
Forging Friendships

“So, Rhion. What did you mean when you said I’d learn about my heritage?” Taenya asked the man walking next to her.

They had been walking for some time, and she recognized the signs that they were taking the scenic route so that Taenya could not easily lead anyone else to their town. Her legs burned from walking up numerous hills along dirt trails that led them upward in a spiraling path. Despite saying Gwyn could leave at any time, she suspected that he really meant that she could request to be guided out of the forest when she desired to depart.

“You are one of the Subverted,” he explained as if the word meant anything to her. “The Valeni that have been convinced to fight your own people.”

Taenya rolled her eyes. “I was not convinced of anything. I am telv, like... Actually, what *are* you?”

“I am a drak’valan. My people were affected by the Great Change, we are now half-drakyn, half-Valeni.”

Taenya looked him over, his skin was a mixture of pale flesh and black scales, and his telv-like ears had changed to the point more resembling a spike, with a second that jutted down just lower than it. His forehead played host to two small nubs of horns right on his temples with longer ones coming from the crest area of his skull.

He had long platinum hair and orange eyes that had slitted pupils like a reptile’s. His face, though... His face was gorgeous with only a small amount of scales that covered his pale cheekbones.

“You may be telv, but you are also Valeni. That is your heritage.” She tilted her head and he smiled. “Don’t worry, I won’t attack you. I just wish to talk.”

“I wasn’t worried about you attacking me,” she replied with an eye roll.

Gwyn would be proud.

“Oh? Maybe we should spar at my home.” He smirked, showing just a hint of fangs before adding, “I promise to take it easy on you.”

She scowled but didn’t retort, instead, she returned to the real topic. “How are the Valeni *my* Heritage? I’m from Meris,” she asked as they continued their trek through the forest, the others of his

kind giving them a wide berth. His wings were folded behind him, and he walked in an almost casual manner.

As if she weren't a threat to him.

How overly confident.

"Do you not know the history of when the Loreni arrived on our lands?" he asked incredulously.

She shrugged. "Honestly? Not really. It isn't really taught in schools among commoners, or actually really among nobles either if Gwyn's school is anything to go by. We know *of* the Loreni Diaspora, but everything that came after? No. All that's widely known is your people went into your forests and the rest of us moved on."

He stopped. The movement was so sudden that it took her by surprise. Then he turned and looked at her, his face a mixture of disbelief and scrutiny. "What do you mean by *moved on*?"

"Exactly that. I don't know if you're aware since your forest is surrounded entirely by the Kingdom of Avira, but I don't think any of your forests have fallen, or if they have I didn't learn it personally. No one cares about them. There are almost a hundred kingdoms of varying sizes across Ikios—"

"Valen. The land is called Valen. That is why you are called Valeni. That is why the elves are called Loreni. They originated from the land across the sea they call Loren."

She sighed. "Really? I didn't know that. Well, it's called Ikios now. Everything you hate about us happened so long ago. The nation of my birth? It's predominantly telv, even the king is telv. I will grant that it's a small nation, but still. The Vlatedian Empire? Mainly telv and orkun. Avira *does* have mostly high elves, but telv are all throughout its society. The Lymtorian Republic? It's a telv, sun elf, and high elf nation. But its unique form of government was created by the telv there that overthrew their Throne of Two Kings many years ago. That's the type of history we learn, because it's fresh in the minds of people. No one cares what happened a thousand years ago. It's too long and it only affects *you*. We know that if anyone enters your forests, they are likely to die unless they meet whatever strange standard of honor games you people hold along the forests' borders."

He stood there, stunned for so long that it started to become awkward. She shifted her stance and looked around, seeing the others, most of whom didn't have wings, standing around as if this were normal.

Finally, he replied, "With respect, just because something happened so long ago, doesn't mean what occurred should be ignored or invalidated. My... no, *our* people suffered, and that you don't even know it is the true tragedy."

Taenya pursed her lips in thought. She... hadn't considered it like that, and realized that she was off to a poor start. This was an opportunity she had never heard of before, she couldn't ruin it just because she couldn't have a bit of tact.

She took a deep breath and bowed her head. "That was not my intention. I apologize if I offended you. I will be more mindful in the future."

He sighed and they resumed walking. After a few minutes of tense silence, he halted and turned towards her. His eyes bore into hers as he said, "It appears that we have much to learn from each other, telv."

She narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. The man was only a notch taller than her, so she didn't have to look up far to meet his eyes. She spoke low, her sharp tone in defiance of the clear predatory creature in front of her. "My name is 'Taenya'. But you will call me *Ser* Taenya. I was bestowed an honor, and I will respect your honor if you respect mine. Clear?"

His response was a slow smile that hinted at respect. He inclined his head. "As crystal. Then, in that case, I am Captain Rhion Wren of the Eldenthor Ranger Corps." With a fluid motion, he gestured to her left. "And for you, Ser Taenya, welcome to Eldenthor."

Those leading their procession dispersed, revealing an expanse beyond the trees. She stepped out of the shade and into a clearing, staring down a vast, sloping hill. The sight stole her breath away. A sprawling town lay cradled by nature, split by a meandering river.

And it was nothing like she was expecting.

Whatever preconceived notions she held—of tree dwellings or basic wooden structures—were shattered. Instead, a sophisticated town reminiscent of anything she might find from Avira to Lehelias stretched out before her. The town, surrounded by stone walls with four large, intricate archways over those gates, buzzed with life, its heart seemingly a bustling market. Roads branched away from the town, across stone bridges over the river, and into the distance in a way that made it clear this wasn't just a remote frontier town.

This was a modern civilization, one distinctly different and yet so similar to all she knew.

The soft crunch of footsteps drew her attention as Rhion closed the distance between them. She glanced his way, a smirk tugging her lips. "This... you made us walk all this way just for this reveal, didn't you?"

"Of course, Ser Taenya. I have pride in my town. It is the most beautiful place after our capital." His smile grew. "We could have been here in several stunde, but this was much preferable. Plus, I doubt you can recall the route. Anyway..."

He's really proud of his home.

Manabound - Resilience

She wasn't sure what 'several stunde' meant, but the way he said it made her think it was similar to how her people used the bell intervals to mark the time of day.

He spread his arms to encapture the entire scene between his hands. "All of this is the domain of Clan Wren. My father is the patriarch, and I am its heir. You, Ser Taenya, are privileged—the first outsider to behold our land."

She raised an eyebrow, interjecting, "Except for Gwyn?"

He huffed a laugh. "Fair point, but you and I both know she should not be subject to our peoples' ancient disputes. The sky-people are the product of a horrible circumstance that should only be treated with compassion and sympathy. Yet, if they too become subverted—"

Taenya interrupted, "Captain Wren, nobody's subverting anyone against you. Frankly, whatever you do in these woods doesn't concern the world. Your desire for isolation has been respected for ages."

His sigh was heavy with old suspicions. "I hope you're right. But one outsider's word hardly eases generations of distrust."

She gave a slight nod, signaling a truce of sorts. "While I may not agree, I can respect your stance."

They continued on their journey, taking a winding path down the hill toward the city where it joined a stone road that led to the town.

As they walked, Taenya's eyes caught the sight of a massive creature pulling a wagon ahead. Its sturdy legs, thick hide, and an armor-like back made it stand out, looking far more lumbering than the drakyyd but more aggressive than the cow-like aptonoth of the southeast she was familiar with.

Its tail swayed with each step, and its sharp beak seemed well-suited for fending off any threats. The beast's eyes, however, held a docile expression. Glancing over to Rhion, she inquired, "What is that?"

"*That* is an apceros. A beast of burden well suited to forest life."

Her humming response concealed her awe. Eldenthor, with its pulse of activity and surprises, was rapidly eroding any expectations she once held.

As they approached, the gates of Eldenthor stood open. Carts laden with produce, tools, and other goods rumbled in and out, while townsfolk bustled about their business. Guarding the entrance was an impressive cohort of sentries who watched them intently. Upon seeing the man next to her, they saluted and spread like a wave.

Oxylus

Unlike Captain Rhion and his leather-clad drak'valan warriors, these guards were equipped in blackened steel plate, designed meticulously to strike awe and fear. Their halberds gleamed menacingly under the sun, a stark contrast to the steel's dark hue.

Even among those few guards who possessed wings, the armor had been thoughtfully tailored. Openings at the back allowed their wings to spread freely, while steel plates fortified the wing ridges. The menacing aura these guards exuded was unparalleled to any she had seen among her own people.

The town of Eldenthor unfolded before Taenya like a tapestry of wonder. A majority of the people lacked wings, but all had a wide array of horns, from two small nubs to long twirling spikes. However, those who sported wings bore them with pride, the scaly appendages often shimmering in a myriad of colors.

The atmosphere here felt distinct, the air thick with mana, making Taenya's **[Mana Sense]** tingle. She glanced at Captain Rhion, her eyes reflecting her wonder. "The mana here... It's so much more dense."

Rhion met her gaze and nodded, his expression a mix of pride and contemplation. "Indeed. It was that which altered our destiny. One of the Great Pillars is not far from here. What you feel is the emanations it gives off."

Their journey through the town was nothing short of enchanting. Giant trees, each easily reaching a hundred meters, punctuated the cityscape. These weren't merely natural features; they stood as monuments, witnesses to the history and evolution of Eldenthor. Their trunks were wide, their bark etched with intricate designs and patterns that glowed faintly with mana. It was as if nature itself had become art, seamlessly blending into the city's architectural fabric.

Eldenthor's buildings were marvels in their own right. Combining wood and stone, they displayed a harmonious balance of strength and elegance. Their defining feature, however, was the extensive use of glass. Large windows, framed in ornate patterns, graced every structure, bathing the interiors in a cascade of sunlight. It was a sight Taenya had rarely seen in other cities, where glass was often a luxury and used sparsely.

After winding through several streets, they finally arrived at their destination. Nestled in the heart of the town, surrounded by towering trees and immaculate gardens, stood a magnificent house. Its facade was regal, punctuated by tall glass windows that captured the dance of light and shadow. The expansive entrance door was carved with motifs of drakyns. What surprised her though, was how *open* it was. It wasn't like most noble estates that were closed off from the commoners around them.

No, there were commoners streaming in and out of the gate and the sounds of cheering coming distantly within.

Captain Rhion paused, allowing Taenya a moment to absorb the magnificence. “Welcome,” he said, his voice carrying a note of reverence, “to the Wren estate.”

Taenya’s eyes traced the house’s contours, taking in the intricacies of its design. It wasn’t just the grandeur that impressed her, but the warmth it emanated.

This wasn’t just an estate. It was a *home* and the centerpiece of this town.

“It certainly sounds lively.”

He chuckled. “There’s probably some sparring going on in the training grounds. If my brother is taking part, it always brings crowds.”

She nodded. “Your brother is good?”

Rhion snorted. “He’s handy in a fight, but he is quite the spectacle. He enjoys the dramatic side of things.”

They walked through the gate, and up to the large double doors of the manor that opened almost immediately by a guard from within. It was clear that their arrival was expected, and Taenya took a deep breath.

“Where’s Gwyn?”

For his part, Rhion just shrugged. “I have no idea, that’s what we need to ask. This morning before I left she was also out by the sparring ring, watching.”

Taenya groaned. “Of course she was.”



Gwyn used a fork to stab something that looked like purple asparagus and bring it to her mouth. It was delicious, and the cooks had clearly used oil and garlic as they roasted it. Her plate also contained some chicken that was surprisingly cut away from the bone and served as just the breast.

The meal was so similar to what she would have eaten with her Mom back on Earth that it almost brought tears to her eyes.

She shifted in her chair, slightly uncomfortable with the narrow back that only reached up two-thirds of the way. It made sense, seeing how they didn’t impede the wings of the drak’val, but they could have had some regular chairs for those not so blessed.

<<*Content.*>>

Her little dragon looked *stuffed* as she toppled over once she had her fill of meat the cooks had grilled.

Neira's mother let out a soft chuckle, her eyes crinkling at the edges, and Gwyn joined in as both of them cast amused glances down at the dragonet. In the corner of her eye, she observed Neira's determined attempts to get a better view by stretching on her tiptoes, but the table's height was against her. With a huff of frustration and a pout, the young drak'valan admitted defeat and settled back into her chair.

She's so persistent, even in the smallest things, Gwyn thought with an affectionate smile.

The woman reached over and patted her daughter's clawed hand reassuringly. Her sharp incisors were prominently displayed as her lips curled upwards, and that combined with her four horns made her look positively predatory.

It was so cool.

"So, what's *your* name?" Gwyn asked after taking another bite of her food.

The pearly-scaled woman turned to Gwyn and looked guilty. "Oh, my apologies! I didn't properly introduce myself, did I?"

"No, you just barged into my room and took over the conversation, Mother," Neira said with a roll of her eyes. "Didn't even knock... like we've talked about... a hundred times..."

The woman rolled her eyes in a way that was an exact mirror of her violet-scaled daughter's. "Yes, yes. You are a young woman and must have your own privacy." She smirked at Gwyn. "I apologize, that was unbecoming of me as your hostess. I am Reaghan Inglas-Wren."

Gwyn dipped her head respectfully. "It is an honor to meet you Miss Inglas-Wren."

"And I, you."

"So, Gwyn!" Neira said, pulling Gwyn's attention back. "You're a *princess*. What's that like?"

She shrugged. "Lots of people trying to kidnap or kill you. School. And always having guards and knights around. It's alright."

Neira sat stunned. "That... that sounds horrible. Are the Loreni that bad? Mother, can she stay here?"

Reaghan was also looking at her with an expression she knew all too well.

Pity.

"Dear, did you come to our world alone?" the mother asked.

Gwyn shook her head. "No, my mom came too. She's out west trying to avoid a war, apparently." Both of their eyes widened at that. "She's on the way to the capital of Avira to meet me. Well, she doesn't know I'll be there, yet. But she will! My people learned about her for me."

“People really try to kill you?” Neira asked. “No, wait. Yes, that’s what brought you into the forest. You said that, last night, didn’t you?”

<<*Confused. Sad?*>>

Her little dragon lifted on her hind legs and *reached* for Gwyn to pick her up. She did and her little dragon nestled up close.

As the dragon moved around on her lap, Gwyn nodded to Neira. “Yes. You were a bit out of it though. I’ve had a lot of people try to kidnap me or try to kill me. I’m still standing though, and they’re not.”

<<*Safe. Happy?*>>

Gwyn gently cradled her baby dragon in her arms, her fingers naturally finding the sweet spot just behind the tiny creature’s horns. As she lightly scritchd the delicate scales there, the little dragon let out a soft coo of contentment. Responding to the touch, she spread her wings ever so slightly, leaning into Gwyn’s fingers as if to ask for more.

The violet drak’valan across from her mumbled under her breath and Gwyn just barely caught it. “That’s so cool...”

That made the princess frown and she looked up from the dragon in her arms. “It’s not. It’s not cool, Neira. People who I knew well are dead. People who trusted me. Who followed me. It *hurts* every day. I...”

“And it will,” a voice came from behind. “That is the burden of those who lead.”

Gwyn turned and saw Neira’s father come in. He walked over to his wife and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder as she shifted her wing to accommodate him. Callum then leaned down and kissed his wife on her head, just between her horns. “Love, how are you?”

The woman smiled, a beautiful radiant thing that was filled with love. A smile that even Gwyn knew was not something you could fake, something that could only come from genuine love.

I hope someone smiles at me like that one day.

Callum Wren, the black-scaled drak’valan patriarch smiled as he sat down at the head of the table. “Thank you for joining us for lunch, Princess.”

“No, I appreciate you allowing me to stay here without issue, Patriarch Wren.”

He nodded. “Like I told you, it’s the least I should do. I apologize for interrupting, but I meant what I said.” His voice took on a deepness that she wasn’t prepared for. “You are... new to leading, yes?”

Gwyn nodded. “I am. It’s... so much.”

Callum paused for a moment, letting the weight of the room settle before speaking. The sunlight filtering in from the windows cast a soft glow on his black scales, making them shimmer ever so slightly. “Leadership,” he began, his voice deep and contemplative, “is not just about wearing a crown, sitting on a throne, or having a title. It’s about the choices we make, the sacrifices we endure, and the weight we bear for our people.”

Gwyn’s blue eyes met Callum’s almost black ones, searching for understanding.

He continued, “When you lead, you will face adversity, and yes, heartbreak. But you will also have moments of unparalleled joy and triumph. You will forge bonds stronger than any steel, and you will spark a fire of hope in hearts that have none.”

She looked down at her hand, felt mana pull in it, and drew a small flame above her palm.

Neira and Reaghan watched silently, both intently looking at the scarlet fire that Gwyn manipulated. She swallowed hard, fighting back the emotions that threatened to spill, and ignored the almost overwhelming urge to use [**Frozen Heart**]. “How do you bear it? The weight?”

Callum’s gaze softened, filled with a wisdom born from years of experience. “You bear it by leaning on those you trust, by believing in your purpose, and most importantly, by believing in yourself. It takes effort, but the best leaders are the most resilient leaders, those who can both withstand and recover from difficulties. To have that *toughness*, that *drive* to stand tall in the face of adversity. Remember, a leader is not defined by the number of times they are knocked down, but by the number of times they rise again.”

The room was silent for a moment, the only sound being the soft rustling of wings and the distant murmur of servants and others moving outside the room.

He’s right. I’ve let grief and rage cloud my judgment. No more waiting, no more reacting. It’s time to dictate the rules of this game.

Callum watched her, the creases around his eyes deepening as he took in her turmoil. He leaned forward, the weight of his years and experience evident. “Every leader has their moments of doubt, Princess. But it’s in those moments that we truly discover who we are. I see a fire in you, a resilient spirit. Embrace it. Your people need you, and I believe that if you do, you will become what they need most.”

Gwyn’s gaze dropped to the flickering flame she’d conjured earlier, watching its mesmerizing dance. With a slight wave of her hand, she summoned her [**Cryomancy**], enveloping the flame in a flash of cold so quick and powerful, that it transformed it into a crystalline shard of ice that she caught effortlessly.

She paused, staring down at the ice and becoming a bit more resolute in her decision. Gwyn would do whatever it took to protect her people, even if it meant reducing her enemies to ash. But she *did* and *had* relied on others. She just feared putting them in danger.

They already had, no matter her desires. Taenya had fought a duel to the death on her behalf. Sabina had infiltrated and killed—

She smirked. *Sabina can track down who attacked us here.*

Her shadow mage was vastly underutilized. Taenya needed to train more... Amari should be her hammer, not her bodyguard. Friedrich was filling into a role that suited him perfectly, especially with Aleanora's help who would be starting the Academy soon. Lorrena... she would be suitable to work with Siveril. To learn how to take on a more administrative role like Aleanora.

Perhaps it was almost time to let her ladies-in-waiting loose. Things would start to heat up, and she didn't want them close at hand until they were ready.

Ilyana... she was starting to become something more. She had been learning to fight, strategy, and all sorts of things at the Upper School that were decidedly more *martial*. She had a barony to run, her own people like Gwyn.

Her baroness should return home after school and build up her lands. They'd need them.

It was about time Gwyn started to take up her true mantle, to make sure everything was safe and ready when her mamma arrived. Yes, it wouldn't do if she got there only to get attacked immediately. She looked down at the ring on her finger. Her mamma was someone who enjoyed making things, and who loved to *create*. She was a gentle and kind woman. Sure she would get all fiery and wasn't afraid to give people a piece of her mind, but she wasn't one prone to violence. No, she was someone who loved seeing the beauty in life.

Gwyn would need to keep her safe.

Like any good daughter should.

Siveril had sent *Ser* Keston to Maireharbora, but Gwyn would have him prepared to move out from there at a moment's notice. She had learned much about the geography of Ikios since starting school; about the nations that surrounded them.

If her mamma was coming from the Sovereign Cities by ship... they would need to check other ports as well. Lehelia was a key place, and maybe Meris, although that was slightly less likely.

There was still that connection that Siveril had learned about. The one with Blightwych-like Adrienne—she needed to follow up on that. She had forgotten to ask Adrienne if she knew who Lady Ismeld d'Argin was.

Then she would see what the Church had learned.

If anything.

But first... Gwyn would need to talk to Roslyn. Because if she were finally going to join the game... well, she didn't want her best friend to become a target.

I'll protect her. She's too precious.

Gwyn needed an army. Siveril was building one in Tiloral, but that would be needed to combat Marquess Angwin.

She wasn't sure how the Church would react to Gwyn being here with the drak'valeni. She would need to lean heavily on her status with the Church, maybe even have a messenger sent to the Archpriestess.

Her eyes darted around the table to the people who had patiently given her time to think and returned to their meals. Neira's eyes kept darting up and searching her questioningly.

What if...

"I... thank you, Patriarch Wren. I needed to hear that, more than you know. You have given me much to contemplate."

It's time I've made moves of my own.



With every step echoing lightly on the polished floor, Taenya trailed behind Rhion, her gaze scanning the intricacies of Clan Wren's manor. Rhion, sensing her curiosity, filled the silence with tales and tidbits about his ancestral home. While the architecture was foreign, there were faint echoes of familiarity to Taenya—like whispered tales she'd heard before.

I wish Sabina was here.

Much to her surprise, the predominant decor of the manor wasn't the dragon motifs she expected, but smaller statues. The remaining decor was an intriguing blend of unusual and familiar designs, not entirely different from what she had heard of the aesthetics of the old clans in the Vlaredian Empire.

The manor lacked the grandiosity of overt wealth or the subtle touches of affluence. Instead, every room, every corner, spoke of a family that, while living comfortably, prioritized the well-being of their community over opulence. This was not just a home; it was a physical demonstration of their values.

It was surprisingly comforting.

Approaching a door guarded by a soldier, the man greeted Captain Wren with a respectful nod. “Rhion,” he murmured affectionately before making way for the man.

She raised a brow at the familiarity, but her guide simply patted the man’s shoulder as he walked by.

With a gentle push, Rhion opened the door to reveal a scene that momentarily robbed Taenya of words.

At the head of a grand table sat a man bearing a striking resemblance to Rhion. He was engaged in quiet conversation with a woman beside him, and to his right, a drak’valan girl—her scales a radiant shade of violet—was animatedly conversing with... a curly-haired human.

But what truly arrested Taenya’s attention was the small creature cradled in the human girl’s lap. *A... dragon?*

Pushing her initial shock aside, Taenya steadied her breathing. She found her, and she was safe.

“Gwyn?”

Rhion paused, and she saw him watching her from the corner of her eye, but she didn’t care.

Her liege. Her princess. The young girl she had been helping raise over the past two years turned her gaze toward the voice. Those familiar blue eyes widened in recognition, and a little black-scaled dragon, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the emblem on her armor, blinked back in a strange reptilian way at Taenya with a slitted, but matching hue.

“Gwyn!”

Forgetting decorum, and driven by a mix of relief and elation, Taenya surged forward.



Her dragon, sensing the rising energy in the room, leaped agilely onto the table and flared its wings slightly in anticipation. As Gwyn began to rise, Taenya, a whirlwind of emotions, closed the distance between them. Before Gwyn could fully steady herself, she was lifted clear off the ground in Taenya’s embrace.

<<*Surprise! Okay?*>>

Gwyn could see tears glistening in the eyes of the telv woman, her blonde locks cascading like a golden curtain. Those hazel eyes, so full of concern, darted over Gwyn’s face, resting momentarily on the faint scar marring her forehead.

“You were hurt,” Taenya’s voice quavered.

Gwyn's fingers instinctively traced the line of the healed wound. "Yeah, this..." She swallowed, memories flooding back, "It happened when Amari and I were ambushed on the wall. We fell pretty far." Her eyes widened with sudden realization. "Amari! How is she? Is she angry? She was hurt so much worse, and I couldn't just leave her to—"

In a swift motion, Taenya clasped Gwyn's face, bringing their foreheads together in a motherly gesture, grounding both of them amidst the chaos of emotions. "She's fine," Taenya whispered fiercely. "You're safe, and that's all that fucking matters. Gods, Gwyn. I was terrified I'd lost you."

Gwyn could feel the cool steel plates of Taenya's armor pressing against her as she tightly wrapped her arms around the knight. She leaned into the embrace, offering comfort and seeking solace.

"I'm alright," Gwyn murmured, her voice thick with emotion. "I took care of the bad guys. Just like you taught me. Just like you would have done."

"Gwyn? I believe some introductions are in order," Taenya whispered.

The princess nodded and took a step back, her stance more formal. The room was filled with a mix of tension and expectation as she took a deep breath. She extended a hand towards Taenya, "Everyone, meet Ser Taenya Shavyre. She's my Knight-Captain, my trusted right hand. I rely on her for... well, almost everything really. She's pretty awesome."

Gwyn then shifted her gaze back to Taenya, "And Taenya, these are the drak'valans who have been so kind to me." She gestured first to the energetic girl with purple scales. "This is Neira," then to the stately figure beside her, "her father, Callum, the Patriarch of Clan Wren and the leader of Eldenthor," and finally, to the elegant winged woman, "and Neira's mother, Rheagan Inglass-Wren. Neira and I sort of stumbled upon each other in the forest," she shared with a playful smirk, earning a grin from Neira.

A giggle broke the introductions. Neira, mischief twinkling in her eyes, remarked, "Your armor has drakyns on it! I thought you told me she didn't believe they existed, Gwyn!"

"Well," Gwyn retorted playfully, "*dragons* are a part of my House's crest. See, I believed in them, and I *did* always tell Taenya we'd find them eventually!"

"But to see a knight, your knight, wearing them so... boldly? Quite the statement," Neira teased.

Rheagan, with an amused smile, chimed in, "Especially on her chest. A tad... suggestive, don't you think?"

Neira couldn't contain her laughter. "It's guarding your breast isn't it?"

Taenya's eyes widened, her face flushing as she choked back her surprise. "This? I... uh, never really thought about it like that."

Gwyn knew her knight's face better than that.

She definitely had.

Which...

A mortified realization dawned on Gwyn. "Wait a minute... I designed that! It's supposed to be protecting her heart..." The room filled with laughter as Gwyn's face turned a deep shade of red, hiding behind her hands.

Taenya, finally regaining her composure, responded with a chuckle, "Well, it's alright. This has officially become my favorite of the two."

Rheagan laughed. "I'm sure any man would be intimidated by that."

Neira smiled. "Do the Loreni cower in fear? Our stories say that drakyns routed entire armies."

Taenya smiled. "I don't know about all that, although I've intimidated a few men when wearing my armor. But whenever Gwyn wields her fire, that... that is when everyone truly knows fear."

"As they should," Callum said with a smirk.

Rheagan rose gracefully, her laughter subsiding as she approached Taenya. Holding Taenya's hand in a warm clasp, she said, "You have a good sense of humor, Ser Taenya. Be welcome in our home."

Taenya nodded gratefully, thanking Rheagan, Callum, and then Neira. "Thank you for letting Captain Wren lead me through your beautiful town. It truly is an enchanting place."

"I am sure my son told you," Callum started as he stood. He then nodded toward Neira's eldest brother who returned the gesture. "But I have extended you the right of hospitality. A rarity for one not of our people, and the first that I am aware of for one not of Gwyneth's. You appear to be an honorable woman, Ser Taenya Shavyre. I sincerely hope you do not do anything to counter that impression or that makes me regret this decision."

Taenya saluted with a fist to her heart and inclined her head. "I will not embarrass my princess, Patriarch Wren. Captain Wren has been a gracious host so far, and I am thankful to have been allowed to return to my place at her side. I will respect your honor in the spirit it was given, I only regret that I do not have a suitable gift to present to the headman of this beautiful town. I hope that at least for our small part, this meeting can become the spark that lights a lasting friendship between your Clan and our House."

Oh, yeah. She's good.

Gwyn could see on the faces of the Wrens that they were impressed. It was only right, Taenya was freaking awesome and Gwyn loved her quirky, adopted aunt.

Oxylus

As the introductions faded, Taenya's gaze settled on the petite dragon resting on the table. Her voice softened, "And who might this little treasure be?"

Gwyn beamed, hesitating for a moment as a name seemed to dance on the tip of her tongue. Picking the dragonet up gently, she whispered as if unveiling a secret, "Meet *Calista*. Calista Nyx Reinhart."