

Qilué Thorani

There was once a woman named Thorani who claimed she had full control of her emotions and would never fall prey to them. “Tender emotions make for weak fighters. Repress the emotions that lead to weakness, and you shall have conquered a greater foe than anything else you’ll ever combat,” was her belief in life. For a hundred years and more, nobody could get a weapon past her defenses. Let us watch her in action with this unwary bandit who hacked a branch off of an oak tree to build a fire.

The bandit was fumbling around with his tinder and flint trying to light the fire. Normally, the wood and kindling would have ignited rapidly, but this time, despite the fact that it was relatively dry, no hint of fire would touch it. Grunting, the bandit looked around to see if anything was amiss. In front of him was a tall, raven-haired woman of slight, yet muscular build wearing doeskin leathers and a tunic made of leaves. In her hands were a pair of matching scimitars, both intricately runed and sharp enough to slice a hair lengthwise. The bandit drew his sword and smiled crookedly at the woman.

“So is this how you like to play? Wouldn’t you like a wrestling match followed by a warm sleeping bag instead?” laughed the bandit, eyeing her eagerly.

Wordlessly, Thorani charged forward, her amber eyes flashing with an inner fire. The bandit parried off her initial charge only to find a scimitar at his throat and staring eye-to-eye with the legendary being he always dismissed as a grandmother’s tale to keep the children out of the forest. He was able to push himself away from her and attack her, but his blade only struck metal. For some undertermined amount of time, he continued to block her blows, but he could not contribute his own attacks. Searching for any weaknesses in her defense, he then saw that he had a longer reach than she did. Taking advantage of it, he thrust his sword forward. Thorani sprang to the side and the bandit felt the sting of the blade in his wrist as his sword got knocked aside. Not only did his sword fall to the ground, but also his right hand, still clasping the weapon. Stunned, the next thing he knew was that a scimitar was going through his heart and another going through his throat. The bandit’s life seeped from him with his blood as Thorani watched grimly.

She knelt next to the body and whispered “May the death-birds guide this defiler to his afterlife and lead him not to Tindarien’s wrath.” With that, she covered the body with soil and leaves and placed a small pile of stones upon the grave. Thus was the fate of any who crossed Thorani and dared to insult her honor.

“If any defeat me in single combat, may they slay me as I slay them,” she had vowed.

Every night under the light of the moon and the stars in a clearing blessed by the Eternal Huntress herself, Thorani did her ritual sword dance. Her sword dance, or meditation, as she preferred to call it, consisted of slow, simulated combats where she practiced parries, thrusts, strikes, and feints. All this she performed naked, her nut-brown skin glowing faintly in the moonlight. At the end of her meditation, she would plant both scimitars into the ground, gaze up

at the moon, and sing her prayers to the Eternal Huntress.

One day, as Thorani patrolled her forest home during the twilight hours for potential defilers, a shining object caught the corner of her eye. Upon focusing her vision on it, she noticed it was a person in armor, probably a knight. With the stealth of a shadow, she kept a very close eye on the armored person, noting the uncertain gait and the longsword on his belt. By all appearances, he seemed to be harmless by his unsteady walk in the obviously heavy armor and the confused look he had as he examined his surroundings. Out of frustration, he removed the cumbersome armor and set it down before sitting down to rest. The forest would take care of him before he could wreak havoc in the forest, yet her hand wandered to a scar on her throat, a reminder of how appearances were deceiving.

Concerned about the future sanctity of the forest, she pounced down from her hiding place in the trees and held her sword at his throat.

“Defiler!” she hissed at the young man, whose eyes flew open in fear.

“What? Who are you?” he asked, trembling.

“You need not know. Select your death – by my blade in a fair fight or by the terrors of the forest,” said Thorani, drawing her scimitars, which twinkled with a wicked light.

The knight gulped in fear, realizing he was doomed to die regardless. His voice, now tiny in the darkness before the fierce, yet beautiful, woman standing before him, trembled. “I accept your challenge.” With an unsteady hand, he drew his own shining longsword.

Thorani stood before the knight, poised to parry his attacks. Her scimitars moved with a fluid grace beyond human belief as she blocked his un-coordinated swings and thrusts. In the knight’s eyes, the scimitars were one with their feral wielder, an eagle’s talons before a cowering fawn. Out of sheer desperation as he was approaching exhaustion, he charged full force like a raging bull at a trespasser, sword-first. The sword struck air and his foot caught on a root that jutted out of the ground. He fell, losing his sword, but managing to stop himself from falling prostrate to the ground. Upon looking up, the woman’s piercing sea-grey eyes stared into his own hazel orbs, her gaze already cutting him open.

One scimitar pointed at his throat, the other at the hand closest to his sword, the knight knew he stood no chance of surviving. His palms started to sweat profusely as he shivered uncontrollably at the sight of the glowing, wickedly curved scimitar. But he looked at her, his hazel eyes pleading for mercy in a swift death, if not his life. The scimitar drew closer to his throat, less than a hair’s width away from his tender, vulnerable skin.

“If I must die, then let it be with honor,” whispered the knight, barely keeping his faint voice from trembling.

The blade then made contact with his skin, but no wound formed, so light was the contact. Thorani was about to make the killing blow, but instead, she said slightly hoarsely, “Go, and never return.” She then withdrew the scimitars from him in a fluid motion. The knight noticed that there was a slight hesitation, but he did not question his luck and got up. With a yearning glance back towards Thorani, the knight walked away, breathing a huge sigh of relief.

Had the knight listened more closely, he would have heard Thorani whisper, “Tindarien, forgive me. I know not what has come upon me.”

For many days, Thorani’s mind was clouded with thoughts of the hazel-eyed knight who could barely handle a sword, much less stand a chance against her in combat. By day, she would hear his meek voice asking who she was, the faint whisper nagging at her conscience, while by night she could feel Tindarien’s judgement rest heavily upon her, condemning her for showing mercy to the knight. At first, it was only a passing thought that would appear and disappear, but soon, all Thorani could think of was of the knight, his pleading gaze, and that innocence that no other she knew had possessed.

While she was doing her daily sword dance, the scimitars started to feel heavy and slow, like lead in her hands. Every time she was about to make a slashing motion, she would see the knight kneeling before her, calm, yet very afraid. Then she would hesitate until she told herself that he was not there. “Tender emotions make for weak fighters. Repress the emotions that lead to weakness, and you shall have conquered a greater foe than anything else you’ll ever combat,” she said with as much conviction as she could muster. Finally, after her voice completely faltered as she said this, she decided to hunt down the knight and avenge herself.

She found him wandering the forest once more. He was alone with only his longsword and a small, round shield and instead of the shining plate mail, simple leather armor. “We meet again,” he said simply, although she caught a slight waver in his voice.

He sensed her approach! Thorani shivered for a split instant, realizing how much her abilities had deteriorated since the last encounter. “Why do you return, human?”

“Because I am drawn to you, Qilué Thorani,” replied the knight, looking her in the eye as bravely as he could. “And so we are no longer strangers, I am Sir Aydrian of Arnor.”

For an instant, Thorani was taken aback. How did he know her true name? Drawing her scimitars, she charged at the knight, her grey eyes lit with a flame from deep within. With a sigh, the knight drew his sword and faced Thorani. One scimitar thrust forwards at his heart, the other parrying the longsword aside. The longsword never once went past the two scimitars, although Thorani knew that Aydrian could have defeated her several times. At one point, Aydrian’s sword had a chance to get past Thorani’s scimitars when she had crossed her scimitars high to deflect a cleaving blow, but he hesitated long enough to give her time to prepare another defense. To Thorani, her scimitars, once extensions of her will instead of mere tools, felt heavy and awkward in her hands. Nonetheless, with a deft twist of her scimitars, she was able to knock the sword from his hands.

Again, she was on the verge of plunging her scimitars into him, but the force that stayed her hand before returned. She struck him with the flat of the weapon, knocking him unconscious, but not harming him otherwise. As she started to walk away, she suddenly decided to turn back around and sat next to him, examining his frail body. Her hand gently caressed him, and she regretted

knocking him unconscious, but she knew to let him go again would dishonor her oath, yet to kill him was just as wrong. A tear fell from her eye, and she murmured something incomprehensible before gently holding his hand in her own hands and pondered what to do when he woke up.

The piercing call from a hunter's horn brought her back from her reflection, and thinking swiftly, she attempted to hoist the knight onto her and take him away. She sensed that in his innocence and weakness, she could mold him, teach him the ways of the forest and purify his still untainted soul. However, when she normally would have been able to lift him effortlessly, she found him too heavy, her strength gone. Sir Aydrian, or rather her feelings towards him, had corrupted her! Quickly, she sprang away into the dense shrubbery in hopes of hiding from the hunters and perhaps even ambushing them.

An arrow flew in her direction, and she tried to dodge the projectile, but she was too slow. The arrow struck her hand, and knowing there was no hope of defeating the hunters or doing something about the weakness Aydrian had brought upon her, she fled as fast as she could, not heeding the amount of noise she made. More arrows went in her direction until at last all the hunters' arrows were spent and they noticed the knight, unconscious, yet as if in a sweet dream. They woke him up by sprinkling some holy water on his slightly flushed pale face. His hazel eyes slowly opened, gazing this way and that for Thorani.

"Thorani! So beautiful, so trapped," murmured Sir Aydrian dreamily to the hunters who were supporting him.

"And dangerous, lad. Beware of the witch of the woods, lest she corrupts and then kills you!" said one of the hunters as he gave the knight water. Then they rode back towards the nearest town to gather more supplies to hunt for the mysterious woman.

Still confused, Thorani spent the next several days observing the knight, always keeping enough distance to keep him from noticing her. Before, she was able to be within three or four feet and not be detected, but now, she had to be further away. She vowed to slay this knight in honorable single combat; honor kept her from just ambushing him in his sleep or firing a killing shot from her bow. As before, she found him alone in the forest, and this time, it seemed as if he were seeking her as well. She sprang down from the trees, and drew her scimitars, determined to end it once and for all.

Instead of drawing his sword, the knight merely looked at her longingly, just as she did before the hunters came. He approached her, unarmed, without his armor. Caught between her code of honor and the desire to redeem herself, Thorani dropped her weapons to the ground and pounced on him as a wolf pounces on its prey. Much to her horror, the knight was able to pin her on the ground even though she was sure she had him pinned down. Plucking her courage, though, Thorani shed off any pretense of honor, grabbed her weapons, and ran straight for the knight, scimitars pointed directly at him. Then, at the last possible instant, the knight finally drew his sword.

Aydrian held his sword in both hands at a slight angle, and he whispered, "Yavanna, Ilberath, please show mercy to she who knows it not." Waiting nervously, he knew that perfect timing was necessary to keep the wickedly curved

scimitars from hitting home. As they drew closer to his unprotected body, a faint sigh of relief escaped from the knight. There was a chance he would survive! With a quickness unseen in any human, he pulled the hilt of his sword towards himself. The scimitars flew free of their wielder's hands and Thorani, overbalanced, fell to the ground in a heap.

Disarmed, Thorani struggled to stand up again and grudgingly but respectfully knelt before the knight. "You have defeated me in fair combat. Now, you have full rights to slay me, for I have shown my weakness."

"No. I will not kill you," said the knight, gazing into Thorani's piercing grey eyes, now softened in defeat.

"Why do you refuse?" demanded Thorani, confused.

The knight knelt next to her and put his arm around her. "You are special."

Frightened, Thorani was caught between trying to break free and allowing herself to enjoy the strange warm feeling growing in her. Her arms also went around him, trying to capture the warmth and tenderness she only vaguely remembered from over a hundred years ago. For the first time in her life after childhood, she felt truly helpless and vulnerable. Aydrian pulled her even more closely to him, still holding her and gently stroking her face. Then he kissed her, first a quick, light kiss on her cheek, then a more passionate one on her lips. For a moment, Thorani forgot about her vow to Tindarien and the danger the knight posed, savoring the warmth that surrounded her.

The peaceful moment burst when the sound of a hunter's horn pierced the air once more. Aydrian was still oblivious of the impending danger as he still held onto Thorani. Taking her chances and hoping against all hope, she called upon the spirits of the forest for help. "Tindarien, restore your weak-willed servant's strength once more," she whispered after struggling to break free from the knight and realizing that he was at the moment too strong for her.

Thorani felt herself growing stronger again, and she roughly broke free from the confused knight, who had now held her hand tightly in his. He just stared at her as she ran off into the wilderness. "Good sir, where did you see the sorceress?" asked the lead hunter just as Thorani disappeared into the dense underbrush.

"I know not who you speak of," replied Aydrian simply, nodding his head.

The hunters continued to ride past, bows ready in case Thorani was sighted. There was a rustling in the underbrush followed by the twang of several bows and shouts of, "There she is! Kill the witch!"

Then there was a grim silence that made Aydrian's nerves freeze. Sadly, he walked away, looking towards where he had last seen Thorani. "Yavanna and Ilberath protect Qilúe Thorani. And Tindarien, forgive her," he murmured softly before returning to his home.

After running for what seemed like an eternity, even with her renewed strength, she paused to consider what happened. "Tindarien, I have failed you," said Thorani as emotionlessly as she could, yet a sadness she had never known before filled her voice. With that, she then let out a long, mournful howl that was heard by all around her.

From that day forth, Thorani would sometimes wander near Arnor, the city Aydrian had come from. On one hand, she hoped to see him again, yet she also dreaded seeing him, knowing what had happened. For several moons, she still kept a close eye on him, noting with some happiness how his swordsmanship continued to improve as he practiced. One spring day though, when the flowers were in full bloom, though, she saw him strolling through the forest with a delicate-featured, fair-skinned, dark-haired human maiden.

A wave of cold nausea passed through her as she saw Aydrian hold the strange maiden with the same passionate embrace he had once held her with. Thorani howled with unbridled anguish at the pair, but they were too engrossed to hear her, only pausing to look around when an arrow flew right past them, within centimeters of striking them. Two more arrows came at them, missing them by a hair's width. Aydrian glanced upwards and saw Thorani, her face wet with tears and her eyes practically aflame with rage. Without any words, Thorani then ran as far away from Aydrian as she could, while the knight only heaved a sigh before the maiden pulled him back towards her. That was the last time Aydrian ever saw Thorani again and never again were there tales of a mysterious being who killed any trespasser she encountered.

But from time to time, if one wanders out to the forest and listens carefully on the night of an autumn full moon, one can hear the yearning melodies of a flute and the mournful howl of a wolf. Nobody knows for sure what the source of it is. Some people say, "It is the forest spirits still mourning for their last great warrior princess, Qilúe Thorani." Who knows for sure what happened to Thorani, the once undefeatable forest warrior?