Prepare to circle the caravan!"*

They needed to create a defensible position. If she could force them into a fight, they could win. After that, who knew? She just needed to get them off of their horses. A spear line would only do so much until they were picked off by arrow fire or simply encircled. That would not do the wagons any favor. If they lit their arrows and targeted the carriages... *Shit. I know what I have to do.*

Sabina, get to Gwyn. You're the last wall. We've discussed this. Do you remember Gwyn's code word?

She could almost feel the mental wince that returned.

~I do.~

Taenya glanced at Oren. *"Circle! Now! All guardsmen, prepare to defend Her Highness!"*

The wagons all rushed to a halt, and the guards quickly moved to take up a position between them and the riders. The riders obviously didn't expect the caravan to stop and had to make a looping turn to move back in front of them. Taenya moved in

front of the two wagons which were positioned in a way to try and provide more cover to the carriages.

“Drivers! Protect the carriages! Archers, volley!” She commanded.

The House Reinhart archers started firing at the riders even as she turned to look around. The four drivers and those that sat with them had already disembarked and were positioning themselves in front of the carriages. Return fire came, and this time they seemed to target—her eyes widened. *The horses!*

“Protect the horses!”

Twenty arrows were loosed, followed by another twenty, and her men tried to interpose their shields between the volleys. Five still managed to fly true and strike their mounts.

The guards riding the struck horses went down hard, but the remainder quickly reacted and managed to cover them as they were checked. Oren moved the horses out of the way even as her archers kept their exchange of fire. *Why aren't they committing?!*

~Taenya! The army is coming!~

Taenya looked back toward the fog and her eyes widened. A battleline emerged from the fog. She felt her heart sink. *They're just keeping us pinned here.*

She looked around at her men, who also noticed the approaching army. Oren looked at her. “Ser Taenya, your orders? Should we charge the riders?”

She glanced between him, the riders, and the distant army. Taenya closed her eyes, listening. She heard the arrows coming. She heard her men calling out where volleys would land, her archers calling out their targets. One of the archers yelled for another bundle of arrows. What happened surprised her, there was no despair, no resignation in their voices. If it was possible, the guardsmen seemed even more determined.

Taenya pulled deep, the mana and magic she had been working on, in secret, building. It had been taking shape, and the chance encounter days previous had changed it even more. Her drakyyds knew what was happening and moved to support her. She placed her hands on either side of her body, letting the spell build, feeling rather than hearing the mana *growl*. As the build-up of mana reached a crescendo, she raised her hands and bid it to form.

Her **Summon Animal Spirit** spell created a massive cloud of red mist that rose from the ground. The spell itself had two different ways of working, she had learned. The first was that it could summon the form of an animal that had no true spirit. It was made from mana and would act as she demanded.

The enemy riders stopped firing and stared. A man pulled a sword and started shouting orders, but Taenya disregarded him. Her drakyyds formed a line in front of her, raising shields in an act of protection. She still focused on the spell building, the mana swirling within the mist.

The second form of her spell sought a contract or oath with a true spirit of an animal. One that had recently fallen within a certain range from her. She felt a pull at something inside her as a connection sought to form. The animal was still forming, and its spirit fought her summoning. Realization set in that the beast was almost beyond what she could control, and as such, the spell would not last long once it finished. It would take all she had to maintain the connection, and she would be completely vulnerable afterward.

She slammed all of her strength into the spell, forcing her intent and desire onto the spirit of the animal. It growled a deep rumble that caused the nearby horses to rear. It startled some of her men, but Oren quickly ordered the remaining horses back to protect them. The riders dismounted and formed a line with spears at the ready.

Taenya closed her eyes. *You will answer to me.*

She felt its emotions, felt it fight back. The desire to not submit was strong. Its spirit bowed to no one.

Still she pressed, sending what she wanted from their contract. *You are a protector. Help me protect the one I am sworn to.*

A bellowing roar came from the still-growing mist. The other senior guardsman shouted a warning of inbound arrows and their focus on the mist. Taenya knew it was folly.

Give us your aid. Answer me.

The animal spirit was angry. It wanted to rest. A feeling of resentment washed over her, and she knew it wanted nothing more to do with the people of the waking world. They had killed it and killed that which it held dear. It did not want to return.

Arrows continued to rain down on the mist, and her guardsmen took advantage of the enemy's misplaced focus and returned fire. She heard angry yelling from behind her, but was concentrating too hard to turn around.

She again threw her desire at the spirit. They needed it. People would die if it didn't answer her. Taenya yelled as she pulled more mana into her working, she felt her insides straining. Her core pulsed followed by shooting pain filling her, but still, she focused even as she cried out.

Gwyn needed her.

Protect the one who holds your fire. Protect her from the allies of those that harmed you. Harmed your child. Once they are gone you can return to your rest.

A sorrowful howl signified the choice that was made. Stillness fell over the area for but a heartbeat, but then a roar cut through the silence, a primal sound, filled with hate and rage. One that reverberated through all the mana around them and chilled her to the bone. The red mana of her spell flashed brightly and even she had to shield her eyes until the mist solidified.

In its place stood a red spirit in the shape of a drakyyd, its translucent form was not fully solid, but not quite ethereal. It was no ghost, for it was a being of mana, and its spirit had merged with the red.

It was *angry*.

The drakyyd stood as tall as the wagons, looking every bit as regal and fierce as she knew it had in life. The massive drake-like animal turned its head and gave her a look, questioning.

She answered.

Them. We do not have much time. They seek to delay us, to let others kill us. They fear us. Take them.

The drakyyd needed no further instruction, and with a furious roar, charged.

The group of riders made to move out of the way, but the drakyyd was too quick. It crossed the distance between them in three leaps, crashing into one of the horses and its rider. While the spirit may not have been made of flesh and bone, it was solid enough that when it hit, the horse and rider went flying. The riders scattered, but they weren't broken. Those with bows launched arrow after arrow at the drakyyd. While any with spears lashed out with their weapons. Taenya *felt* every hit as if it were raindrops falling on her, her connection giving her awareness of how stable the **Drakyyd Spirit** was.

The riders and spirit seemed to almost be playing a game. They tried to ride circles around it while peppering it with arrows or stabbing at it with their spears, and the spirit would leap and take down a rider and swat another one as it passed. Already it had taken down five and it had not even been fifteen seconds, but Taenya knew she didn't have much longer.

She felt exhaustion start to set in. The connection to the spirit was too much for her to handle due to its large size. Every spirit she had summoned before had been much smaller. The largest being thus far had been no bigger than a large jungle feline. Oren saw her faltering and called for the archers to increase their firing.

Taenya watched several more horses go down, and it seemed that the drakyyd itself felt the connection waver. It glanced at her before it narrowed its eyes and roared. It lowered itself and then put everything into a single leap. It crashed right in the middle of five riders and bowled them all over. Another quick leap and swing of its tail managed to knock over more.

“Target the horses! Force them to ground!” Her telv senior guardsman shouted. The archers deliberately focused on the riders’ horses, with more and more being hit by their combined arrow fire as the drakyyd rampaged through their ranks.

Taenya swayed on her saddle as she tried to maintain the connection, pulling more and more mana into herself. She knew it was too much. She managed to maintain the spell for nearly another thirty seconds before two of her team caught her as she toppled over, and her connection to the spirit was lost.

~Taenya!~

As her guards moved her behind the line, she noticed the riders moving their way. She looked over at Sabina, seeing Gwyn standing behind the elf and being held back by one of the guards. Wide blue eyes filled with fear stared back at her.

Taenya thought of one thing, even as she felt her vision going black, overexertion taking her.

She remembered the word that Gwyn had taught them. A word that would tell Sabina that she had to do whatever she could to protect the princess. Taenya said it in her mind as loudly as she could.

Pandora.

As her vision faded and she felt herself falling asleep, the sky itself blotted out into inky blackness.