

Prologue

Fateful Encounters

Past Spring

Aila stood in the heart of her workcenter, her body heavy with the weight of a long day's work. She stifled a yawn, her hand moving to gather her belongings into her satchel. The room was quiet, the usual hum of activity having died down as the day drew to a close.

Across the room, one of her workers, a sun elf man on loan from the local temple, was also packing up. His movements were slow and deliberate, the fatigue evident in his posture.

“Going home, Miss Aila?” he asked, his voice echoing slightly in the near-empty room.

Aila nodded, her hand moving to sling her satchel over her head. “Yes, finally. I’m exhausted.”

The man chuckled, a warm, friendly sound that cut through the quiet. “Get some rest. See you tomorrow?”

Aila nodded again, her hand moving to cover a yawn. “Bye! Don’t forget to lock up.”

With that, she stepped out into the bustling streets of Nornport. The city was alive with activity, oil lamps casting a warm glow over the cobblestones. The sounds of laughter and conversation filled the air, emanating from the taverns and eateries that lined the streets.

As she walked, her mind lost in thought, she nearly stepped in front of a passing carriage. A shout of warning pulled her back to reality, and she jumped back just in time.

“Woaaah! Watch where you’re going! You could have been trampled!” the driver yelled, his voice filled with irritation.

Aila’s heart pounded in her chest as she watched the carriage pass, a noble peering out of the window with a scowl. She offered a quick, apologetic wave before continuing on her way, her steps a bit more cautious.

Her thoughts turned to Aredd, her colleague who had left for Calling, the capital, weeks ago. He was attempting to secure more funding for their research, a task that had become increasingly difficult in recent times.

After their initial discovery of *Essentia*, it was as if everything they did was not seen as important. The Church had made large strides in the field of the arcane, but beyond finding out something that she knew was important, no one else saw it.

Now, they had to scrounge by on what little funds they had remaining, their previous large team moved to other tasks by the King's terran advisor who believed their focus should be on things more tangible.

Funds had been redirected to Lady Maxwell's secret project along with Rosale's army and navy, leaving Aila and Aredd's work underfunded and undervalued.

Aila understood the reasoning, but it didn't lessen the sting of disappointment.

They had come so far, only to be halted by circumstances beyond their control. She knew their research could be instrumental in the fight against the monsters that threatened the kingdom, if only they were given the chance.

Their work was key in understanding what had *happened* to them, and what this new reality meant.

It shouldn't matter if it wasn't flashy or wasn't something someone could see with their eyes.

Thus, the king thought to leave that field of research that included Essentia to the Church.

They're looking at the symptoms! Not the cause!

And now there was word that the Church would be spreading their so-called Ceremony of Paths.

It infuriated her.

The entire field would become a walled garden that only allowed those who went through the Church to see.

She wanted to enlighten everyone.

Not just a holy few.

She shook her head, such thoughts always worked her up.

Finally, she arrived home, her satchel landing with a soft thud on her table. She groaned, her stomach rumbling in protest. She was hungry, but the thought of cooking was daunting.

After a long, drawn-out debate with herself, she settled for a simple meal of cheese and fruit. It wasn't much, but it would tide her over until morning.

As she climbed into bed, her thoughts were a whirlwind of plans and possibilities. Tomorrow was another day, another chance to make a difference. With that thought, she drifted off to sleep, the challenges of the day fading into the quiet of the night.



Oxylus

Early Autumn

A week passed in a blur of work and routine, the days blending together in a monotonous cycle. One morning, as Aila was getting ready in her room, a knock echoed through the quiet space. She paused, her hand hovering as she braided her hair.

With a sigh, she quickly finished dressing, her movements hurried and slightly frantic. She smoothed down her skirt, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear before making her way to the door.

Upon opening it, she was met with the sight of a knight, his armor bearing the colors of the noble House that governed the city. His face was solemn, his eyes holding a gravity that sent a chill down Aila's spine.

“Good morning, are you Miss Aila Iliric?” he asked, his voice formal and stiff.

Aila nodded even as her heart started beating like the increasing tempo of a drum. “I am. Can I help you?”

The man took a deep breath. “I am sorry to meet under these circumstances, but I regret to inform you that there was an attack by monsters on the road,” he said slowly without taking his eyes off of her, then taking another breath before continuing, “And... Mister Aredd Vhoor was one of the victims. Again, I am really sorry, miss. But, he listed you as a contact with the caravaners in case of his death.”

Aila felt the world tilt beneath her feet. “Aredd?” she whispered.

The knight nodded, his expression sympathetic. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

She didn’t even see him leave.

The following days were a blur of grief and disbelief.

Aila moved through them like a ghost, her heart heavy with the weight of her loss. Aredd had been more than a colleague, he had been a friend, a confidant.

His absence left a void that nothing could fill.

In the absence of a body, she’d used what meager funds she could use to honor him with a memorial.

The number of attendees was depressingly small, and it crushed Aila’s heart.

Is this what I have to look forward to?

Her friend had lost his family when he was younger, and thus had no family for what remained of his belongings to go to. An esquire had come by later with a letter that let her know that Aredd had left everything to her.

Manabound - Resilience

After all that had happened over the last year, it wasn't much.

Two seasons passed in a haze of sorrow and determination.

Aila was alone now, her remaining team members having disbanded in the wake of Aredd's death. The funding for their research had dried up, leaving her with dwindling resources and a mountain of challenges.

Now, she sat alone in her workcenter, surrounded by the last few gems and cores that remained. She looked down at the tools she had prepared, the silver-based ink glinting in the soft light. Her arm was covered in drawings, a reference for the task ahead.

She was going to figure out a way to honor Aredd's memory. She was going to finish their work, no matter what it took. She owed him that much.

And so, with a deep breath, she picked up her tools, used her **[Examine Mana]**, and got to work.



Present

At the end of Autumn, Aila found herself wandering through the bustling port district of the city. The salty tang of the sea filled the brisk air, mingling with the scent of fresh fish and the earthy aroma of damp wood. The sounds of the city were a constant hum in the background, a symphony of voices, footsteps, and the creaking of ships in the harbor.

As she walked, something in her peripheral vision made her stop in her tracks. She turned, her gaze drawn to a sight that was causing quite a stir among the city folk.

Descending a gangplank from one of the docked ships was a tall woman with a mane of curly hair. But it wasn't the woman that had caught Aila's attention, nor the attention of literally anyone else in the vicinity.

It was the massive metal creature that followed in her wake. It looked like a large feline creature, but with two long appendages coming from its shoulders that swayed as if looking for threats.

Aila blinked, her mind struggling to process what she was seeing.

What the fuck? she thought, her eyes wide with shock and curiosity.

She watched as the woman and her companions, both living and metal, made their way through the crowd, a sense of awe and fear rippling through the onlookers.

Who was this woman? And what were those creatures?

Oxylus

Aila felt a spark of excitement ignite within her. Perhaps this was the breakthrough she had been waiting for.



Present

The legacy of Neira Wren's people was as timeless as the age-old forests of Eona they vigilantly safeguarded. The Clans of Aerin, who bore the heavy mantle of duty, defended the verdant bastions of the Aerival Forest against the ceaseless encroachment of an omnipresent enemy. Their resolve was unyielding, the fierceness of their spirit undeterred by the encircling menace. There was a rhythm to their survival that was almost like a relentless drumbeat. They marched forward, adapted, evolved.

Though, these past two winters had tested her people like never before.

It had been a little over two years since the event that shook their world to its very roots.

The Great Change had triggered the appearance of the Great Pillars, thrusting upon them the challenge of adapting in ways they hadn't imagined since the downfall of the Old Empire.

The collapse of that illustrious era had expelled them from their glorious cities, pushing them into the dense heart of the continent's forests.

A monumental shift, a cultural upheaval that had altered the course of their history forever. Ever since, they had been left in isolation, bereft of contact with their brethren from other Clans for over a century.

Have the others finally fallen to the onslaught? Are we the last ones standing?

The uncertainty hung over them like a specter, feeding the fervor of their resistance. It stoked the embers of their resilience, solidifying their commitment to hold the line.

In the hidden recesses of her heart, Neira held the hope that her fellow Valeni, if they still thrived, nurtured a similar spirit of defiance.

We will endure, no matter the cost.

Yet her thoughts, in that moment, were not preoccupied with the fate of their lost kin.

Instead, they were drawn inward, toward her own people and the profound upheaval they had undergone. In the wake of the celestial lights that appeared following the Great Change, a drastic transformation had befallen them.

The once-pure lineage of her people had become... *twisted*. As if they had been merged with the forest's reptiles in an amalgamation that had redefined their existence.

Manabound - Resilience

Their appearances had been forever changed, birthing an uncanny fusion of humanoid and reptile. Scales replaced the once smooth skin, claws emerged where once were hands, eyes adopted a slitted reptilian outlook, horns erupted from their heads like jagged mountain peaks, and a sinewy tail grew where none existed before.

Yet, the most profound change was not merely physical, it had pervaded their minds as well, changing their instincts and thoughts to be decidedly more... like their distant cousins.

Then... a precious few of them, like Neira and her family, had gained more.

Their bodies sprouted wings, the membranous extensions of power and freedom that set them apart from the rest.

Their transformation mirrored the twisted drakyyds who had claimed the central mountains and were even now establishing a new relationship with her people.

Or as those great beasts were referred to as now... *drakyns*.

Neira contemplated the implications of her people's newfound identity, the whirlwind of thoughts fluttering within her young mind, her half-valeni, half-drakyn heart pulsing with the rhythm of the relentless drumbeat.

We are changed, yet we endure. We are drak'valeni.



The cerulean hues of dusk were gently creeping over the verdant Aerinval Forest as Neira attempted to escape her home's confines. A headstrong thirteen and a half-year-old, her spirit embodied the fiery determination and untamed curiosity of her kin, the drak'valeni. As a telv turned half-drakyn, her vibrant purple scales served as a beautiful contrast to her pale complexion and a color that stood out even amongst her people.

"Ahem. And where do you think you are going?" a deep voice echoed through the wooden corridors of her home.

The question brought her stealthy departure to an abrupt halt, and she winced. Recognizing her father's authoritative tone, she slowly turned to face him, her brilliant, slitted eyes meeting his piercing gaze. The familiar twinkle of stern yet loving concern in his eyes made her heart flutter with a mixture of guilt and defiance.

"Just going to stretch my wings!" Neira blurted out, attempting to placate him with an innocent grin, her wingtips rustling with anticipation behind her.

Oxylus

Her father, Corin Wren, was not just the family patriarch; he held the influential position of Town Headman, presiding over the bustling town of Eldenthor. Simultaneously, as Head of Clan Wren, he had the daunting responsibility of leading their people and safeguarding their forested haven from any external threats.

Neira was aware of her father's crucial roles, especially in the current situation, as Eldenthor was one of the frontier towns. With its strategic location at the edge of Aerinval Forest, the town acted as the forest's protective barrier, its first line of defense against any incursions from the Kingdom of Avira that surrounded their vast forest on all sides.

The significance of that purpose was why her father was being so overprotective.

They had faced the first such incursion in years only the previous night. A small group of outsiders had dared to breach their tranquil sanctuary, disrupting the serene rhythms of their secluded life. The news had spread like wildfire, igniting a surge of unrest and apprehension within their community.

"Ducking out to stretch your wings, at this time?" Corin questioned, raising an eyebrow. His towering figure leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed and curved dark-grey horns giving him a regal appearance as his gaze bore into Neira's rebellious facade. "And perhaps catch a glimpse of an Encroacher or two while you're at it?" he asked, the rhetorical question hanging heavy in the air between them.

Neira squirmed under her father's scrutiny, her heart pounding in her chest as she was caught in her lie. She couldn't deny her urge to explore, to understand what was happening.

It was a part of who she was.

She wanted to fly, to be free to see what lay beyond the verdant expanse of the forest.

She stood her ground, chin lifted in defiance as she responded, "We need to know our enemy, don't we? If I am to become a worthy member of Clan Wren, I need to understand these threats."

Corin sighed, his stern expression softening as he looked at his audacious daughter.

She knew exactly what he was thinking, because he had told her so many times.

Her determination was admirable, her courage unmistakable. Yet, the protective instinct of a father conflicted with his role as Clan Head. Understanding her restless spirit, he had to find a way to keep her safe while allowing her the room she needed to grow and explore.

"You may approach the site at a *distance* and observe, but only if you accompany your brother Elgan and a squad of sentinels as they go relieve Rhion."

Rhion was her oldest brother, and the captain of the town's sentinels while her brother Elgan was a lieutenant who had joined last winter and had been steadily rising by his own merit—as was expected from a Son of Wren.

It... was also not what she wanted. In fact, it was the complete *opposite* of what she wanted.

Why can't he understand I'm not a child anymore?

“No! Dad!” Neira groaned, her fingers curling into frustrated fists at her sides. The prospect of being chaperoned by her older brother and the town's warriors felt like a leash on her budding independence.

Corin's gaze narrowed, his stern expression unyielding as he retorted, “Then you may not approach the incursion site.”

Frustration bubbled in Neira, threatening to spill over. Desperate for a compromise, she argued, “What if I swear to not go near the site. I will just fly tonight, then we can talk again tomorrow after the incursion is repelled.”

Corin seemed to mull over her proposal, his intense eyes locked onto hers as he gauged the sincerity behind her words. Pushing off from where he leaned, his tall figure dominated the room, a visual reminder of his power and authority.

“Swear to me as your Clan Head, that you will obey my rule, Neira Wren. You are to not approach the incursion or seek out those that, even now, your oldest brother defends against.”

Neira sucked in a deep breath as his words sank into her, marking the gravity of the situation. The seriousness of the oath demanded of her wasn't lost on the young drak'valeni. She understood the significance of swearing fealty to the Clan Head, a solemn promise that was not to be taken lightly.

With a determined nod, Neira straightened her posture, standing tall and regal. She offered her father a salute, pressing her closed fist's knuckles to her forehead before allowing it to fall back to her side in a respectful drop. “I swear, Patriarch Wren. I will avoid the Encroachers and stay away from the site of the incursion.”

Corin's firm nod came in response, an affirmation that her oath was accepted. “Then I will allow you to 'go stretch your wings.' Find a suitable beast to hunt and return with it, daughter.”

“Yes, father,” Neira replied, her voice strong and resolute.

She turned away from him, drawing a long, steadying breath as she prepared herself for her outing. The weight of their exchange lingered, and as she pushed open the door to step outside, she could still feel the intensity of her father's gaze on her.

Oxylus

Once outside, Neira took a moment to regain her composure, her chest heaving as she breathed in the cool, evening air. Her eyes fell closed as she absorbed the serenity of her surroundings, allowing the calming sounds of the forest to wash over her.

Opening her eyes again, the vibrant hues of the twilight sky served as a beautiful backdrop to the emerald canopy of the Aerinval Forest. She squared her shoulders, her wings fluttering in anticipation as she whispered to herself, "Time to hunt."

With her determined resolve fueling her spirit, Neira's wings spread and with a powerful downward thrust, she took off into the air and angled toward the forest.



Neira traced her path through the emerald expanse of the Val Forest with its towering trees that even now were growing due to an infusion of the abundant arcane energy.

Her vibrant purple scales shimmered in the dappling light that filtered through the leafy canopy, reflecting an array of colors that even others of her new kind had called mesmerizing. Her horns, jutting proudly from her forehead, were as resolute and sharp as her resolve, and her claws, potent and precise, flexed rhythmically with every movement.

Neira was the epitome of grace and agility.

Rather than merely flying, she bounded from branch to branch high above the ground with precision that could only be honed through years of practice. The joy of darting through the leafy canopy, harnessing her skills to maneuver through the dense network of branches, made her feel more alive than anything else.

But occasionally, having wings did come in handy... wingy?

They were helpful.

A branch ahead lay too far to be traversed by mere leaping, its distant location beckoning like a challenge to her prowess. Her wings, attuned to her intent, flared out, catching the air under their sturdy membrane. With a powerful thrust, she launched herself forward, her wings carrying her in a graceful glide across the distance.

She landed lightly on the new perch, her claws gripping the bark firmly, her tail coiling for added balance.

The heady thrill of flight coursed through her veins, the exhilaration of being one with the wind stirring her drakyn blood. Yet, her delight was interrupted by an incongruous rustle from the forest floor.

Neira froze, her senses heightened, her predatory gaze sweeping the verdant foliage beneath her.

There, amidst the symphony of nature, a foreign figure disrupted the harmony, a girl not much older than herself.

An Encroacher!

The girl was walking along the forest floor. Slowly. Cautiously.

Suspiciously.

This is far from the incursion point! I specifically tried to stay away!

Father's going to roast me.

Curiosity and responsibility warred inside of her.

The teenaged half-drakyn never had a chance.

Curiosity piqued, Neira drew her bow and nocked an arrow as she began tailing the Encroacher from high above, leaping from branch to branch in a near-silent pursuit. Her eyes remained locked onto the girl, observing her every move with the studied focus of a predator.

The girl halted, her hands reaching up to gather her dark, curly hair into a tight pony tail that revealed curious round ears.

What is she?

Neira used her **[Mana Sight]** to look closer, when suddenly, a surge of magical energy pulsed through the girl, causing her eyes to glow subtly in the dim morning light.

She has magic too!

This brought a different sort of revelation. Neira would need to tread carefully.

Because if the girl had penetrated this deep into the forest without her brother and his warriors stopping her... then it meant she was powerful.

She watched closer, trying to see what the girl had on her opposite shoulder.

The girl kept talking to... something, but Neira couldn't tell what from her vantage point so she slowly moved to tail the Encroacher.

What does she have with her?

Fascinated and intrigued, Neira continued her silent surveillance. Even though her drakyn eyes gave her the increased ability to see in the dark, she still couldn't make out what was on the girl's shoulder. It was, if she were to admit, utterly frustrating.

The curiosity that burned deep within her really wanted, no *needed* to know.

Her journey toward the incursion was completely forgotten as she endeavored to unravel the mystery before her.

She decided she had to see where this unexpected encounter would lead.

And if an opportunity rises, maybe I'll be blooded finally. Father will see that I am capable then.

'Just stay home,' her father had said. *Well, aren't I glad I didn't listen?* She thought to herself, a spark of thrill igniting within her as she followed the odd girl.

The girl's movements were hesitant, a sure sign of unfamiliarity with the forest's cryptic trails. But Neira was intrigued and her keen eyes tracked the girl's every move from her perch among the branches.

As the girl came to a sudden stop and hunched down, Neira followed her gaze. Nestled among the underbrush, a rabbit quietly navigated the forest floor, its twitching ears the only sign of its nervous anticipation.

To Neira's surprise, the girl drew a knife, her hand steady as her eyes remained focused on her prey. A split second later, an invisible force lifted the rabbit off the ground. Its desperate struggles were fruitless against the unseen power.

Then, with a gasp-inducing flash of light, the girl vanished.

Neira's eyes widened, the sudden disappearance leaving her momentarily stunned.

Where did she—

But just as quickly, the girl reappeared next to the suspended rabbit in another brilliant flash, and with a swift, practiced movement, she plunged her knife into it.

The girl was clearly not what she seemed and Neira couldn't help but be captivated by the inexplicable scene. All the while, as she observed the girl calmly dressing down the rabbit with the touch of an amateur who had only been shown a few times, the wheels of curiosity spun within Neira's mind.

Or rather, she remained stupefied there perched in the trees.

Then the sight of the girl using fire magic finally jarred Neira from her stupor.

But it wasn't just any fire.

It was a flame she would have recognized anywhere.

The distinctive scarlet and gold blaze of her people's now distant kin that ruled the mountains.

The girl's routine did not end there, however.

She cooked the rabbit then Neira watched as she meticulously sliced pieces and fed whatever was perched on her other shoulder before consuming some herself.

Manabound - Resilience

Neira didn't miss the subtle wince as the girl bit into the cooked meat, and she strained her ears to catch the hushed apology that the girl offered to her companion. It was in the language of the Encroachers, but Neira had been taught at a young age.

“Sorry it's bland. I promise I'm a better cook when I have proper supplies.”

Neira couldn't see the response from whatever it was that the girl spoke to, but a light giggle escaped from the girl, a gentle echo that filled the surrounding silence with an endearing melody.

She's an Encroacher, don't get attached, Neira.

With a sudden impulse to get closer and see once and for all what creature was with the girl, Neira shifted her weight on the branch. Her foot slipped, snapping the branch with an ominous crack.

Surprise flashed in her eyes as she lost her footing and fell.

A scream tore from her throat as the ground rushed up to meet her. At the last moment, her wings flared open, instinctively catching the wind. It was not enough to glide, but it broke her fall somewhat.

The jarring impact shook her as she crashed onto the forest floor, a sharp pain blooming in her head. Her world spun as the shock overcame her consciousness and she slipped into darkness, her last sight was of the girl shrieking in shock before her hands erupted in flames.

And peering down at her from its perch on the girl's shoulder...

Was a drakyn.