
Ties that Bind

Gwyn sensed a pulse of mana surge from her into Calista, who sat nestled beside her, both captivated by the duel unfolding before them. Next to Gwyn stood Neira, the young violet-scaled half-dragoness, her gaze riveted on the swordplay. She had wanted to challenge Taenya herself, but it seemed that her knight and Captain Wren had already struck a deal to spar.

So, the princess sat there, watching her knight duel as if she had a chip on her shoulder; as if she had everything to prove.

The duel began with Taenya holding her ground, her sword reflecting the subtle glints of sunlight. Rhion lunged forward, aiming a series of quick strikes at Taenya. She parried each. He tried feinting and moving in closer with his axe, but she simply sidestepped, and then a pulse of mana was the only warning before her knee connected with his stomach. She immediately pressed after him *hard*. After a moment, it was clear that he was being pushed back and would lose if he didn't do anything.

He tried to disengage by feinting toward her, and then with a wing-assisted burst of movement, tried to reset the match.

But before he could pull away, a bright flare of red mana enveloped Taenya's hand. In a split second, where her sword once was, now rested a spear.

Rhion's eyes widened in shock, his reflexes only allowing him another half-step of movement before the spear's shaft caught his ankle, sending him tumbling backward. But Taenya wasn't done. Just as he began to fall, she was already closing the gap between them. The spear vanished in another blink of red mana, and her sword was back, poised right above Rhion's chest.

He lay on the ground, breathing heavily.

Rhion didn't last thirty seconds.

He didn't stay down long, ready to go by the time he bounced back to his feet.

Oh, he was good. There was *zero* doubt about it. Gwyn could tell in his foot movements, in how he easily transitioned between each strike with no hesitance. But the moment Taenya used her first skill to knee him in the gut and then somehow *change* weapons mid-fight... yeah, he stood no chance.

She wasn't sure what Rhion had said to Taenya, but her knight responded very definitively.

This time, Rhion was being *much* more conservative. *Everyone* was silent as the two circled each other. There weren't other villagers around—just some of Rhion's soldiers and Clan Wren. Neira's father, Calum, had a slight frown on his face.

Gwyn's eyes locked onto the scene unfolding before her. Taenya and Rhion squared off once more in a dance of blades and skill. The atmosphere in the clearing was thick with tension, every onlooker's gaze fixed on the duo. As the duel progressed, Rhion activated some ability that gave him a burst of speed that literally blurred his movements. Even with all of her increased physical ability, as Gwyn tried to track him, she found herself straining.

What in the world? He's faster.

Taenya, not one to be outdone, responded in kind, although Rhion still had a significant edge in speed. But it was Taenya's magic that captured both Gwyn's and the audience's attention, as she summoned an array of weapons and shields directly from a nearby rack. The guards stationed beside it exchanged glances of astonishment, and Gwyn's heart raced.

She never told me about this... I only knew about the animals.

Yet despite her prowess and magic, Taenya's reactions were just a bit too slow, and eventually, Rhion's skill let him take advantage of a slight misstep on her part.

A sharp impact reverberated as Rhion's weapon connected, eliciting a wince from her.

Another quick follow-up strike landed before Taenya suddenly became a blur, her form rushing forward to shoulder-check Rhion off his footing. He flew backward but, impressively, regained his composure almost instantly, launching himself back into the fray.

Gwyn could feel her breath catching in her throat as Taenya readied herself.

With a fluid motion, she thrust a weapon at Rhion, clearly anticipating his evasion. As he sidestepped, the weapon morphed into a staff, which she deftly used to hook around his leg and yank it from under him. Yet in the midst of his descent, Rhion showed surprising agility, grabbing the staff and entwining his other leg around Taenya, ensuring they'd both share in the impending crash.

Gravity took them both.

Gwyn's eyes widened as somehow, amidst the fall, the two swapped positions, and Taenya's back slammed onto the ground with Rhion on top. They lay still for a split second as they both caught their breath before Rhion shot her a victorious smirk.

But Taenya was far from finished.

Quick as a whip, she wrapped her legs and one arm around Rhion, using her momentum to reverse their positions, pinning him beneath her with his arm twisted unnaturally.

Rhion gasped in pain. "Alright! *Alright!* Damn it, woman."

Oxylus

A feral snarl formed on Taenya's lips. "Say it."

"Ancestors take you. You win."

With a satisfied nod, Taenya released his arm and quickly scrambled to her feet before reaching down and pulling Rhion to his.

Neira spoke low next to Gwyn. "So. Cool."

Gwyn nodded.

Rhion laughed and addressed the blonde knight, "I thought I had you that time."

Taenya rolled her eyes. "For one, the fight isn't over until it's over. You didn't capitalize on your superior positioning. You also need to get used to using your *abilities* more. Not just your combat ability. The one that improved your speed is massive, you should learn to fight with it constantly."

He nodded solemnly. "You speak wisdom. I will keep it in mind for the future."

"In the future?"

He smirked. "You'll see."

Callum stepped forward. "I think I can tell who trained the princess. Just this morning she was showing her own prowess. You fight well, and your magic is something to behold, Ser Taenya."

Taenya smiled. "I helped her a bit, but her real trainer is her paladin protector. That woman is *scary* in a fight."

"I see. Let us break here and prepare ourselves for dinner. I suspect it is late for you two to leave the forest; I will have a room prepared for you. If you desire it, you may leave after breakfast."

Taenya shared a look with Gwyn who nodded.

The knight turned back to the Wren patriarch. "That will be acceptable."

As the group dispersed, Gwyn and Neira began their trek back to the house as the sun started its descent. The ambiance was both serene and inviting. Gwyn, still in the aftermath of the duel, was processing the raw energy and skill displayed and realized that being magically aligned meant she would never be able to fight as physically as those who were.

My steps and core quality help, but I'll always be lagging behind. Eventually, I won't be able to bridge the gap with steps alone.

She would need to adjust how she fought. Right now it was either with overwhelming magic, or as she did with the mercenaries, magic and sword. That one man who used a sword and could use magic almost like her blink had been surprising, but not enough.

Gwyn would need to learn magic that would help her even the playing field against physically aligned people in close range. She would never be a swordswoman, but that didn't mean she couldn't use swords.

It would just need to be a last resort.

Raafe's Legacy may, unfortunately, be actually slowing her down in this regard.

What she needed was a spell that let her form a sword as needed, and then she could switch back to her other magic immediately. It only made sense because her magic worked best when she used both hands to do it.

She also needed to figure out how to use her **[Cryomancy]** and **[Pyromancy]** more efficiently. Maybe weave their use into her spells.

<<*Curious!*>>

Gwyn jolted in surprise as the emotion from Calista interrupted her thoughts. The dragon leaped joyfully from Gwyn's arms toward Neira.

The half-dragoness caught Calista with a laugh, her eyes twinkling with amusement. Calista scrambled up Neira's arm, reaching her head, and tentatively poked one of Neira's horns with her small talons.

The action sent Neira into a fit of giggles. "You're a curious one, aren't you."

The soft sound of laughter filled the air as Gwyn self-consciously tugged at her outfit. *Damn this pinching fabric*, she thought, trying to adjust the tightness on her chest. As the two young women stepped into the manor, the echo of their footsteps on the floor caught the attention of servants who moved out of the way of them and watched them intently.

Soon, they found themselves nestled in Neira's room, surrounded by the familiar comforts of plush seating and ambient lighting that danced warmly across the walls. As they settled into the coziness, Neira turned to Gwyn with curious eyes. "So, you mentioned an academy?"

That was all that was needed.

Gwyn's eyes lit up, eager to share. "Oh, Neira, the academy is something else. I mean, the seriousness and cutthroat ambition of the students there? Absolutely obnoxious." She scoffed, recalling some vivid memories. "And then there's this new magic class. Can you believe the instructors know next to nothing about magic? Sure, mana and magic's all new, but why would they start it now if they knew so little. They intended for the class to be a place where everyone learns together. But guess what? It turns into me—yes, me, some kid—teaching the adults. It's all upside down."

She then delved into her life at school, painting a vivid picture of the academy's intricacies, from the ranking system to her friends, and of course, her skirmishes with her former roommate and

those insufferable twins. But when she began sharing stories about Roslyn, her voice softened as she delved into stories and moved on to the upcoming year. “We’ve done so much together and I try to spend as much time as possible with her. There’s so much more we plan to do.”

“And this girl, the noble, you’re in the same class this year?”

“Yeah! Oh man, Neira. She’s my best friend. Since we’re both class one, we’re... ah, I can’t believe we’re actually going to be roomies... Oh my gosh, and...”

As she continued her animated recounting and talking about plans she and Roslyn had, Neira’s grin widened. Noticing the almost teasing look on Neira’s face, Gwyn paused, “What’s with that look?”

Neira’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “You’re blushing.”

Gwyn huffed, feigning annoyance. “No, I’m not. Stop teasing.”

I am not blushing.

Yet, as self-doubt crept in, Gwyn discreetly employed her [**Cryomancy**], sending a cooling sensation to her cheeks just to ensure they weren’t betraying her emotions.

Not that there was anything to betray.

Just a normal conversation about best friends. Silly dragon girls and their lizard brains.

With a playful roll of her eyes, Gwyn dove back into her tales, from practicing magic with Roslyn and her elation when Roz conjured magic for the first time, to the intensive studying and the challenging exams. Neira, absorbing every word, occasionally interjected with questions, her grin a constant presence.

Gwyn just ignored it.

She then went back into talking about her tutors and studying and all the exams they had. It was a lot, but Neira took it all in.

Finishing her tales, Gwyn leaned back, taking a moment to breathe. Neira then shared a glimpse into her own world. “My education here is different. It’s more tailored. I learn from tutors, and then there’s my mother. She educates me about our heritage and our customs. But she also teaches me all the practical skills that come with running a home. She’s the one that runs the clan while my father runs everything else with the town and the military. It works, and she’s always busy.” She looked distant for a moment, her voice tinged with uncertainty. “One day, I might have to step into her shoes.”

Gwyn tilted her head, a curious frown curling. “What do you mean?”

Neira hesitated, her fingers playing with the edge of her dress. “Considering my father’s importance and our clan’s influence, they’re already entertaining proposals for my marriage, for when the time comes. The idea makes me nervous.”

Gwyn’s eyes darkened, her voice carrying an edge. “God, I’m so sick of that... that *shit*. Trust me, I get it. The Crown Prince of Avira? I hate him. He even tried pulling Taenya into the mix, suggesting I marry one of his spawn, but apparently, I’m only good enough for the one who won’t be his heir. It’s infuriating. Why can’t I decide who I want to be with? And it’s most certainly not either of *them*. And Roslyn’s caught in the same net because of her status. She’s my rock and has always supported me, and the idea of her being shackled to a stranger... It’s not right. She just accepts it, but I see how much she doesn’t want it. I need to figure out how to make sure she doesn’t suffer that fate.”

Neira leaned in, her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

Drawing a deep breath, Gwyn’s gaze seemed to pierce the distance. “Your father gave me a lot to think about when we were eating,” Gwyn explained. “I think it’s time I took matters into my own hands.”

Neira looked deep into Gwyn’s eyes, searching for understanding. “I can’t claim to know the depth of what you’re planning or what that all entails, Gwyn. But knowing you as little as I do, and seeing the honor you’ve carried, I believe you’ll make the right choices.”

Gwyn’s posture stiffened, the air around her seeming to grow dense with tension. Within her, there was a distinct sensation, like the restless shifting of the tide. Mana, dark as midnight and as potent as an untamed storm, roiled within her. Black mana coursed through her veins, a shadowy torrent surging with her every heartbeat, resonating with her rising ire.

But that wasn’t all.

Soon, it was joined by the fervent pulse of red mana. It seared through her, a burning tempest that sought to manifest as a righteous weapon, to be wielded against any that dared threaten her or her people. Together, the black and red mana intertwined, becoming a potent maelstrom of power that mirrored the tempestuous emotions bubbling within her.

“I hope so. I really do,” Gwyn murmured, her voice carrying a dangerous edge. Her eyes flared with a fire that hinted at the surging mana within. “Because I’m so *damn* tired of constantly being on the back foot, always playing defense. I’ll make them understand, one way or another, that my people are not to be messed with.”



In the dimly lit parlor of the Wren estate, Taenya found herself surrounded by the members of the Wren family, settled on plush chairs in a semicircle near the fireplace that held a small fire more for light than a comforting heat. They sat, not in anticipation of a jovial evening, but for a conversation whose seriousness was reflected in the tension hanging in the room. Callum, Rheagan, and their sons, Rhion and Elgan had been discussing the situation Clan and House had found themselves in.

As the firelight danced on Taenya's face, she spoke of their House and its status. "As a human princess, Gwyn has constantly clashed with the Aviran royalty and their agents," Taenya began, her voice steady. "They can't do anything except attack her from the shadows for now. A part of Avira's so-called Polite War. She has broken no laws that would permit them to take overt action. She holds no allegiance to the nation, nor does she care for Aviran or even Ikiosi politics. If she demands it, as her people we would never bring harm upon any of your people. Nor would we speak of what we learned."

Callum nodded in acknowledgment. "Your lands, are they near our forest?"

"No. Allow me to give some backstory to our nation. The Kingdom of Avira, which surrounds your lands, is composed of ten duchies and two crown marches. The capital hosts the Royal Academy of Avira which is *the* preeminent center of learning in western Ikios." She winced, not wanting to offend them due to their culture so she corrected herself, "Sorry, *Valen*. Children of high standing within the kingdom and in foreign nations around the region all come to learn at the institute. Gwyneth's lands are within the Duchy of Tiloral, which is beyond the Loduhr Mountains and south of the Ayeval Forest. Or rather, the lands of Gwyn's *bannermen* of which she holds the fealty of several notable Houses of that duchy. House Reinhart, itself, only consists of several estates and residences, such as the estate and townhouse we own within the capital for the purpose of attending the Royal Academy. We consider House Tiloral to be close friends and allies. They too seek to remain outside of the politics of the nation, and for many years managed it. Due to their backing of Gwyn, they have been thrust into it nonetheless."

"Is there a possibility of your... House obtaining land near our forest?" Rheagan asked.

Taenya shook her head. "I seriously doubt it at this point in time. Definitely nowhere near your town, to say the least. Why do you ask?"

Callum and Rheagan shared a look. "Your princess represents an... opportunity, you can call it." She looked at her sons. "Rhion, you know some of this, but Elgan? You are to not repeat this to anyone else, understood?"

The son sucked in a breath but nodded. "Yes, mother."

"Good," the pearlescent-scaled woman acknowledged. "Now, among the clans are four humans who arrived during the Great Change. They too are now drak'val. Two were easily integrated into our society due to similarities amongst our civilizations. The other two... had difficulties

assimilating, but in those difficulties, we learned much from each other. They come from civilizations that make both of ours seem as though we just learned how to make fire. The prince has given orders to all clans to accept any human, or *terran* as the more advanced two call themselves, with open arms.”

Both sons sucked in breaths of surprise and shared glances.

Callum nodded. “That is another reason for me allowing the princess to be treated as a guest, but she did save my daughter, and that is how I am able to explain it to the people of our town. They are unaware of what the prince has ordered.”

His wife nodded. “And thus, the opportunity I speak of. Clearly, she represents a force to be reckoned with. I have not seen her—”

“She wields magic as if it is as simple as breathing. I *watched* her kill those Encroachers,” Rhion added.

“Yes, yes. And Elgan was put on his rear by a young maiden. We are aware of her ability, son,” Rheagan said with a sigh. “Now, before my son interrupted me...” Rhion winced but kept his mouth shut. “We believe a closer relationship with your princess is something we should pursue. Nothing... firm for now, as we have just met...”

She looked at her husband.

“But the circumstances of our meeting have been etched into our memories forever,” Callum finished. “We owe Gwyneth a debt, one that we will never be able to repay.”

Taenya shook her head. “She would not want you to do that, I am sure. How do you see a relationship?”

“We would like to learn, possibly trade with each other. We have much to offer.”

“Speaking of learning,” She looked between each of them in turn. “Since the Flash, just over two years ago, magic’s presence has surged. While none are yet equal to Gwyn, people are embracing it, wielding its power. It would be prudent for you to do the same, lest you be left adrift.”

Callum, unshaken, responded, “I am aware. We have healers and crafters using magic even now within our town. But those who wield it for destruction and war? They... have gone to our capital, Aerie Peak, for training. The city is nestled in the central mountains, and is absolutely grand in scale and beauty where drakyns fly and drak’val live. Also called the Emerald City or the City of Gems, because of its large source of gemstones and the towering green canopy that surrounds it.”

Gems? I wonder if they understand the significance of them since the Flash.

She arched an eyebrow, taken aback by his candidness. “You’re open about that?”

He met her gaze, unwavering. “Yes, I meant what I said by a relationship. This would be a boon for our clan and would better our position with the prince. But, not just that, it would help our

people. Nevertheless, you gave my son sound advice today. All of our warriors will train in how to better utilize these new abilities we have found ourselves with.”

Rhion's eyes shifted to Taenya. “When will you be departing?”

Curious about the abrupt change of subject, she replied. “After breakfast tomorrow. It allows Gwyn time with Neira. They have forged a fast bond.”

“And that brings warmth to my heart,” Rheagan mused and shared a smile with her husband. “Our daughter is quite the spirited one.”

Callum huffed and crossed his arms. “She is certainly that... ‘Just going stretch my wings, father...’ she said.”

Rheagan let out a soft sigh, her gaze distant. “She will want to ask...”

“I'm aware,” Callum's voice grew heavier, “but I cannot allow it.”

Confusion lined Taenya's face. “Allow what?”

“She will wish to accompany you,” Rheagan said.

Taenya's eyes bore into hers. “That's not advisable. Gwyn's time is consumed by the Academy, in fact, she *lives* there. They would only have weekend passes to leave the grounds.”

The room's energy shifted as Rhion exchanged a loaded glance with his father. “Father...”

Callum raised a hand, halting him. “It's fraught with danger.”

Elgan leaned in, his youthful face a mask of curiosity. “What's dangerous?”

“And You have duties here,” Callum continued, ignoring his younger son.

Rhion persisted, “Elgan's wanted increased responsibility. He's prepared.”

Elgan's eyes darted between his father and brother, realization dawning. “Wait, you're suggesting—”

Taenya narrowed her eyes at Rhion as she also understood and interrupted, “Your... presence would attract unnecessary attention.”

Callum added, “It would expose you.”

Rhion's determination flared, “I'd stay within the House Reinhart estate. I'd be discreet and wear a disguise.”

Taenya shot back, “Discreet? With wings like that?”

Rheagan leaned close to Callum, murmuring in hushed tones. Whatever she said caused Callum to exhale deeply, appearing almost defeated. “Fine, your mother brings up a good point.”

The gazes of Taenya and that of both sons were instantly drawn to Rheagan.

“You will go, and you will learn all you can of magic. If Gwyneth is truly at the forefront of this, then we need to learn more.” She turned to Taenya. “I understand it will be difficult, but can you protect my son?”

“Mother, I do not—”

“I wasn’t addressing you,” she responded, her calm demeanor carrying an unyielding undertone.

Taenya’s eyes briefly lingered on Rhion, despite his undeniable good looks, his changes were not something he could hide.

Would Rhion truly be safe with us?

According to Amari, the paladins respect the Valeni’s isolation, but she knew there was something there between the Church and Rhion’s people. But Amari was now a part of House Reinhart. Would that allegiance be enough?

House Reinhart was also undeniably within the archer’s sight. They would need to figure out who had attempted to take Gwyn but to do so may attract more danger, not that Taenya shied away from such. She simply did not want Rhion to be injured simply for being present.

With Rhion’s *very obvious* physical transformation, he wasn’t just vulnerable; he was a veritable beacon. The danger wasn’t just about him being harmed—he could be snatched up and used as a pawn against them. The idea of him being ensnared in the political and magical crossfire, a mere victim of his own uniqueness, was almost too distressing.

Taenya took a deep breath, her decision hinging on a fragile balance between the potential for knowledge and the very real risks. The hope in Rhion’s eyes was evident, but was it a risk Taenya was willing to shoulder? The weight of that responsibility pressed in on her.

No one mentioned the kind of shit I’d face when I was made knight-captain for Gwyn.

In the end, she knew the answer. It’s the only one that mattered, what would Gwyn want?

It was also one that often came with the most headaches.

She exhaled. “Yes. We can keep him safe,” she promised before looking at Rhion. “But you *will* need to follow my orders. You will work with me personally, or when I am not there, under Sir Friedrich who I will introduce.”

Rhion raised an eyebrow. “Sir Friedrich? An odd name.”

“He’s human. From a civilization much like ours.”

The subtle shared grin between Rheagan and Callum suggested their approval.

Rhion nodded. “I will. How will we do this?”

“Park your ass at the forest’s edge,” Taenya instructed a hint of levity in her tone. “As darkness settles tomorrow, Gwyn and I will leave the castle by carriage. You’ll fly to us discreetly and join us inside.”

“Understood.”

Callum, with an authoritative tone, chimed in, “Then it’s settled. Rhion will accompany you, learn, and in turn, offer insights to aid House Reinhart. Our hope is to foster a mutually beneficial relationship, and in time, possibly an alliance. If Gwyneth has weekends free, we extend an invitation to visit whenever feasible.”

Taenya smiled. “I’m sure she would enjoy visiting your daughter, but I must request the ability to bring more than just myself. Gwyneth also has a horse we can ride through the forest.”

“Granted,” Callum affirmed. “Anyone bearing your House’s crest and colors will be permitted as long as you or your princess is present.”

“Or me,” Rhion added. There was a hint of indignation.

Rheagan waved a hand dismissively. “Of course, son. It’s implied.” Her tone shifted to exhaustion. “Now, I’m retiring for the night. Callum, inform our daughter.”

He responded with a pensive frown. “Perhaps after she approaches us?”

Rheagan’s retort was playful yet biting. “If that is how you wish to die, then yes, by all means my love.”

Taenya chuckled, but the laughter died when she realized the gravitas in the room.

This family is... interesting.



“Uhm, Gwyn? Are you... *crying?*” Neira asked quietly from beside her.

“It’s just so good!” Gwyn said while eating her bacon, eggs, and something kind of like hashbrowns. She looked at Taenya. “I don’t care what we have to do. Our cooks have to learn how to make this. I’m begging you.”

<<*Hungry. More?*>>

Gwyn smiled and handed Calista another slice of bacon.

“Would you like some sausage, Princess?” Neira’s brother Rhion asked from across the table.

She almost cried out again. "Please! Oh my god, this..." She stabbed the sausage with a fork and it quickly found its way into her mouth. In between bites, she added, "This is amazing. It's like I'm home again. Why, why doesn't anyone else know how to make good food?"

Neira laughed. "This is just what we eat! You enjoyed the food yesterday too, yes?"

Gwyn nodded while shoveling eggs into her mouth.

Taenya sighed. "Gwyn, that is not the way a princess should eat."

"Shut up!" she said with a mouthful of yummy goodness. She quickly swallowed the bite and added, "I'm not at some prissy noble party. This is heaven. I've died and gone to heaven. Food heaven. And I shall partake of my just rewards."

Her adopted aunt sighed again before turning to Neira's parents. "I would like to thank you, again, for hosting my princess," she said before narrowing her eyes at Gwyn. "Despite the fact that she apparently has not eaten since arriving on our world."

"Don't judge me!"

"Oh, I'm judging."

Rheagan laughed softly. "I am truly pleased that you enjoy our food this much, Princess. I will ensure next time you visit that you can try more."

Gwyn's focus shot up to the woman. "*What?* I can come back?"

Neira's father, Callum nodded. "Yes, you may return when you are able."

Gwyn's "I can!?" was echoed by Neira's "She can!?"

"Yes. You are welcome in Eldenthor," he confirmed.

Both teenagers cheered.

Their excitement made the little dragon perk up as well and let out a sound almost like a chirp.

<<*Happy!*>>

Gwyn giggled. "Yes, Calista! Happy!"

The older Wrens all shared a glance. "You... can understand her?" Callum asked.

She shrugged. "Sort of? I get a sense of her emotions."

The man shook his horned head. "Fascinating. The other drakyn chosen made no mention of this."

She shot a look at Taenya, who nodded slowly. Gwyn addressed the adults, "I may have an explanation for that." She waited for them to all give her their full attention, and then she continued, "Taenya is my closest knight. She's been there since day one." The telv knight gave her a smile which

she returned. “But, of my other knights, Sabina is the most loyal, the most in tune with what I feel. She is the second half of what I consider to be my adopted aunts with Taenya. Well, she is a... what I call a mind mage. Her magic—it doesn’t conjure flames or move mountains—but it touches someone’s thoughts and feelings. It dances in the realm of shadows and mind. She’s used it around us a lot and I’ve practiced with her. It may be why I’m able to understand Calista a bit.”

Or that strange new trait Mana told me about last night... but let’s not tell them that.

Neira leaned forward, the light in the room reflecting in her eyes, revealing an innate curiosity that was so similar to Calista’s own. *Maybe a dragon thing?*

“Is that like when you carried me into town?” the curious dragon-girl asked. “When the world seemed... swallowed by the shadows? I have faint memories of that.”

Gwyn’s lips pulled into a half-smile. “In a way. That was the first time I tried to manipulate shadows, I have no way to read or affect someone’s thoughts as she can.”

Callum’s eyebrows knit together, a shadow of doubt crossing his stern face. “But how can you be certain she won’t use such a power against you?”

Gwyn hesitated, but only for a heartbeat. Meeting his gaze with unyielding intensity, her lips parted to speak words laden with conviction. “I trust her with every breath I take.” She articulated each word with such gravity, wanting them to feel the depth of her faith. “While the world sleeps, she’s the sentinel against my nightmares. She stands guard against the unseen, the lurking threats of darkness.” Her eyes darted to Taenya momentarily, “Taenya stands beside me, the very sword and shield I bear in the light of day.”

Without breaking her stride, her **[Draco-Pyromancy]** ignited a brilliant sun-like orb. It floated beside her, its vibrant, scarlet hue reminiscent of Eona’s radiant star. Her lips curled into a smirk, “Yet, Sabina—she’s the unseen blade, waiting for the dark of night to deliver its sting.”

As the words tumbled from her mouth, black mana surged within her, drowning the room momentarily in an oppressive darkness. The shadows, cast by her miniature sun, intensified, becoming an abyss that seemed to swallow light whole. She grinned, revealing the confidence that backed her statement.

“Any who dare challenge us should fear the lurking threat she poses. She’s never betrayed the trust I place in her. And the day she does?”

Her voice trailed off as **[Cryomancy]** coursed through her. The warm glow of the orb was swiftly overtaken, crystallizing instantly into a jagged, frozen sphere. Her eyes gleamed with unspoken understanding and she channeled mana into her very words, “**Hell will have frozen over.**”



The morning sun caressed the landscape as Gwyn and Neira stepped outside after breakfast. The inevitable moment of parting was upon them, and Calista, the tiny dragonet in Neira's embrace, seemed all too perceptive of the mood, emanating an aura of melancholy.

<<*Sad.*>>

A wistful smile played on Gwyn's lips. "I know, Calista. Me too." Her gaze shifted to Neira, the violet drak'valan who had become an unexpected friend in such a brief span. The thought of seeing her again warmed Gwyn's heart. "Neira, our meeting was amazing. I'm so glad to have made a friend after all that happened."

The bright-eyed girl nodded eagerly. "Me too! But it's so unfair you have to leave already." Suddenly, hope lit up her features as she glanced towards her father. "Father!"

His response was curt. "No."

She opened her mouth to protest but was interrupted when Rhion emerged from the manor, arms burdened with two leather duffel-like bags.

Neira's face contorted in disbelief.

"You can't be serious!" she exclaimed. "He gets to go and I don't?"

Gwyn's expression mirrored Neira's shock. Turning to Taenya, she searched the knight's face for an answer. "Is this for real?"

"Neira," Callum's voice commanded her attention, "come here."

Though she was visibly seething, Neira surrendered Calista to Gwyn, her footfalls heavy with indignation as she approached her father. Their exchange, though whispered, carried the heat of a fiery debate.

Taenya sighed, addressing the palpable tension. "Rhion will be joining us to both teach and to learn. We are to keep him safe."

<<*Confident, Powerful.*>>

Gwyn smiled down at the dragon before she looked up at Rhion with renewed determination. "Don't worry. Calista and I will protect you."

He chuckled. "I have every faith in that, Princess."

Channeling her mamma, she raised an eyebrow and asked, "One *very* important question. Can you cook?"

His laughter echoed warmly. “Certainly. I’ll introduce you to more of our food. My mother taught me well.”

She pivoted gracefully to Taenya and stood tall. “Ser Taenya, Captain Rhion Wren will be a formidable asset to House Reinhart. Ensure his lodgings reflect his unparalleled culinary prowess.”

Rhaegan, with the elegance of a queen, approached and embraced her son. “Stay safe, my son. You do your family proud and bear our honor.”

He nodded gratefully. “Thank you, mother.”

Rhion’s mother stepped close to Gwyn’s knight. Whispers passed between the two that caused the knight’s gaze to snap sharply towards the majestic half-dragoness. Rhaegan’s final words hung in the air, “Remember my words.”

Taenya’s eyes, usually so composed, reflected a rare uncertainty. “Very well.”

Neira returned, her expression dulled by disappointment. “I can’t go.”

Without hesitation, Gwyn wrapped the girl in a comforting embrace. “Calista and I will return, and perhaps I’ll be able to bring my bestie. You’ll love her.” She leaned close and whispered, “Even if she is one of those *dastardly* Encroachers.”

Neira’s grin was mischievous. “Maybe by then, you’ll have figured it out. Can’t wait to see the results.”

“Figured out what?”

Neira winked. “Your journey, your revelation.”

Shaking her head, Gwyn smirked, “Whatever you say, Neira. But really, I’m glad I met you. And honestly, those wings? I’ll master magic that lets me fly just to soar beside you. You’ll have to teach me how to do it properly when I get back. Okay?”

In response, Neira offered her pinky. “Promise.”

Gwyn’s face illuminated with surprise and forced her voice to take on a solemn tone, “You’re versed in the sacred art of the pinkie promise?”

Neira feigned shock. “You too?”

“Inevitable,” Gwyn remarked gravely.

“Destiny,” Neira agreed, their pinkies intertwining in a pact of friendship and the promise of shared flight.

The two girls, trying to maintain their solemn expressions, failed spectacularly. A tiny snort from Neira was the catalyst, and Gwyn followed suit. In no time, they were leaning against each other, shoulders shaking as they were consumed by a contagious bout of giggles.



The journey back to Marglen Castle passed smoothly, the monotony only disrupted by an eager little dragon with an insatiable curiosity for the world around her. By midday, the expansive treeline began to recede, revealing the familiar landscape leading to the castle. Rhion, adhering to the plan, remained sheltered within the forest's depths with some of his warriors, awaiting night to fall.

As Gwyn and Taenya emerged into the open, they did not go unnoticed.

"Gwyn!" Two voices—Amari and Ilyana's—rang out in unison, their tones laced with a mixture of relief and anxiety.

Turning toward them, Gwyn's lips curled into a soft smile.

Instead of allowing Ilyana to rush forward, Amari placed a protective hand in front of the younger woman.

Her eyes scanned Gwyn from head to toe before landing on the dragonet, Calista, cradled in Gwyn's arms. Drawing a deep breath, Amari's gaze intensified, as if trying to read the unsaid. "There's going to be quite an extended training session for you when we return," she remarked, her voice heavy with meaning.

Feeling a knot of worry in her stomach, Gwyn asked, "Are you alright?"

Amari countered with her own concern. "Are you?"

Gwyn nodded, introducing her new companion. "I'm fine. Meet Calista, she's a dragon."

<<*Interested, Friendly!*>>

A deep, relieved sigh escaped from Amari, her voice dripping with irony as she remarked, "Of course she is. You go into the forest and return with a dragon. This is normal."

Overwhelmed by emotion, the usually composed paladin finally stepped closer, her eyes moistening. Then, surrendering to her feelings, she embraced Gwyn tightly, her tears hidden within the folds of the warm hug.