
A Cultural Introduction

Neira stirred, a throbbing pain punctuating her temple as though a sharp talon had dug into her skull. It wasn't pretty. She groaned, lifting her hand to rub the pain away, her fingers instinctively tracing the path to the base of her horns. The room was dim with just a bit of sunlight peeking through the curtains, but the familiar scent and warmth told her she was home.

"Neira?"

Her gaze shifted to the entrance where her father stood, his usually poised demeanor now marred by fatigue. She could tell he hadn't slept; the worry lines on his forehead were a dead giveaway. With a soft sigh, she rasped, "You didn't stay up all night for me, did you?"

Approaching, he settled on the edge of her bed, causing her to readjust her position so her wings weren't pinned beneath her. "Am I not allowed to be concerned for my daughter? Especially when she's brought home, nearly unconscious, by an Encroacher?"

Realization flashed in Neira's eyes. *So it wasn't just a dream!*

"Where is she? Is she alright? Did you fight?"

Heaving a deep sigh, her father responded, "She's under my protection for now, given the right of hospitality. If your eldest brother manages to make her people see reason, she can confirm you're alright and then depart."

Neira processed this. The right of hospitality was a sacred act in their culture, reserved for guests of the clan held in high regard. *She must have made a significant impression on Father*, she mused.

Seeing her contemplative look, he continued, "I've sent your eldest brother to negotiate because it's crucial we understand the extent of the Encroachers' magic. Times are changing. Our people have gained much, along with our new kin. But if the Encroachers can use magic like that... girl does, then the Prince needs to be informed." He seemed pensive for a moment, the weight of his responsibility evident in how he held himself. She sympathized with him, but...

Neira, growing impatient, pressed again, "Father, where is she now?"

He chuckled softly, though his eyes retained their serious gleam. "She's outside, sparring with your more hardheaded brother. I swear, sometimes I think his horns are more suited to a ram than a drakyn."

Manabound - Resilience

A surprised snort escaped Neira as her mind grappled with the image of Gwyn sparring with her brother. *I've got to see this for myself.* Pushing herself to rise, she was immediately thwarted by the gentle yet firm pressure of her father's wing, stilling her movements without him even turning to face her.

"But I want to see!" she protested.

"You can't go outside yet," her father said sternly, then softened, "But you can watch from the window."

"How's Gwyn holding up against him?"

Her father scowled, his scales shimmering with agitation. "It's... unexpected. That girl fights with an expertise I didn't anticipate. And she's unnaturally strong and quick for her size. It's got to be that damned magic of hers; it's almost like she was born with it in her veins. It's beyond frustrating how she wields it so naturally."

Rolling her eyes, Neira huffed, "If you're going to treat me like a whelping, at least help me get a proper view."

A chuckle rumbled in his chest as he relented. "Very well." Extending his arm, he helped her steady herself, guiding her toward the large window that offered a panoramic view of their family's training grounds.

What she saw... shocked her.

Gwyn and her brother were in the center of a sparring circle, surrounded by clan members and villagers who watched with rapt attention—but were also giving a wide berth of a bench where a tiny white drakyn perched as its eyes tracked every movement in the ring with keen interest.

Gwyn looked every bit the part of a seasoned fighter. Her attire, undoubtedly borrowed from Neira's own people, clung to her form. The form-fitting pants, sleeveless shirt, leather cuirass, and protective gear all hinted at a warrior's discipline. The sun highlighted the glistening sweat on her skin, and her curly hair was wrestled into a messy ponytail which gave her an air of wild determination. Not to mention, her height, nearly rivaling that of Neira's brother, was impressive.

She looked... fierce.

However, Neira's brother, with his sinewy build accentuated by emerald scales and distinct ram-like horns, undoubtedly overshadowed the girl in sheer mass. Yet, as they moved in the ring, it was clear: size wasn't the deciding factor here. Gwyn's skill and magic evened the scales.

With bated breath, Neira observed the tense dance between Gwyn and her brother. As her sibling propelled himself into the air using the thrust of his wings, arm drawn back ready to strike, Gwyn faltered for just a fraction of a moment. But then, with a sudden surge of determination, she

lunged at him head-on. The smug confidence that had played on her brother's face moments earlier morphed into a look of disbelief as the air whooshed out from his lungs.

He didn't see that coming.

Desperately, he flapped his wings, trying to regain control, but his momentum was against him. The pair crashed onto the earth, sending a puff of dust into the air. But Gwyn, showing impressive agility, instantly rolled to the side and sprang back up, fists ready and eyes sharp. In stark contrast, Neira's brother struggled to find his footing.

In the blink of an eye, Gwyn vanished, only to reappear in a luminous burst of light directly in front of him. Without hesitation, she drove a fist deep into his midsection. As he doubled over, she dropped lower and swept out his legs with a swift motion. The thud of his fall resonated through the training grounds.

She could see the observers collectively wince in unison as her brother slammed into the ground... again.

From the corner of her eye, Neira caught her father muttering a curse. The corners of her mouth quirked up in a grin. *Why am I enjoying this so much?* There was something satisfying, watching Gwyn, the unexpected outsider, standing tall amongst their clans. It made Neira's initial decision to avoid a duel to the death with her seem all the more justified.

Gwyn wasn't just any ordinary fighter. She was a warrior of honor. And surely, she was no mere Encroacher.

With newfound admiration, Neira nudged her father, "We should join them. Imagine, you against her!"

"I won't be drawn into this spectacle."

She pouted. "Alright, but let's go down, at least."

Heaving a resigned sigh, her father conceded, "If it'll satisfy your curiosity." But even as he said it, his eyes were riveted back to the arena where another eager challenger stepped forth, bowing to Gwyn. She responded in kind before resuming her combat stance.

I better get a good spot to watch this, Neira thought as anticipation bubbled within her.



Inside the sparring ring, Gwyn held her ground, her every muscle coiled in readiness. Elgan, Neira's emerald-scaled brother, was slowly rising, rubbing the back of his head where he must've taken quite a hit.

Gwyn half-expected a string of provocations, perhaps something similar to what Prince Aran might spit out. Instead, Elgan's features cracked into an unexpected smile. "You've got fire in you, Encroacher! That's the third time you've bested me. I concede."

She rolled her eyes, slightly exasperated. "For the last time, I'm not an Encroacher. Hell, even Neira knew of my people before we met."

As the two bantered, another figure moved towards the ring. His distinct brown scales and the absence of wings on his back identified him as the other variant of drak'val that Neira had once described. He halted in front of Gwyn and offered a deep, courteous bow. In kind, she mirrored the gesture. Then, he uttered something in the lyrical Valeni language, and she glanced at Elgan, raising an eyebrow in inquiry.

"He's asking for an honorable spar," Elgan clarified, his voice tinged with amusement. "He wants you to give it your all. He might not have wings, but trust me, he's fast."

Gwyn grinned, her excitement palpable. "I'm honored. This is turning out to be more fun than I anticipated."

Elgan laughed, a rich sound that echoed around the arena. "It's refreshing to meet another who thinks so. Sometimes I wonder if Neira and I are the only odd ones in our clan."

"Well," Gwyn replied with a smirk, "Neira does seem to have a knack for those honor duels. I take it she shadowed you a lot growing up?"

Elgan chuckled again, a twinkle in his eyes. "Sharp observation. Yes, while my elder brother is caught up in his duties and our younger sister proves a handful, it often fell to me to watch over Neira."

Nodding in understanding, Gwyn shifted her gaze back to the wingless drak'val challenger. She loosened up, rolling her shoulders and trying to shake off the tension. Admittedly, she wasn't the most seasoned hand-to-hand combatant. However, a year's worth of training at school and with Amari had significantly honed her skills. Moreover, her stats probably gave her more strength than most people here.

She'd take that advantage any day.

The towering man smirked, a glint of challenge in his eyes, then lunged with a startling burst of speed. Caught off guard, Gwyn instinctively used her **[Blink]** to retreat a mere two steps. Seizing the

moment, she retaliated with a fierce roundhouse kick, catching him off-guard. He managed to deflect it with his forearms, but the force sent him skidding sideways.

Regaining his stance, he gave his arms a quick shake, eyes now filled with newfound respect and caution as he advanced once more.

Gwyn's eyes narrowed, reading the determination in her opponent's stance. She expected him to come at her with that surprising speed again, but instead, he feinted to the left, drawing her attention momentarily away.

Just as she realized the ruse, a fist connected with her ribcage, the impact echoing through the arena. A sharp gasp escaped her lips, and before she could recover, he capitalized on the momentum, landing a solid kick to her thigh, and causing her to stumble.

Focus, Gwyn!

Her every instinct screamed for her to draw on her magic, but other than using **[Blink]** to counter the drak'val's impressive speed, she sensed that it wouldn't earn the respect she was striving for in this duel. She needed to win this fair and square, relying solely on her combat skills.

She circled her opponent, keeping her eyes locked onto his, both assessing each other. He smirked, probably thinking he had the upper hand now.

Waiting for the right moment, Gwyn saw an opening. She lunged, feigning a punch with her right. As he raised his arms to block, she twisted her body and delivered a swift elbow strike to his abdomen. He grunted in pain, momentarily winded. Seizing the moment, she followed with a spinning kick, knocking him off balance.

He tried to recover, but she could see he was disoriented. With a deep breath, gathering all the strength she had left, Gwyn landed a solid punch right at his temple. He collapsed to the ground and lifted a hand to his head, but didn't move to get up right away.

The crowd surrounding the ring erupted in a mix of cheers and shocked murmurs. Through the ruckus, she heard Elgan's voice rise above the others, "Incredible!"

Gwyn, despite the throbbing pain in her side and thigh, managed to remain upright. She stretched out a hand to help her fallen opponent who grasped it and allowed her to pull him to his feet.

He gave her a small smile and a nod then turned his head and said something to Elgan that made the crowd laugh.

"He says you may be a little thing, but you pack the hit of a charging trol'ar."

I have no idea what that is!

Gwyn exhaled, her chest heaving, but a satisfied smile played on her lips. "Tell him he's one of the strongest people I've fought, yet."

Elgan relayed her message and the man straightened, a proud look etched on his face.

<<*Excited! Playful!*>>

Gwyn chuckled as the emotions filled her mind. She turned to look at her little dragon and gasped. Sitting on the ground and playing with her was Neira.

“Neira!” she called out.

Gwyn swiftly crossed the ring, making her way toward Neira. The girl looked up, a weak but genuine smile playing on her lips. Her skin, which had shimmered like the finest of violet gemstones just yesterday, now seemed slightly dulled.

“Hey there, Sky-Person,” Neira murmured, her voice hoarse but teasing.

Gwyn crouched down beside her, careful not to startle the little drakyn playing in Neira’s lap. “You shouldn’t be out here,” she admonished gently, brushing a stray lock of hair away from Neira’s forehead. The skin there felt too warm to the touch. “How are you feeling?”

Neira sighed. “Like someone’s using my head as a drum.” Her fingers tenderly touched the side of her head, wincing. “But I wanted to see you fight. And,” she glanced at the little dragon playing at her feet, “I wanted to see this beautiful little girl, here!”

<<*Happy!*>>

Gwyn smiled softly. “I appreciate that, but I would have visited you as soon as the sparring was over. You should rest.”

Neira chuckled weakly. “You sound like my father.”

Speaking of which, Gwyn’s eyes darted to the side, catching sight of Corin Wren, Neira’s father, approaching Elgan. From the distance, she could sense the gravity of their conversation by the way Corin’s brows furrowed and the solemn nod Elgan gave.

He’s already trying to get rid of me.

Neira followed Gwyn’s gaze. “Father and Elgan... they’ve been worried about you. Especially after you showed... well, all of this.” She gestured to the sparring ring and the crowd that had gathered.

Gwyn’s gaze softened. “I’m not here to bring harm, Neira. I hope they see that.”

Neira sighed. “Change is hard, especially for those set in their ways. But what you did today, what you did for me last night with the respect you showed... it’s a start.” Then she smiled. “If nothing else, it shows that the sky-people aren’t too bad.”

Gwyn felt the slight tug of the dragon at her feet, its urge for closeness apparent in its insistent movements. As she bent to lift it, the creature practically launched itself into her embrace, swiftly climbing up to nestle against her chest, its snout affectionately brushing her cheek.

<<*Happy. Fire?*>>

Chuckling, Gwyn mused, "Fire as an emotion, huh? That's a new one." Drawing upon the mana and swirling it within her, she harnessed her [**Draco-pyromancy**], and a delicate dance of flames played upon her outstretched palm.

She leaned her head close and whispered, "I can get behind that sentiment."

The little dragon's eyes glittered with fascination.

<<*Comfort. Happy.*>>

"You like the warmth, don't you?"

But before Gwyn could react, the dragon, seemingly drawn to the fire, made an audacious leap toward the flames. "Hey, careful there!" she cried out, catching the spry creature in her fiery hand. Instead of harm, a connection formed, pulling on her mana.

She allowed the flow, and her fiery aura seemed to envelop the dragon, providing a protective, warm embrace.

<<*Fire. Safe.*>>

Swallowing her nervous chuckle, she caught Neira's rapt gaze fixed on the dragon. "You know, she's going to start growing really fast if you do that," the half-dragon girl commented.

Gwyn frowned. "She's barely bigger than a house cat."

Raising an eyebrow, Neira responded, "With the amount of mana she's absorbing, her growth will be quick. It's something we learned from our kin."

"Your kin? I think I remember you saying that word before."

Neira gestured to the horizon. "In the central mountains lies a clan of drakyns, allied with the prince and our people."

Gwyn's confusion deepened. "I thought dragons didn't exist, at least that's what Taenya said."

"*Drakyns* have always been real, remnants of ancient times. Two great clans rode them during the conflict against the Encroachers in the era of the Old Empire. Our Prince's clan was one. It's why we maintained such a large area of sanctuary. The fate of the other remains a mystery."

"What happened to these *drakyns* then? I met a drakyyd mother who was very big. I think she came from the Val Forest back in Tilorl. Uhm, Ayeval? She died protecting her baby, but it died too. Taenya managed to summon her spirit to fight a bunch of really bad people."

"Your Taenya sounds quite formidable and loyal."

Gwyn smiled. "She is. She's my quirky adopted aunt. She's been taking care of me, just until we find my mom."

Neira nodded.

“Now, the drakyns?”

“The great change affected them as well,” Neira explained. “They’re more wise and intelligent, and as large as a house! Well, some of the oldest ones are. Their mountain also has one of the pillars of change.”

“I’ve felt a lot more mana since coming into the forest, is it because of these... pillars?”

With a solemn nod, Neira explained, “The pillars bestowed us our drakyn features. We have embraced it, and through it became kin to the drakyn.”

A new voice interrupted, “Ayeval still stands?” Gwyn turned to find Corin, Neira’s father, approaching.

“Yes, my knight told me that they are still there.”

“Your knight, an Encroacher?”

“She’s a telv, and from the sound of it, she doesn’t know half as much as you all do about whatever caused you guys to come into your forests. She saved me when I first arrived here. She’s also probably worried about me right now...”

Corin’s gaze bore into hers. “More than just your telv searches for you. A large group of Encroachers search for you, Loreni among them.”

Gwyn’s gaze sharpened, heart hammering. “Are they safe?”

He nodded slowly. “We’ve fought, but only one has fallen. A man of the city who got... cocky. It’s the way of things. I’ve gathered our people and dispatched my son for negotiations. This telv knight of yours, you deem her trustworthy?”

“With my life. Taenya has my back,” Gwyn confirmed, every word underscored by sincerity.

His head pivoted, voice carrying a command’s weight. “Elgan! Come here, boy.”

Emerging swiftly, Neira’s brother retorted, “I’m twenty. Hardly a child.”

“Age doesn’t decide manhood. Heed my words. Instruct your brother to ensure the safety of Princess Gwyn’s knight—Taenya. Grant her the right of hospitality of our clan. She will be the responsibility of our guest. Apparently, the subverted may have had the truth hidden from them. We will learn if this is indeed the case. It appears we have much to learn.”

Elgan’s gaze locked with his father’s for a moment, a silent conversation passing between them. He finally acquiesced with a nod, wings fanning out in a powerful display before he lifted off, disappearing into the towering forest canopy.

Oxylus

The elder Wren then addressed Gwyn, "Once your protector sees you're unharmed, perhaps she'll escort you away from these parts."

Gwyn studied him, intuition prickling. "You're not going to get in trouble, are you?"

His brows furrowed, taken aback. "What prompts that notion?"

"Neira hinted at a prince in charge. I get the feeling I'm not supposed to be here, but it's a grey area because I'm a terran. But bringing Taenya here seems to be too much. You don't have to bring her here if it causes you problems. I can just walk out."

A subtle warmth touched Corin's eyes. "You two come with me," he said with a glance toward his daughter. "A brief stroll through our town may offer insights."

Guiding them through a grandiose archway of twisting wood and leaves, the three ventured out of the Wren estate. The town unfolding before Gwyn defied her expectations. It wasn't just another town; it was a symbiosis of nature and civilization. Towering trees stood guard, while intricately crafted buildings nestled at their bases. As they moved through the cobblestone roads, Neira played tour guide, explaining their surroundings, while Corin silently observed.

Breaking his contemplation, Corin's voice took on a pensive tone. "You'd sacrifice your safeguard for our sakes, even being strangers to you?"

Glancing at the dragonet snuggled in her arms, who purred against her, she felt a wash of emotion.

<<*Trust.*>>

"She," Gwyn motioned to the dragon, "believes in you. You didn't try to fight me when you had the chance, but instead showed restraint. And as for Neira? Well, she may have jostled her brain around with the fall, and that made her a bit obsessed with dueling to the death..."

Corin's gaze shifted to Neira, a teasing scowl forming, causing Neira to recoil slightly, but Gwyn's words seemed to hang in the air, prompting them all to reflect on their paths forward.

Gwyn continued, "But she's pretty awesome. You guys have changed since the Flash arrived. Neira said you have embraced your changes. Why can't you embrace other changes as well?"

He stopped walking, which caused her and Neira to also stop.

"Father?"

Corin held up a hand to his daughter as he fixed his gaze on Gwyn. It was almost as if his contemplation had a tangible weight to it. Time even seemed to slow as she waited for him to respond.

Did I say something wrong?

After what felt like an eternity, the lines of his face relaxed, and he spoke, “Your concern about me facing repercussions is valid. If I were anyone else. To shed more light on the matter: not only am I the Headman of Eldenthor, but the prince is one of my blood kin. I stand as more than just a figurehead in this town. Eldenthor’s distinct nature, its very essence, is due to its strategic position as the vanguard against the Encroachers. Here, every individual, every *clan*, shoulders the responsibility of bolstering the army’s core, which operates from this very town. The mantle of leadership for these forces—and the broader region of the Eastern Reach—rests on my shoulders as Marshal. You see, princess, these decisions are very much within my jurisdiction.”

As he spoke, his posture straightened, his chin lifted, and his slitted eyes sparkled with a mixture of pride and resolve.

Gwyn nodded, but then a smirk grew on her face. “Yeah, that makes sense. You could have just said you wouldn’t get in trouble, though.”

Neira covered her mouth as she tried not to laugh.

The man closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. When he opened them, he also had a slight smile on his face. “I see why my daughter is fond of you. You two are just alike.”

Gwyn and Neira shared a look.

Did we just become friends?!

“Let us get back. You two can talk while Rhion retrieves your knight and the servants prepare for lunch.”

“Will Mother join us?” Neira asked.

“She will. She is looking forward to meeting your new friend.”



In the richly decorated corridors of the Wren manor, Gwyn stepped tentatively into Neira’s room. Neira, her wings twitching in excitement, greeted her with a broad smile, “Welcome! This is my sanctuary. What do you think?”

The baby dragon, restless in Gwyn’s arms, made eager noises which prompted the princess to set her down. As the creature’s eyes widened with wonder, it scurried around, eagerly exploring every nook and cranny.

<<*Curious!*>>

Gwyn chuckled.

Taking in the room, Gwyn was struck by its scale and the myriad of intriguing items adorning it. Her eyes widened, drawn to a rack holding an array of swords and unstrung bows. “Incredible! They let you keep all these weapons here? It took so long to convince Taenya to let me keep Raafe’s Legacy close. I had to demonstrate proficiency with it. That took a year of training almost daily with paladins and my instructors at school.”

She saw the half-dragon girl wince out of the corner of her eye when she said the word paladin.

Gwyn crouched down and inspected the blades. Some shimmered with ornate designs, meant more for ceremony, while others bore the battle-worn marks of functionality.

Behind her, Neira’s chuckle resonated. “Honestly, I’m better with a bow. And your sword has a name? Naming a blade is a deep tradition here that signifies its blooded history.”

Gwyn’s face paled, and she sank back, landing on her butt with a soft thud. “Yeah... it was... blooded? Yeah, blooded by the man who first wielded it. Then it passed on to his grandson, my friend Raafe. Raafe used it to kill people trying to kill me before he died. You heard about my little trip into your forest, right?”

Neira was enraptured and she quickly nodded.

“Well, that was the first time I used it on actual people. I killed... I killed several with it. The rest I killed with my magic. I...”

Neira’s eyes glittered, filled with a combination of awe and mischief. “That’s so amazing! Oh, how I wish I could have seen it. My father would *never* let me do any of that.”

Throwing herself backward with exaggerated flair, wings outstretched and hand dramatically clutching her chest, Neira sighed.

Gwyn rolled her eyes, but her tone was serious. “Neira, I know you’re all into this little murderhobo thing you’ve got going on, but... It’s not fun. I don’t enjoy it. I’ve killed way too many people and I think it’s starting to affect how I see everything. I’m not in a good headspace.”

Neira peeked up, one eye revealing genuine curiosity. “But shouldn’t combat, especially for honor, be something celebrated?”

Sighing deeply, Gwyn replied, “Combat might be. But the act of killing, even when justified or honorable... it leaves scars. Mental ones.”

A melodic voice interjected, “The princess speaks wisely, Neira.”

Both girls looked up. A tall, striking woman stood framed in the doorway, her four horns and wings glistening, scales shimmering with a pearl-like sheen that looked so pretty and different from the others.

“Mother!” Neira said, pushing herself up to a sitting position.

<<Pretty...>>

“Uh, yeah...” Gwyn murmured, momentarily captivated.

The woman's smile was magnetic. “Who might this enchanting creature be?”

Gwyn beamed, gesturing toward the baby dragon. “I found her on the way here. She... she doesn't have a name yet.”

Bending down gracefully, the woman extended a clawed finger to the creature, who bounded forward, sniffing and cooing affectionately.

<<Happy!>>

With a twinkle in her eyes, she said, “Naming this little one seems a delightful discussion for us to engage in before your departure, young princess.”

I'm so horrible with names...

A little rumbling came from the dragon's tummy.

<<Hungry.>>

Neira's mother chuckled. “Someone appears to be hungry. Why don't we get you some meat little one?”

<<Excited!>>



Moving cautiously through the dense forest, Taenya, flanked by Amari, House Reinhart guards, and a squad of paladins, tried to stay alert to the elusive Valeni. The previous night's encounter with them had revealed the Valeni's transformation, and yet, as the group ventured deeper into the woods, there was an unsettling absence of them.

Lucian, the assassin-monk, had joined Ilyana to prepare just in case they needed to make a swift journey back to the capital. If they couldn't find Gwyn soon, they would retrieve enough guards and paladins that would allow them to make a serious expedition into the forest to retrieve the princess.

Peeking through the narrow slit of her helmet, Taenya caught sight of Amari's focused face.

“Where is she? I'm getting worried, Amari. We've been at this since last night. What if she—”

“Taenya, she's fine. I know you're worried, but Gwyn is resourceful. She fought all of those mercenaries, grown men and women. Professionals. Alone, and came out on top. Have faith.”

“It's just...”

The paladin stepped closer and grabbed Taenya and jerked her slightly to look into her eyes through the slit. “Stop. We will find her. I know you are worried, and you have done an admirable job. Her mother will be proud that such a woman has stepped in and filled the role you have. Keep. Faith. Gwyn is stronger than any of us. She used her magic to send me away to keep me safe. Now, I am going to have a very *pointed* discussion about that with her, but I still respect the decision.”

Taenya nodded, feeling a rush of emotions well up inside of her. She really had come to see Gwyn as sort of an adopted daughter, hadn't she? She sighed again, forcing those distractions down. She had a job—a duty to her princess. Amari was right. Taenya needed to keep the faith. She nodded and they started moving again. Taenya glanced at the woman next to her. “Still, the silence... It's unnerving. Shouldn't they have ambushed us by now?”

Amari, with a hint of consternation in her eyes, responded, “Typically, from what I've been taught, the Valeni wouldn't let outsiders trespass this deep. But these aren't the Valeni we know—or so it seems. Their changes might have altered their tactics.”

Taenya merely nodded.

As the sun reached midday, the paladins' formation shifted, signaling the detection of an entity ahead. A squad of Valeni emerged, their attire a mix of leather cuirasses and light gear, but it was the leader, however, that commanded immediate attention. His body was adorned with inky-black scales, intimidating horns, and, astonishingly, wings.

An involuntary gasp escaped Taenya's lips.

Raising his hands in a gesture of peace, the Valeni leader inadvertently set the paladins on edge. The tips of his fingers curved into sharp claws that were as black as his scales.

With an air of caution, Amari noted, “I've always heard that the Valeni strike first and never bother to engage in conversation.”

A cryptic smile played on the leader's lips as he quipped, “Ah, Encroacher. At least you understand the significance of what I come to do.”

Taenya's resolve hardened, and she took a bold step forward, brushing past Amari's arm that tried to hold her back. “What is that?”

The Valeni's gaze sharpened, focusing intently on her. “You, are you the knight sworn to the princess?”

Her heart raced. *Fuck.*

Taenya set herself up for a confrontation. “I am. Where is she? If you've done anything to her—”

“She remains unharmed,” he responded coolly. “My father has seen to it that she receives the right of hospitality. She’s free to go whenever she pleases.”

Amari’s voice was sharp, like a blade on the whetstone. “*Can* she actually leave?”

He looked Amari directly in the eyes, his tone dripping with contempt. “Yes, whenever she wishes. We maintain our honor. Perhaps you Loreni should learn to do the same.”

With a quick gesture, Taenya halted the paladin before she could retort. “Amari, let me handle this,” she whispered.

Amari shot a seething look at the man but held her tongue.

“We do not wish to intrude upon your lands,” Taenya began, choosing her words carefully. “Our charge was chased into your forest by those who would harm her. We merely want to retrieve her and bring her to safety. May we do this?”

His lips curled into a smile, filled with unexpected respect. “I’ve seen what she did to her attackers. Quite the force, that one. They tell me you are Taenya?”

She nodded, piecing together that Gwyn must’ve shared this.

“Fine. You’ve also been granted the right of hospitality. But for you, you are the responsibility of the princess. Do not embarrass your liege. We’ll escort you to her.”

While she likely knew the answer, she had to ask.

“And the others?” Taenya inquired.

His answer was cold and unforgiving. “Any Loreni approaching will die.”

Before she could formulate a response, a sharp whistle pierced the air. Shadows detached from trees, figures swooped from the skies, and within seconds, Valeni soldiers tripled the number of Taenya’s group.

How did we miss them?

Taenya’s eyes met Amari’s fierce, defiant ones, and realized the paladin wasn’t surprised.

She knew they were there and wasn’t worried.

“We can handle this,” Amari murmured.

The paladins might, but her House Guard couldn’t. They’d be cut down before the paladins could finish off the enemy. No, Taenya knew what she had to do.

“We can’t risk Gwyn’s safety,” Taenya responded, her mind racing to evaluate their options. “Valeni are known for their particular code of honor. He’d have ordered an attack otherwise.”

Amari’s brow furrowed. “You’re certain about this?”

Oxylus

Taenya's resolve was unwavering. "Absolutely. I'll retrieve Gwyn, and we'll regroup."

Shifting her focus back to the Valeni leader, she inquired, "What's your name?"

He stood tall, exuding authority. "Rhion of Clan Wren."

"And when can we depart from the forest?"

He quirked an eyebrow, clearly irritated. "She's free to leave. She saved my sister and thus earned our respect. Your princess is safe—on my honor. My sister... she's dear to me."

That was the only reassurance Taenya needed.

Sharing a final understanding glance with Amari, she watched as her comrade signaled the rest to pull back.

With a deep breath, she strode to him, then Taenya removed her helmet and smirked. "Alright, Rhion, lead the way."

His smile returned as he looked her in the eyes, his own slitted pupils were tinged with mystery. "Welcome to Aerival Forest, Taenya, loyal knight of Princess Gwyn. Perhaps, here, you might uncover truths about your heritage."