

Kate Orr

“Stone Song”

Character Development Short Story – Fantasy Action

I was too tired to argue. Luckily, I had landed with my back to a tree, and I let it lend me its strength. I gathered in my legs and pushed until I was slouched upright. It was not a speedy process. “This was easier when I was young.” I thought, as I caught my breath and surveyed the damage. Seven men were back by the guardpost and one had fought with me into the tree line. All of them were now unconscious and would stay that way for a while. One persistent opponent still remained, though definitely not a member of the border guards.

“Get that thing out of my face.” I panted, as I shoved the end of a spear away from its new position at my throat. I didn’t care so much when it had been aimed at my gut, but now the person on the other end decided they meant business. I hate business: It always interrupts something I’d much rather be doing, like my own business. My suspicions were confirmed as the metal point came zooming back into my direct line of vision. I spat out an expletive to myself and then addressed the spear’s owner.

“Look, kid, what do you want? I told you I’m not a mercenary. No matter how much you may have, you can’t hire me, and no matter how good you are with that thing, I’d turn it into kindling before you do any damage.” I said, as my breathing came back under control, and I sheathed my sword to emphasize how little a threat she posed.

A few paces away, the kid’s eyes flickered to the spear, then back to my face. As dark as it was outside, I could see an expression of renewed determination as it redirected itself at my gut. Another expletive.

“No. No way.” The kid said, setting her jaw. “I saw what you did to those guys back there and I need you to help me. You took out seven guys! SEVEN! Wait, EIGHT! EIGHT GUYS! You have to help my family.”

I groaned and slowly stretched my arms, repositioning my back as comfortably against the tree as it would allow. This is always what happens. Someone finds out you’re good with a sword or a bow or whatever and next thing you know, you’re everyone’s friend and they all want a favor. No one wants to solve their own problems anymore. It took more energy and magic than I wanted to admit to take them out. I had been riding hard for several days straight and I was in no mood to be patient. That was probably why the border guards were able to surround me so quickly. Apparently, the kid had been hiding in the bushes, trying to sneak past them. Stupid kid - should’ve kept sneaking. Then again, this was no place for a kid anyway.

“Kid, I have more pressing matters and I don’t have time to waste with you. Go home.” I’ve been doing this for too long to bother being nice about it anymore.

“I was on my way to Manderey to hire someone to help us, but I saw those guards giving you a hard time and then, -“ the kid swallowed hard, “sir, I think the fates must have sent me to find you.”

What is it about me that makes people think I do that kind of thing?

“What, did the neighbor steal your favorite cow? I’ve got better things to do than play peacekeeper to your country feuds.” And with that, I grabbed the spear out of the kid’s hands and threw it. It’s owner dropped to one knee. “You’ve got to be kidding me” I thought. Who was this dumb scrap of a kid? She started talking as I started checking myself for wounds.

“Thank you, sir, for not breaking my weapon. It was wrong of me to try to threaten you. I beg you not to harm me as well. I am all my mother has to care for her, and she needs me. For her sake do I ask that you listen to our plight. I assure you we do not ask something as trivial as the safety of our livestock, or guarding our home, we are inn-keepers, and as such, -“

“Oh, save it, kid. Who talks like that anyway? Get up. Before I have to shake it out of you, tell me how close I am to Treaver Glen.”

With a growl, the kid stood up and swore back at me. “No way am I going back there!” She said as she stomped over to the tree where her spear was now lodged. “No one will help! Not even an old fighter! You think we’re just some country folk squabbling over some cows? Well, we’re not! We run the finest inn in Treaver! Who are you? I’ll have you know that even though you’re a good fighter and old and stuff, that gives you no right to be so rude . . . “

As the kid kept talking, the moon came back out, bright and full. I took the opportunity to stretch and take in my newest opponent: Just over four feet tall, wearing baggy trousers and a tunic. The clothes looked new and probably expensive, but the boots had definitely seen some wear. The cap and scarf were roughly knit, but all of the clothes were in drab colors, probably meant to camouflage the wearer. Was this kid traveling alone? Someone had taken the time to train the loudmouth, as evidenced by some skill with the spear and quality of accoutrement buckled around the tunic. Probably about ten years old – this was no place for children, even if this had been full daylight.

She was still talking as she leapt up, grabbed the spear and let her body weight pull it free. “. . . and you don’t know the first thing about a good deal when it walks right up to you. My family has money and we need help. I am going to hire someone anyway, so it’s too bad that you missed out on -“

“Enough.” Good. I had barely raised my voice and the kid at least knew to stop talking for a second. “We’re just West of Treaver Glen?”

“Yes.” She said.

Even better. I took a second to get my bearings. Perhaps I was closer to my destination than I thought. Saints be praised for giving me some good news out of this scrap.

“I would guess you’ve been traveling for the better part of a day, then?” I asked, adjusting my boots. “Probably snuck out before the sun, hmm? Well, no matter, I’ll have you back by morning.” I said, and turned back toward the pass to gather my things.

“WHAT? I’m not going back until I have what I came for, old man! If you won’t help me, I go back on my way to Manderey to find someone who will.”

“And you complain about my manners?” I said, as I grabbed the bundle that had been flung off of my horse, and started checking its contents. Now I needed the horse. I sighed. I told those guards I didn’t want any trouble. I told them not to start anything with me and let me on my way. That’s the problem with the young, bullheaded types: They refuse to listen. I turned back to the one glaring at me.

“In five hours, we will be in Treaver, kid. WE. I have news for you, now. I just came from Manderey, and you would be hard pressed to find someone to help you, young lady. The soldiers are all recalled to the capitol and their scouts are headed this way to gather more.” I don’t know why I thought that would shut her up. It didn’t.

“How can I tell you’re not lying? I have two more days until I get to Manderey, and I don’t want to waste my—HEY! How did you know I was a girl?”

I just sighed and turned back to the trail. Youth.

“I really worked on this disguise.” She muttered to herself. “Hey, I asked you a question, old man! How did you—what are you doing?” She stopped talking to look where I was looking. For some reason she whispered. “Why were you whistling?”

“I am calling my horse. You don’t think we’d get all the way back to Treaver by dawn on foot, did you? I sent her off so she wouldn’t get hurt in the fight. Here she comes.”

“Ergh! Fine! I will just leave you with your horse, and be on my way!” I grabbed the back of her tunic as she moved to stomp past me. “Hey, let go of me!”

“Quiet!” There were certain tones of voice that made up for however tired I felt. She stopped struggling and turned to face me, but not without a look of fury. I bent down, bringing my face inches away from hers. “Look, Scrap, have you ever heard of a glae-cat?”

Her eyes widened for a second before she regained her scowl. “Those things don’t come this far West. You gonna tell me the boogey man is under my bed? I’m not going with you!”

“Well, maybe that used to be the case, but just before I rode into Manderey, I had a run-in with one of them.” I marched her over to where my horse was standing and unwrapped the bandage on her leg. “See that scrape? She got that four days ago when we had our little meeting with the glae-cat. With all the healing spells used on her, that should have been gone by now from an ordinary bobcat.”

She knelt down and took a closer look. “Why’s it green on the edges?” she asked, frowning, and reached up to pat the large horse nose that had leaned down to inspect the inspection. I stood up and gave my old friend a once-over.

“It’s taking a long time to heal and that’s no ordinary scratch. Glae-cat claws carry a special poison that keeps the wound from healing properly. Luckily for Falanth, she has me, and I know a thing or two about wounds. Now look, Scrap, I’m not a saint and I don’t particularly care what you do with your life, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to let a filthy glae-cat have an easy time of getting dinner, you catch me? I don’t care what you do once I get you back to the Glen, but at least you know what you’re getting yourself into once you leave. The war in the East didn’t just drive *people* away from their homes.”

Thank the Saints the kid decided to stay silent and consider this new information. She silently watched me re-bandage Falanth. I noticed she didn’t seem surprised when I used a healing spell. The kid had seen spell-casting. Interesting. I tucked that thought back in my mind as I worked.

Even though I was tired, news of my destination being so close seemed to renew my energy. I walked back to where the unconscious guards had fallen about the guardhouse fence. Only eight of them. It was sad that so many had already been summoned to the capitol, and so few left to defend their homes. As I knelt in front of one, I could hear the kid following behind me, watching my actions.

“This will go faster if you help.” I said, as I heaved the guard over my shoulder and carried him inside. I didn’t want to leave them at the forest’s mercy, so this was a necessary hindrance. I deposited him against a wall and took in the meager surroundings. Last time I had been here, there were 40 to 50 guards posted. Now, these eight were all they could afford.

I headed back out, when I almost collided with the kid. She was dragging in another unconscious guard by the feet. I raised my eyebrows as she heaved and wheezed past me.

“Ugh. This guy could eat a few less pies.” She said. I didn’t think she would actually help, but all the same, I winced as I watched her heave him across the room to the other guard, his head bouncing across the flagstone. “I bet if I dragged them by the arms, it would save wear and tear on their heads.” She paused, contemplated her victim, and dropped his legs. “Oh well.”

“Yeah, well, so would not beating them unconscious.” I said, propping him next to the other guard.

She marched back to the door, gestured grandly at it, and said “this will go faster if you help,” and trudged back out.

Once they were all inside, I pulled a pouch from my belt and crouched in front of one of them, holding a Stone in my palm. This would require stronger magic than a healing spell.

“Stay back and keep quiet. I don’t need any of them waking up before I’m done.”

She didn’t say anything, but I could hear her step back and sit on the ground. Weird kid. As I concentrated on each guard, I could hear my horse stop walking around the entryway. Even animals knew when to keep quiet when this kind of work was happening.

I finished and replaced the now-depleted stone. The men would wake in a couple of hours, with a hazy recollection of a man that did not fit my description, and left no tracks.

Only six good Stones left, but I could change that in Treaver where I hoped to finally rest. I turned around to find the kid holding the horse’s reins and leaning against her. The look on her face told me that she had seen Stones at work before, which was surprising considering how little was known of their use this far North. She had seen spells and Stones used: Very interesting.

I nodded. “Are you ready to go? I don’t relish being your babysitter much longer.” I said, shutting the door to the building.

“Oh, who asked you?” She retorted. I gave her a look of warning. I wasn’t going to leave her there, but I wasn’t above tying her to the horse for the journey back. I swung onto the saddle and pulled her up in front of me.

“Hold on, kid. Falanth makes good time, especially when she knows we’re almost home.” The horse nodded her head as if she agreed with my words.