
First Impressions

Earlier

Nestled amidst the fragments of its egg, a white, glittering form started to unfurl. As the shell fell away, a small, scaled creature was revealed that shimmered with a breathtaking radiant brilliance. Gwyn stared in wide-eyed astonishment as the creature moved clumsily within the remnants of its once protective shell. As it tipped over, it rolled onto its back, revealing a tiny, round belly that was just as shimmering white as the rest of it.

As it caught sight of Gwyn, it squeaked, the soft, high-pitched sound echoing through the silent burrow and was. So. Cute.

An involuntary squeak escaped from deep within her.

The tiny creature shook its head, seeming disoriented, and then slowly rolled onto its feet. With a shakiness that betrayed its newborn status, it pushed itself upright, wobbling slightly before finding its balance.

Then, as it lifted its head to look at her, Gwyn felt her breath hitch in her throat. The creature had bright, piercing blue eyes, a mirror image of her own, but instead of the familiar round pupils of a human, they were slitted.

The real surprise, however, was when it stretched, revealing a pair of delicate, gossamer-thin wings that unfurled from its back. Their translucent texture caught the meager light within the burrow, scattering iridescent sparkles across the cavernous walls.

Gwyn gasped, her heart pounding in her chest as realization dawned.

It's a baby dragon!

“Oh. My. Goodness. You are adorable!” Gwyn couldn't contain her excitement. The words burst forth from her lips, echoing through the burrow. The dragon seemed to perk up at her exclamation, its tail twitching as it tilted its head, appearing to study her with those bright, intelligent eyes.

Gwyn could hardly believe it.

The little dragon was about the size of a housecat, its scales a gleaming pearly white, as though carved from moonlight itself. Its eyes, a striking blue, held an enchanting sparkle that seemed to match

her own. The wings, now folded on its back, were like a delicate lacework of dew-laden spiderwebs, catching the light and reflecting the colors of the surrounding environment.

Its tiny claws, though sharp, were still proportionally small. A ridge of soft, white spikes ran from the crown of its head down to the tip of its tail, giving it an almost regal appearance. The dragonet exuded a sense of innocent curiosity as it swayed slightly, looking around the burrow with those captivating eyes.

It was, without a doubt, the most beautiful, adorable creature Gwyn had ever seen.

As Gwyn drew closer to the dragon, she noticed it begin to shiver, its tiny body unable to hold onto the heat that had been previously cocooned by the eggshell. Without a second thought, she instinctively drew upon her mana, and with an ease that defied her tired mental state, she summoned a small ball of flame into existence with her **[Draco-pyromancy]**.

The baby dragon glanced towards the flame that flickered with comforting warmth, then turned its gaze toward Gwyn.

It looked at her with such intense focus that Gwyn felt a sudden rush of mana surging from her core. It flowed unbidden, directed towards the dragon, creating a tangible line of energy that bridged the gap between them.

This rush was so powerful, it left her feeling slightly dizzy.

It felt as if some sort of connection was formed, an invisible lifeline tethering their existences together.

But then, something extraordinary happened. From this link, an unexpected sensation resonated, <<Happy! Safe!>>

Then came another sensation, <<Hunger?>>

Her eyes shot open as she realized it was as if she could feel the emotions of the dragon.

<<Hunger!>>

She couldn't help but chuckle at this peculiar, yet endearing communication. "Are you hungry?" she asked, the joy evident in her voice.

The cat-sized dragonet, encouraged by her response, edged its way closer.

Gently, Gwyn reached down and scooped it into her arms, cradling the small creature close to her chest. It nestled in comfortably, no longer quivering from the cold. "Are you a boy dragon or a girl dragon, I wonder?"

The sense of <<Confusion?>> that followed her question made her sigh. "Don't worry! We'll figure it out! Not like you have a skirt to lift," she said with a touch of humor in her voice.

Oxylus

Before she could stop it, the dragon clambered onto her tattered dress and found a comfortable spot on her shoulder.

Gwyn giggled at the ticklish sensation.

“Let’s go find you some food!” she proposed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Oh my gosh, Taenya’s not going to believe this! Amari probably won’t be surprised though,” she mused aloud, her mind already racing with the tales she would share.

Ah, hopefully Amari will forgive me.

When Gwyn and her little companion emerged from the burrow, she realized much more time passed than she thought as it seemed it was already the next day, and a bit of her own confusion flitted through her tired mind.

But then she shrugged it off and set off to go hunt.

Who cares about mana shenanigans! I have a baby dragon!



Present

With a soft groan, Neira roused from the darkness that had claimed her.

A pulsating pain throbbed at the back of her skull as her hand moved instinctively to the source. A groan escaped her and the world was a hazy blur, wavering as she blinked open her eyes.

The sight that greeted her made her eyes go wide and a chill go down her spine and into her tail.

The Encroacher was there, standing with an imposing demeanor, her eyes ignited with the blazing fire of drakyn flames. Two orbs of the same, fierce flame of scarlet and gold hovered menacingly above her hands.

Then there was the little drakyn perched on her shoulder surveying Neira with wary eyes.

A sharp intake of breath drew Neira’s attention to her surroundings.

Her bow lay shattered on the ground.

If I can get my dagger...

“Who are you?” The girl asked in the Ikiosan Common tongue

Neira looked up at her, squinting against the radiance of the girl’s fire-imbued gaze.

Manabound - Resilience

Her mind spun in thought, it was her own complacency that had led her to this point. Despite her current predicament, she had not formally lost. She was honor-bound to fight, but the odds were stacked against her.

And then there was the drakyn...

Her hand went back to her aching head, flinching at the touch.

She pulled it back and saw her blood smeared on her hand.

The girl's flaming orbs extinguished instantly, and she crouched down, concern etching her face.

"Are you alright?" she asked, her tone laced with genuine worry.

An involuntary scowl twisted Neira's face at the girl's concern. "I am fine, Encroacher. You will die by my b-blade," Neira gritted out, her voice raspy.

Her hand darted to her side, searching for her blade.

But her heart sank as she saw the girl staring at her, her eyebrows arched in silent inquiry. Silently, she gestured to the ground next to her where Neira's blade lay.

Neira took a painful breath, each throb of her head echoing her defeat.

The girl sighed, running a hand through her hair. She looked older, taller from this close, yet Neira refused to be cowed by her stature.

She had claws, after all.

"Look, I'm... we're lost. I don't mean you any harm," the girl pleaded, her gaze shifting between Neira and the drakyn on her shoulder.

"As if you could harm me. If it weren't for that branch, I could have..." Neira began, ready to rebuke her claims when the girl cut her off.

"You've been following me for a while, yeah. I know."

Neira's heart skipped a beat. "*You knew?*"

"Of course... you weren't exactly subtle, but you falling scared the shi-crap out of me. I probably peed a little bit. I wasn't expecting that at all. Plus, your wings kind of stand out." The girl quickly added, "Not that they're not amazing! They're sooo cool! Sorry, I didn't mean anything bad by that."

A wave of resignation washed over Neira, her shoulders drooping in surrender. "Then you have bested me," she admitted, lowering her gaze and exposing her neck. "End it Encroacher. I only ask that you make it quick."

“Wooaahhh, hold on. What the heck? No. Heck no. I’m not killing you,” the girl interjected, a wave of panic visible in her eyes.

“Then why have you penetrated so deep into the forest?” Neira asked, incredulous.

The girl’s eyes widened for a moment then she collapsed onto her butt in front of Neira, letting out an exaggerated exhale. “I thought I was going back *out* of the forest.”

Neira sighed. “Bested by an Encroacher who doesn’t even have a sense of direction.”

“What the heck is an Encroacher? And what the heck are you?” the girl asked.

Neira narrowed her eyes. “I am drak’val. Why did you steal that drakyn?”

The girl glanced at the small thing that was on her shoulder. The drakyn rubbed its head against the girl’s and let out a squeak. “I didn’t steal him—”

“Her,” Neira corrected. “That’s a female drakyn.”

The girl smiled. “Her,” she accepted. “I didn’t steal her. I found myself in her nest, and all the other eggs were hatched and she was left alone. I fed my mana into her egg and she hatched. We’re connected now.”

Neira almost gasped, but schooled her expression. “As Valeni, it is my duty to protect the forest.”

“And you’re doing a great job of it,” the girl mocked lightly as she looked at Neira’s wounded state. “Look, I don’t wanna fight you. You go your way, I’ll go mine. I just have to get out of here. I was chased by bad guys who wanted to kidnap me...” The girl shook her head. “No, that’s not right. Sorry. I led them in here, because there were so many and I needed space to kill them.”

Neira’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “You have been blooded?” she asked with a bit more enthusiasm than was probably proper.

The girl, Gwyn, tilted her head to one side, clearly confused. “I mean, I got hurt a bit but that’s a weird way of—”

“No, I mean you have killed?” Neira interrupted, forcing her voice to take on a softer tone.

A flurry of emotions danced across Gwyn’s face before settling on an expression of somber resignation. Her shoulders slumped as she nodded in confirmation. “Yes. Too many. I’m not proud of it. But... but they just keep trying to hurt my people.”

A sense of understanding washed over Neira. Protecting your people was a noble task, an expectation of their culture. Perhaps this Encroacher was not entirely devoid of honor. She could offer her a decent fight.

“I am Neira, Encroacher. I beseech your honor, allow me to gather myself and then we may fight as is proper.”

Gwyn gave her a long, searching look. “I’m Gwyn, and I’m not going to fight you. You obviously bumped your head far too hard.” She paused, shaking her head. “Why do you keep calling me Encroacher?”

Neira narrowed her eyes. “Because that is what you are? You have *encroached* into our forest. Outsiders are not permitted, especially the... Loreni,” she spat the name of their ancient enemies with disgust. “Or even their Subverted followers.”

“Subverted? You mean the telv, orkun, raithe, and dwarves?”

Neira shook her head in denial. “Not the dwarves. They have honored the old ways. We have no quarrel with them. The rest were subverted by the invaders and turned against their own people.”

Gwyn cocked her head to the side. “Well, I’m not even from this world. I’m human—or terran, rather. I don’t know anything about any of that.”

Neira’s mind reeled. She was one of the sky people? She felt a strange sense of relief wash over her. “You... you speak Ikiosan, though. You have clearly fallen for their ways.”

Gwyn huffed in exasperation. “I’m speaking English. *Posso parlare italiano se preferisci.*”

Neira found the girl’s language enthralling. “What is this tongue?”

“In my world, a lot of people speak what we call English. Mana automatically translates English to Common—or Ikiosan or whatever. I also speak Italian, from my home.”

Gwyn began to unravel her tale, the soft glow of mana pulsating around her acting like a gentle aura in the otherwise oppressive shadows of the dense forest. Her words painted the picture of a world vastly different from their own, one where tongues were as diverse as the beings that inhabited it, names that felt foreign yet intriguing on Neira’s tongue.

The small drakyn perched on Gwyn’s shoulder purred gently, its sapphire eyes sparkling with a gentle, almost comforting light. It nestled against the girl’s neck, the delicate hum of its purr almost in tune with the rhythm of Gwyn’s voice.

Its gaze shifted to Neira intermittently, exuding a sense of curiosity and innocence that contrasted sharply with the tense atmosphere.

Neira found herself drawn in by the depth of Gwyn’s tales, her mind involuntarily deciphering and internalizing the exotic sounds and inflections of the strange languages.

“*si renthisj drak’valeni,*” she finally said.

Gwyn's face lit up with pure fascination, her lips curving into a wide smile that seemed to illuminate her features even more. She bombarded Neira with enthusiastic questions about her language, her body leaning in slightly, driven by an insatiable curiosity. Her drakyn let out a soft chirp, its eyes flickering between Neira and Gwyn as though trying to keep up with their exchange.

“Why are you talking to me like this?” Neira found herself blurting out, her words slicing through the chatty atmosphere. Her brows furrowed, her defensive walls slowly creeping up again as the memory of her duty towards the forest remained etched in her mind.

The girl, Gwyn, shrugged lightly, the corners of her mouth pulling upwards into a small, almost shy smile. Her blue eyes seemed to soften as she looked at Neira. “Because you're hurt, and I think you're really pretty with your wings and tail and horns. Purple scales? So cool. I wish I had wings.”

The words hit Neira like a sudden, rogue gust of wind, her eyes widening slightly in surprise. The rhythmic thump of her heart seemed to slow, every beat echoing the girl's words.

She thinks I'm pretty?

Neira watched as Gwyn nervously bit her lip, a flush creeping onto her cheeks as the drakyn on her shoulder chirped softly, its gaze moving between the two girls.

Gwyn must have realized what she said because she stumbled over her words, “No, sorry. Not like that! I just mean...” She let out a groan. “Can you point me the way out of the forest?”

Neira shifted, steeling herself to rise, her muscles protesting after the impact. A newfound determination filled her. *This is not an Encroacher but a lost sky person. I'm not disobeying father's orders!* she thought, glancing towards Gwyn, who watched her curiously.

Just as she was about to stand, a wave of agony crashed against her skull, the forest around her morphing into a swirling mass of green and brown. A jolt of nausea swelled within her stomach, her breath hitching as the world tipped sideways.

“Gwyn... the exit is...” she tried to speak, her voice a bare whisper against the cacophony of her throbbing head.

But the words never fully formed. Instead, they dissolved into a pained gasp as her knees gave way, her body buckling under the onslaught of dizziness and pain. The world tilted sickeningly as she crumbled, her hands scrabbling against the mossy forest floor, the texture rough against her claws.

Without warning, the nausea peaked, a sour taste flooding her mouth. Heat rose in her throat, the forest floor spinning as she hunched over, retching violently.

Dimly, through the haze of pain and nausea, she heard a soft, alarmed squeak—the baby drakyn. Its worried sapphire gaze fixed on her from Gwyn's shoulder, its little body tense as it watched her shameful ordeal unfold.

Neira heaved, her body convulsing with each gut-wrenching bout. Her vision swam, her senses dulled, the usually vibrant forest reducing to nothing more than a spinning, nauseating blur. Her limbs trembled, her breaths ragged and shallow as she fought against the throbbing pain and debilitating nausea, a low, pained groan escaping her lips.



Gwyn watched in horror as Neira crumpled, her body convulsing with each violent retch. Without thinking, she moved swiftly towards her to help. Kneeling next to Neira, she carefully gathered the strands of her hair, pulling them back to clear her face.

But an abrupt slap from Neira's wing made her draw back, stinging surprise replacing her concern. "Oh, okay. Sorry," she muttered, slightly chagrined.

She shifted, careful to stay clear of the flailing wing while still managing to hold Neira's hair back.

As she watched Neira's distress, realization struck.

She has a concussion.

The symptoms were there—the loss of balance, nausea, confusion.

They needed help. And soon.

Once Neira was done retching, Gwyn glanced at her, trying to catch her eyes. "Neira," she said, her voice low and urgent. "We need to get you home. You need help."

The dragon-girl swayed, her eyes glazed. "I'm fine. Just need... sleep," she mumbled, her eyelids fluttering.

"No, no sleep," Gwyn responded quickly, patting Neira's cheek lightly. "You need to stay awake. Can you tell me where your home is?"

Neira gestured weakly in a direction and Gwyn nodded, aiding the semi-conscious girl to her feet. "This may not feel good," she warned, her heart hammering in her chest.

She drew in her mana, the familiar rush of energy making her feel slightly more grounded. She had done this before. She could do this again.

Channeling the power of her **[Blink]** spell, she surrounded both Neira and the little dragon in her arms with a shimmering layer of her blue and white mana, before disappearing and reappearing in the direction Neira had pointed.

The sudden drain on her mental stamina made her stagger slightly along with a <<*Panic, Surprise, Awe*>> from the little dragon on her shoulder, but she bit her lip and pressed on, using a combination of walking and **[Blinking]** to travel to help.

It took hours, but as they neared Neira's home, the dragon-girl suddenly jolted alert. "You can't be here! Oh no, oh no, oh no," she stammered, panic creeping into her eyes as she started hyperventilating.

Gwyn drew her close, her heart aching at Neira's fear. "Look, you need help. And if anything happens, I can run," she assured her, her tone steady despite her own worries. "We can sneak. I can do that. Where's your house?"

Seeing Neira's terrified expression, Gwyn made a decision.

Black mana.

She rarely used it, but it was necessary now. Focusing on the concept of *conceal*, she felt her presence dim, as if she was merging with the darkness around her, blending into the shadows ever so slightly.

"See?" she whispered to Neira, giving her a reassuring smile. "Where's your house?"

Neira whimpered but pointed, and Gwyn took a deep breath, ready to brave the unknown for the sake of this hurt girl.

Stepping into the moonlit town with Neira was like stepping into a minefield, each footfall, each crunch of leaf underfoot a potential trigger for unwanted attention.

Neira's town was an array of beautifully constructed wooden houses, their windows sparsely lit by soft, warm light, casting long, twisted shadows that served as their sanctuary. Gwyn held onto Neira tightly, taking in the scent of wood and pine that wafted from the houses. Underneath that scent, however, was something earthy, something primal that marked this place as Neira's home.

They moved silently, ducking from one shadow to the next, each moment of exposure making Gwyn's heart pound in her chest.

They needed to avoid getting caught, but they also needed to move fast. Neira was getting weaker with every passing second, her body leaning heavily on Gwyn. The vibrant strength she displayed earlier was fading, replaced by a fragile vulnerability that tightened Gwyn's grip on her.

Gwyn could hear the rhythmic clink of metal-on-stone in the distance. Squinting her eyes against the moonlight, she saw the patrol of guards marching on their nightly rounds through the

forest town. Their metallic armor shimmered with a faint silver glow, throwing back the soft, pale moonlight. Her heart pounded, the drumming rhythm echoing in her ears, its tempo increasing as the guards neared.

Easy, stay in the shadows, Gwyn reminded herself, drawing Neira into the comforting embrace of a thick tree's shadow.

They huddled there, Neira's breath hitching in her throat, her slender scaled body pressed against Gwyn's. The guards passed, unaware of their presence. A sigh of relief escaped Gwyn, her grip on Neira softening, but she was acutely aware that this was just the beginning.

Their journey was punctuated by near-misses that played out like a cruel game of hide-and-seek. The second one came as a late-night wanderer, a silhouette against the moonlit backdrop of the town.

With only moments to spare, Gwyn guided Neira into a narrow alleyway, their backs pressing against the cold stone of the wall, their breaths held hostage in their throats.

Her eyes scanned their surroundings, searching for a potential escape route. *The rooftops are too exposed. The shadows provide better coverage, but we're cornered here,* she thought, her fingers digging into Neira's arms reassuringly.

All they could do was wait, wait for the danger to pass.

It's only dangerous for me... Maybe...

No, she wouldn't leave Neira. She'd help the girl.

The wanderer moved on, leaving them in the silent darkness of the alley. Gwyn slowly released her breath, her chest deflating with the exertion of holding it.

Neira was trembling against her, the stress of their predicament manifesting physically. Gwyn placed a steadying hand on her shoulder, giving her a weak but encouraging smile.

Gwyn wanted nothing more than to use her **[Blink]** spell, to whisk them both away, but she knew better. *The sudden flash of mana could alert everyone around us. We need to stay low, move slowly.* The tantalizing option of a quick movement was constantly pushed away by necessity.

The black mana weaving around them, aiding their concealment, was a reassurance, but it was not infallible. They had to rely on their caution and patience. It was a game of shadows and silence, the stakes high and the margin for error nonexistent.

Gwyn tightened her hold on Neira, channeling her inner Sabina as she pressed forward into the unforgiving night. Every step was a calculated risk, every moment a test of her strategic thinking and survival instinct. The gradual progress gnawed at her patience, but she held on, her determination flaring brighter with each step towards their destination.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of heart-stopping near-misses and breathless waiting, they reached a large house at the center of the town surrounded by vast trees and gardens. It was a beautiful structure, almost regal in its stature, with tall windows and an expansive door that exuded a sense of warm welcome. Despite its inviting nature, Gwyn couldn't shake off the anxiety knotting her stomach as they approached it.

She pressed her back against the exterior wall, pulling Neira with her. The girl was barely conscious now, her breath coming out in ragged gasps. Her glazed eyes held a flicker of fear, her mouth moving soundlessly as she looked at Gwyn.

With a soft squeeze of assurance, Gwyn peeked around the corner, checking for any guards. The coast was clear. Mustering the last of her strength and resolve, she helped Neira towards the entrance of the house.

As they reached the door, Neira's voice came out in a whisper, her words filled with trepidation. "My father, he will not be as open as I. Just leave me here."

"No." Gwyn shook her head resolutely, her grip tightening around Neira's waist while one of the girl's wings wrapped around Gwyn. "I've got you."

The small dragon on Gwyn's shoulder, a silent companion throughout their ordeal, stirred and gently leaned over, nudging its head against Neira's.

<<Sad, Anxious, Hopeful>>

It was a tender moment, a quiet reassurance that they weren't alone. Neira's eyes fluttered shut, her face relaxing slightly as she leaned into the creature's touch. Her eyes blinked open again, and she exhaled.

Gwyn tentatively reached out, her hand encircling the cold metal of the handle. She cast one last glance at Neira, a silent promise in her eyes before she turned the handle and pushed open the door. The hinges creaked in protest, a harsh sound in the stillness of the night.

Gently, she guided Neira inside, their footsteps echoing softly against the high ceilings.

A low voice called out in Neira's fascinating and strange, sibilant tongue of Drak'valeni. The sharp sounds echoed ominously through the house before they abruptly cut off.

Out of a brightly lit room just inside the entrance stepped a man.

The faint glow from the oil lamps lining the halls danced off his black scales, casting an eerie sheen on his face. His eyes flicked between Neira and Gwyn, his gaze sharp and assessing. His eyes narrowed and filled with an inky black, a telltale sign of mana use.

<<Surprise, Worried>>

Gwyn froze.

Just like Neira, he sported curved, regal-looking horns, and dark wings unfolded from his back. Gwyn's heart thudded wildly in her chest.

This must be Neira's father.

As his hand moved toward his waist where a sword lay, her free hand shot up in a placating gesture. "Wait!" she blurted out, her voice echoing in the silent hall. "She's hurt! Help her, please!"

The man's response was a growl, a low rumble that vibrated through the air.

It was menacing, his mana-induced eyes seemingly piercing through Gwyn. The sound of footsteps suddenly echoed through the hallways, growing louder with each passing second until five wingless guards materialized, their expressions equally fierce. A young man, bearing the same scaled wings as Neira's father, trailed behind.

As the guards moved to draw their weapons, Neira's father raised a hand but kept his focus on Gwyn. "What did you do, Encroacher?!"

"I'm terran, not an Encroacher. And she fell! I'm just trying to get her help. She has a concussion, um, head injury. She's having trouble—"

"F-Father?" Neira's voice was a raspy whisper, interrupting Gwyn's hurried explanation. She had switched to Common, Gwyn noted, likely for her sake.

Instantly, the man's harsh facade softened, his eyes flooding with worry as he rushed over to his daughter. "Neira, my heart. What happened?"

"Not a beast, but I brought her back," Neira managed, her gaze flicking towards Gwyn. "D-don't hurt her."

Her father nodded as he put an arm around her, gently pulling her away from Gwyn, and guided her towards the room.

Gwyn took a step to follow but was stopped by the man's commanding voice. "Remain here."

She nodded quickly, and quickly explained, "She fell from a tree and hit her head. Standing made her vomit and she has been struggling to stay awake. She needs—"

"She needs a healer. Do not speak, Encroacher. My patience—" His sentence cut off as his gaze landed on the baby dragon perched on Gwyn's shoulder. His eyes widened in surprise. "How..."

"Help her first," Gwyn interjected, keeping her voice firm. "I'll explain everything, I swear."

He turned towards the young man, barking out a series of orders in their native language.

The young man nodded and sprinted out the door, followed closely by two of the guards. The remaining three circled Gwyn, their weapons now drawn as they assessed her for any threat.

Oxylus

Neira's father disappeared into the room with her, leaving Gwyn alone with the guards. She waited while her heart beat like a jackhammer.

She had done her part; now, it was up to them to save Neira.



Gwyn had lost track of time, her muscles stiff from sitting rigidly on the staircase across from the entrance. The guards' eyes never left her, their suspicious stares seemed as if they were trying to drill into her very soul.

The wait was broken by the return of the young man, who she suspected was Neira's brother. He was accompanied by another dragon-like figure whose presence screamed of authority and expertise—most likely a doctor or healer.

Hopefully a healer like Adrienne

She watched as they hurriedly entered the room where Neira was.

Hours seemed to pass before Neira's father emerged, his features drawn and weary. His black scales seemed to absorb the dim light of the oil lamps, adding to his tired demeanor.

“Come, terran,” he ordered in a resonant tone that belied his clear weariness.

With a nod, Gwyn rose to her feet.

The guards flanked her as she followed Neira's father down the hallway and into another room. Once inside, he pointed towards a low-backed chair, indicating for her to sit. He grabbed a second chair and angled it towards hers before gracefully settling down, his wings draping over the back of the chair.

Curiously, she watched his wings, noting the casual ease with which he let them drape. *Hub, interesting.*

His dark gaze focused on her, the intensity of his stare causing her to squirm slightly. “Now, tell me everything.”

Taking a deep breath, she nodded. Her tale began with the introduction of her identity, then moved on to the details of the castle attack, and concluded with the events that had transpired thereafter. It was a long, exhaustive explanation, but he listened quietly, never interrupting. His expression remained unreadable, his dark eyes watchful and contemplative.

When Gwyn finally stopped, she found herself holding her breath, anxious to hear his response.

His eyes darted to the dragon who was, against all odds, sleeping soundly on her shoulder with its tail curled over her shoulders while its claws clinched to her.

The silence was almost palpable, like a shroud that enveloped them, before it was cut through by the deep timbre of Neira's father's voice.

"*Princess*," he spat out the word as if it were a curse. "By your own admission you have joined the culture of the Encroachers. Tell me why I shouldn't cut you down right here?"

Gwyn exhaled, tension tightening her shoulders. Despite her efforts, her attempt to appear non-hostile was misconstrued as a sign of weakness. *Seems it's time for a show of force*. Channeling mana through her core, she let the fiery essence leak from her eyes.

"Because, truthfully, I've been nice. If you try *anything*, Neira or not. I will kill *anyone* who attacks me. Neira mentioned that I was 'blooded', but I didn't elaborate on *how* bloody my past is."

He scoffed. "You are what, thirteen? You are a child, just like my daughter."

"Yes, and this child has *easily* killed over a hundred soldiers," she replied calmly.

Before he could respond, she channeled more mana and **[Blinked]** to the other side of the room.

The abrupt movement startled the dragon, who snapped her jaws in surprise.

<<*Surprise, Annoyed*>>

Gwyn winced. "Sorry, girl," she apologized quickly, drawing Raafe's Legacy.

Simultaneously, Neira's father rose to his feet, his scales glistening under the flickering light of the lamps. Gwyn conjured a ball of fire above her hand, adding to the dramatic display. "Now, what is it going to be? Are we going to fight for no... *damn* reason? Or are you going to act like a civilized person? I saved your daughter. I could have left her, but I didn't. She's a nice girl, save for her somewhat obsessive desire for honor-bound duels to the death. So, can we dispense with threats and focus on her wellbeing?"

He studied the fire dancing above her hand, then his gaze shifted to the dragon. His defiance seemed to evaporate, replaced by resignation. He muttered something to the guards, sparking a short exchange. A sharp reprimand from Neira's father quelled further questions. Saluting, the guards vacated the room.

Gwyn let her fire dissipate and resheathed her sword.

Neira's father took a deep breath before he straightened his back and dipped his head to her. "Princess Gwyn. I am Corin Wren, the Headman of Eldenthor and Patriarch of Clan Wren," he introduced himself, his demeanor now respectful. "Welcome to my house. While here, you are under my protection, as per the customs of our land."

Gwyn nodded her head in acknowledgment. "I am grateful for your hospitality, Headman Wren."

"And...thank you for saving Neira. The healer says she wouldn't have survived if not for your timely intervention." His voice softened, and Gwyn knew they had made progress.

"Now, perhaps we can discuss how you have become the chosen for a drakyn?"

Gwyn glanced at the peeved dragon on her shoulder and smiled. "I'd love to talk about her. She's pretty amazing, but first, can I see Neira?"

The man sighed. "You may see her tomorrow, tonight she must rest." He raised a hand before she could protest. "Even I was kicked out, and I brought you here so they could move her to her room. I will have a room prepared for you. You must be tired."

Gwyn nodded her understanding, fatigue subtly creeping into her muscles.

Talk about first impressions.

As Corin moved to arrange for her accommodation, Gwyn stayed standing there a moment longer, her gaze drifting to the dragon nestled on her shoulder, recalling what he said about being a *chosen*. She was sure racking up the titles...

<Tired...>

Gwyn smiled softly at the cute baby dragon. She was tired too.

Tomorrow, Neira. We have a lot to talk about tomorrow.

She took a deep breath and followed after Corin who waited patiently outside the door.

Gwyn had to admit, she was ready to rest and prepare for the next day.

Then I need to get back before Taenya and Amari think I'm dead.