

Final Stand

One of the most often used examples of monsterized species is the drakyyd lizard. This is mainly due to the terran reaction to the mutated appearance of the species. According to many of the Displaced, the one variant of the monsterized drakyyd highly resembled what their people called Drakes. A name that spread quickly and started the trend of renaming monsterized creatures. A fact later reinforced by discovering that the monsterization process caused by high concentrations of mana actually created and introduced an almost incalculable number of entirely new species to Eona.

- *A History of Monsters. 173 SA*

House Reinhart was on the move, or at least the entourage and guards of Princess Gwyneth were.

They had made it out of the city without fanfare, and the roads had been fairly clear of people. They traveled north from Strathmore and over the Strath River, along the road to the Naro Pass. A deliberate name because it was a narrow strip of land between the Loduhr Mountains and the Ayeval Forest. The pass was also the quickest way to get to the capital from the Duchy of Tiloral.

Its importance and vulnerability to the Valeni or even the dwarves of Dirn Loduhr were why a large castle was built many years ago by the Crown on the duchy's side of the pass just before entering the Duchy of Avira. Eventually, the current Crown Prince decided that funds for maintaining it would be better spent elsewhere. So, he convinced his father to organize a token force to oversee the castle and have the Tilorals pay for it.

The Tilorals happily took on the burden... and stationed their own troops alongside the small unit of royal army soldiers. Castle Naro now held a garrison designed to hold out against both a dwarven or Valeni incursion just long enough for the Tilorals to respond with a greater force.

As they traveled along the road, the occasional travelers smoothly moved out of the way for the group of two carriages and two wagons, along with the contingent of guards on horseback. Of those on horses, two were knights with magical abilities, while eight more were members of the two specialist teams of guards.

These were things that Ser Taenya Shavyre had to keep track of. That, and the three ladies-in-waiting, two scholars, seven servants, and twelve other House guards. Not to mention the princess herself. Luckily, the guards were extremely competent, and all it took was for her to give general direction to one of the three senior guardsmen that had accompanied them and they would see it done, whether that meant settling in for the night in one of the many villages or towns along the route or organizing a watch shift.

Evocati Amari had ridden ahead on some temple business and promised to meet them either at the town of Mardale or on the road near it within the next few days or so. Taenya wasn't sure what that business entailed, but the woman had said that it would be worth it.

The great thing about the route was that there was at least one village or hamlet within half a day's travel of everywhere they stopped. This busy route ended with the town of Mardale which lay a day's journey from the pass. Beyond that, it was a few days' trek to the castle, followed by a week to exit the *Naro* route.

It would take them another three or four weeks to reach the city of Drakensburg.

They were currently on the road after leaving one of the many villages along the route. The stop had been nice, with the group nearly filling the sole inn within the small central plaza. They had been able to relax and plan the route without trying to rush out of the city.

Taenya rode ahead of the caravan with Sabina to her right. Two more guards were ahead of them while the remainder either positioned themselves alongside the carriages or behind the wagons.

She glanced over at the raven-haired elf riding next to her. Sabina looked calm and collected, but Taenya could tell that she was still attempting to reconcile her feelings about the attack on the manor. The high elf had been deeply disturbed by the way she had killed one of the two knights that had attacked her and the princess.

"You alright?" she asked her friend.

Sabina nodded. "I am. Just lost within my thoughts."

"Do you wish to talk about it?"

"Ask me again in Drakensburg."

Taenya nodded. *I'm here. Okay?*

The elf's ear twitched. *~I know.~*

They fell into a contemplative silence for the next hour. The scenery dragged on and the clouds seemed to fill more and more of the skies. Taenya figured they had a few more hours until they reached the next village. It seemed like it would storm soon. Hopefully, it would hold up until they were safely inside the next inn.

With luck, it wouldn't delay their travels the next day.

She did her rounds and rode along the caravan, making sure everyone was alright and didn't need anything. They had to stop and allow some of their passengers to relieve themselves, but they soon returned to the journey.

The first sign of potential trouble was the circling birds.

Taenya searched the area, trying to see anything, but all she saw were the sparse trees and the cloudy sky. There was a slight fog rolling in from the distant hills, but still no sign of anything amiss. She looked at one of her Drakyyds, the telv was one of the three senior guardsmen that they had brought with them and one of the men who had been one of the former Tiloral soldiers she and Theran had recruited. Which said a lot, because the duchy soldiers were worth their weight in gold compared to the less-trained royal army men and women. It was rare to poach active soldiers from the duchy, and she knew that a recommendation straight from the duke had a lot to do with it.

"Oren, grab someone and scout ahead. Something is wrong."

The man nodded, looking in the direction she was looking. "I see the birds. We'll figure it out and be back soon."

"Be safe. Any issues and you come back immediately."

The man saluted and pushed his horse into a gallop, calling to one of the other guards to join him as he passed. She called out to one of the other guards to have her bring word to the others, she would not have her people caught unprepared.

Taenya glanced at Sabina, and the woman caught her eye. ***~I do not feel anything.~***

That made Taenya feel better. The caravan continued, not slowing despite the potential for danger. There just wasn't anything that made the knight-captain *need* to stop. Not yet, at least.

She saw the two guards returning in the distance and moved forward to intercept them. Sabina remained right at her side.

"Ser Taenya! There was an attack ahead. An entire force is... they're dead, Knight-Captain. Several wagons, horses, and bodies were strewn about. The road is fairly clear though."

She had a thought, and asked the senior guardsman, “Can you tell how long it has been?”

The man shrugged. “No later than this morning I’d say by the way everything has settled. It... *smells*. The carrion birds have been feasting all afternoon it seems.”

Taenya nodded and looked at Sabina. “Can you warn the passengers? I’d like for them to remain inside while we investigate. We will keep pushing, perhaps halt the caravan within sight, but far enough away that they do not have to be right near the scene. I will take some with me and investigate.”

“I’ll let them know,” Sabina told her

~Be careful, Taenya.~

I will. After all, my early warning has my back.

Sabina’s returning smile was small as if she didn’t quite believe her.

As the woman moved toward the carriages, Taenya turned back to the guardsman. “Sabina’s Wynvers will remain close to the carriages, grab the rest of the Drakkyds and half of the others, we’ll move ahead.”

It did not take them long to make it to the scene, and the short description Oren had given her did not prepare Taenya for what she saw.

What lay before her was nothing short of carnage. Two wagons were wrecked as if hit by a siege weapon. Bodies were everywhere, arrows, and the very ground was scorched in many places, including around blackened bodies of guards. She got down from her horse and handed the reins to one of her men, before slowly moving toward the wreckage of the wagons, trying to find some sort of identifying marking.

There were still cinders from where one of the two wagons had burned. The other was the site of a final stand it seems. Six bodies lay protective around one other body, their spears and swords scattered—their shields and bodies broken. She glanced at the Drakkyd guard next to her and nodded to the elf woman. They walked closer, and Taenya squatted down next to one of the dead men. His armor had massive tears through the chest plate; gouges that looked like... *claws*.

She heard the woman gasp, and Taenya turned her head. “What?”

“Ser Taenya, come look... is this..?”

Taenya stood and walked over to the body of the man who the others had tried to protect. He wore an elaborate silver armor with remains of yellow and green fabric lightly blowing in the wind. The armor was dirtied and dented, and drying blood fell

from the holes in the helm. The man's breastplate was pierced in the stomach by three holes almost as large as her fist. It would have taken time for him to die, but Relena had claimed him nonetheless.

She looked at the woman. "Who is it?"

The colors and the armor of the man that had died in such a brutal way weren't recognizable to her.

In answer, the guard reached down and pulled off the helm in an almost angry way before she discarded the offending piece of armor as if it had personally attacked her.

The face of the revealed corpse answered what her guard had not.

A man who had started a sequence of events that had ended with Taenya dueling the son of Marquess Angwin and the manor being attacked in return. A man who had tried to manipulate Gwyn into an illegal arranged marriage.

A sick man who only wanted more power, and would do whatever it took.

Count Agrond Telford lay dead.

She stood and looked around, the scene becoming more clear in her mind. Here sat a force meant to ambush them. They would have too and it would have been a fight that she wasn't sure they could have won. Tens of bodies lay dead. Fire had ravaged the scene of battle, and whatever had inadvertently assisted House Reinhart was nowhere to be seen. *I am unsure I would want to know what could do this, even if I could.*

Of course, that was when she heard it.

In the distance, a massive roar let loose. Something that chilled her to her bones.

A primal cry of rage seemed to shake the very ground she stood on. Her eyes widened and she looked around, the guard with her already grabbing her shield and readying her steel spear.

"We need to get back. Now."

The woman nodded and they jogged back to the others, everyone was looking around, spears angled so that they could bring them on target quickly. Their heads were on a swivel and Senior Guardsman Oren was calling to her, "Ser Taenya. It came from the northwest."

She was nodding when she heard someone calling from behind her.

"Taenya!"

Her eyebrows rose and she felt her stress rising. This wasn't...

“Taenya! Did you hear that?”

She turned, seeing Gwyn rushing over. Her wool kefta of dark blue with an elegant design of flame embroidered in silver thread along the seams. The high collar pulled close just under the girl's jawline as the chilling breeze gently caught and waved through the young royal's hair. The coat itself was buttoned together down the front to just below the waist. At her waist was a black belt with a silver buckle that had the sigil of House Reinhart engraved into it. The coat continued until it fell to Gwyn's shins, where the leather boots could be seen, simple and made to keep her comfortable and warm no matter the weather.

“Gwyn? What are you doing out here? This is not a scene appropriate for a young girl,” she said while giving a pointed look at Sabina.

~She insisted. You know how she can be.~

Taenya just glared at her friend.

“Taenya, be nice to Sabina. I made her. What happened here? Did you hear that sound?”

The telv knight ground her teeth together. “An attack. It seems like... *something* attacked those here, and I suspect that they,” she said gesturing to the scene around them. “...were here for us.”

Gwyn's eyes narrowed and her head darted around as she took in the sight. “Who are they?”

“Count Telford and his men.”

The girl nodded. “Good.”

Another roar sounded and Taenya jerked her head around toward the northwest. “I think you should get in the carriage, Your Highness,” she stated as professionally as possible.

Contrary to her wishes, Gwyn did not agree.

“I am fine. Do you see those wagons? Staying inside did not help them. I can help out better when I can use my magic.”

Taenya raised her hand, but Gwyn cut her off.

“You know I am right, Taenya. Come on, let's go.”

The telv squinted her eyes in confusion. *Go where?*

“Where are we going?”

“Toward the sound.”

Taenya’s eyes rounded as another roar was heard, this one sounding almost pained.

“No. That is not a good idea whatsoever.”

The girl sighed. “Taenya, either we go now when we know where the noise is coming from or it surprises us like it did Telford. I would think that us going in prepared is the best idea.”

It stung that the girl had a point, but that didn’t mean Taenya liked it. She was ten. It was Taenya’s job to keep her safe, but the girl kept showing that her use of magic was nearly indispensable.

Gwyn had saved lives when she had swept through the manor like a flaming Hand of Alos. Taenya didn’t know what temperature was needed to burn a body to ash within seconds, but the girl had done it.

Taenya still remembered how the girl had slept for a day straight afterward, over exhaustion from pushing herself to use too much magic and mana. It was something Taenya had resolved to look more into when they reached the capital. Right after they found a doctor for the House. One who could be trusted with magic alongside the two professors.

She sighed. The girl wouldn’t let up, and despite her misgivings, it may be better to have Gwyn with her.

“Fine. You stay close, and if it gets bad, we run. Whatever this is, it took out tens of men.”

Gwyn nodded.

“Understood,” she said as fire built up and started to escape from the corners of her eyes.

She looked around. “House Guards remain back. Wynvers and Drakyyds will join us. Stay in formation. We’re looking for something large and importantly, able to fight an entire force, and from the looks of it, win.”

The group mounted up. Sabina assisted Gwyn with getting up on the horse behind her. She gave some last orders to the senior guardswoman remaining behind,

and the woman gathered the rest of the guards into defensive positions around the wagons and carriages.

She could just make out Ilyana peeking her head out from the carriage door with wide eyes and a disappointed frown. *That girl may need training. Gwyn needs another close to her that can defend her.*

Taenya took the lead as they moved toward where the roars were coming from, the sound not having changed much other than in pitch. *It sounds like it isn't moving away or even closer.*

It took them five minutes of slow riding, but then they came upon the source. A blackened, charred land lay in a cone area easily thirty meters at its greatest width, centered on something that chilled her to her bones. At the center, she saw two things. A massive beast that had a passing resemblance to a drakkyd, and the collapsed armored body of a knight by a downed horse.

The beast was massive. Its shoulders were as tall as Taenya's head... *if you included her sitting on her horse.* It looked over at them with pained eyes, the red eyes burned as Gwyn's did. The monster's deep scarlet scales looked as hard as plate, with fierce spikes that ran down its spine. Its head had a small horn at the tip of its snout, and a crown of fierce horns protruded from the top of its head that rested on top of a long neck. It had a long tail that ended in a diamond-shaped spike. The monster let loose a bellowing roar in their direction, but it didn't move. It lay curled up and she saw why. A long lance pierced its side, and it seemed just out of reach of both the beast's massive taloned feet and its maw.

The monster drakkyd drew its head back and then let loose a massive gout of flame in their direction, that fell short almost ten meters.

It roared again, this time the pain was obvious. It lay its head down and closed its eyes, and Taenya thought it may die right then. She heard a gasp and looked over and saw Gwyn staring at the monster, but then Taenya's heart fell. Gwyn quickly jumped down from the horse, landing in a low crouch, before she got up and started walking *toward* the monster. Sabina reached down and tried grabbing the girl as she moved to pass, missing and almost toppling over before she caught herself.

"Gwyn!" Sabina cried out.

The girl ignored her as she kept going. Taenya quickly jumped down and moved after the princess just as the monster opened its eyes and let out a roar more furious than any it had done yet. The fierce sound scared the horses, causing them to rear up in fear. The act had a couple of guards tumble from their mounts in a crash.

Taenya turned toward the senior guardsmen for her and Sabina's teams. "Check them! I got her!" She saw Gwyn jogging toward the monster, and Taenya's eyes shot open. She started sprinting. "*Gwyn! No, come back!*"

The girl sped up, fire sprouted around her, and she saw the eyes of the beast widen ever so slightly. It drew its head back.

"*No! Gwyn!*"

The monster let loose its burning fury and Gwyn disappeared into a massive spout of flame.

* * *

Gwyn pulled at the red mana and raised her hand as the drake bellowed its flame at her. It was strong, *so strong* but mana sang to *her*. She let her **Fire Shield** flow around her and as the drake's deep red fire met her orange, she *pulled*.

The fire rushed around her and then bent back toward her, joining in with the shield that surrounded her. The fire became hers. The drake was hurt, it was just trying to protect itself. Gwyn would help it.

She moved closer, ignoring the screams from Taenya, knowing that the woman wouldn't let her leave the carriage for the rest of the trip. *I have to do this*.

The beast lifted its head, growing as she got closer. She put out her hand, fire engulfing her. "It's okay. I am a friend. I won't hurt you."

The drake blew more fire, and she easily caught and subsumed it into her own. There was strength in the fire, but it had a weak connection to the mana. The beast could create fire on its own, with but a small sliver of a song to the red mana. It was impressive in how strong it could be, but its weakness was glaring. Anyone able to manipulate fire could take control of it. *If they can sing to the mana well enough*.

She felt the fire pour into her shield and felt the flame that was merging with her own. It was different. It was as if the fire itself was not the same as what she could create. Her own fire felt more mundane, as fire should. Gwyn could feel it within the mana, the drake's fire had an almost regal quality to it. *As is fitting*.

Dropping her shield, she said, "You are gorgeous. Your fire is so powerful. Strong."

The drake let out another growl.

Gwyn sighed. “If only you had a better connection to the mana. It was almost enough though, wasn’t it?”

She was within only several paces now, and still, the drake did not move. It seemed to tighten its tail closer to its body. It looked at her warily, as if expecting an attack. There was an intelligence there, one that reminded her of cats.

“It’s okay. I won’t hurt you.”

She looked back at where the dead man lay. His silver armor was blackened by soot and flame. The man had fought to the end, and though he had not survived the confrontation, he had ensured the drake would die with him. She could respect it if he hadn’t followed such a bad man. Gwyn didn’t know the knight, but she felt you could understand someone by those they followed.

She turned back to the drake. “I am sorry he hurt you.”

The monster let out a rumbling noise, but then it rested its head down and closed its eyes. Gwyn let out a sad chuckle. “You can’t just pretend I am not here, you know.”

A single eye opened and the monster moved its head away.

Gwyn laughed. She took another step and reached out her hand, trying to touch the drake. It turned and nipped at her.

She jerked her hand back.

“Hey!”

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. She pulled on the memory of the drake’s fire and sent out a weak burst of a similar flame. Fire lightly flowed over the monster’s face and the drake jerked its head back. It regarded her and drew its head back, before sending a small puff of fire back at her.

Gwyn laughed as she caught the fire and let it curl around her hand and took control of it. A familiar *rush* filled her, but then the mana surrounding them *sang*. Red mana filled her unbidden and something inside of her seemed to change. Pulling at it, she lifted her hand in front of her and brought her flame to bear. She could instantly see and feel the difference. Where before was a simple orange fire as you would see in any campfire, now was a flame of deep red with golden lines.

As she stared at her new fire, what sounded almost like distant chimes being rustled by wind filled the surrounding mana and the very core of her being. It was a beautiful melodic sound of bell-like ringing that was nowhere and everywhere. A noise

that she had thought was something only she could hear if it weren't for the sight of the drake also hunting for the sound.

She jerked her head around searching for the source and saw Taenya.

Her telv knight also seemed as if she had heard the ethereal sound, and was looking around. She noticed Gwyn staring and pointed at her.

She waved at her knight just as the woman's eyes went wide and her arm reached out.

Gwyn felt a shove, and let out a surprised yelp as she fell face-first into the sooty dirt and grass. Rolling over, she looked up at the drake who seemed to have a smug look on its face as it pulled back its head. Pained, but still smug. *That jerk pushed me over!*

She sighed. *Just like a cat would if it could.*

Wiping herself off as she stood up, she placed a hand on her hip. "That isn't nice."

The drake winced and let out a pained cry. It looked at Gwyn helplessly and then turned and looked toward its stomach where the lance had pierced it.

"Do you want help?"

A growl was its response. It almost whimpered as it shifted itself and moved its head closer to its tail. Gwyn moved so that she could see what it was doing and gasped. The drake looked at her and then looked back down at *another* drake. This one was small.

It was the same dark red, that was more black with a red sheen, and was about the size of a really big dog, like a great dane. The little drake was also not moving.

The big drake nudged the small one softly with its snout, trying to get it to move. It turned and looked at Gwyn almost expectantly. Gwyn felt tears form as she knew then what had happened.

"You were just protecting your baby."

A sorrowful sound came from the big drake and it lay its head on top of the small form. Gwyn moved closer, but the drake turned and growled. "Stop. I am trying to help."

It narrowed its eyes but then moved slightly. Gwyn moved closer and pulled at her **Mana Sight**. The surrounding arcane energy lit up in her vision and she saw the red of the drake, the green swirling through the ground. With a glance, she noticed her knight had been slowly moving closer, the woman's deep red shining bright as if the woman was strengthening herself with it.

Gwyn peered down at the baby drake and let out a sob as she realized that there was nothing. She could see the small red core in its chest, but it wasn't connected to the baby anymore. It was just lifeless.

She looked at the mother and rushed to it. Hugging just behind its eyes, pushing herself against the drake. "I am so sorry. Those mean men did this."

A rumble vibrated her to her bones as the drake made a sound before it moved and lay its head down. Its eye opened and turned toward her, its feline-like slit gazing at her as she held it.

It drew its head back and she let go. The drake turned and brought its head closer to her. Tilting its head to the side, it closed its eyes and leaned forward. Gwyn reached out and brought her hand and forehead against the drake's.

"You beat them."

The drake huffed and heat filled the air around them as if that fact was never in question. *Only its ability to survive as well.*

She took a step back as the drake lay down fully on the ground, its breath starting to become more rapid. It looked up at Gwyn with pained eyes and let out a small whimper.

Gwyn placed her hand on its snout, tears streaming down her face. "I am right here. I won't leave you."

She didn't. Eventually, she felt Taenya's hand on her shoulder, but Gwyn didn't move. Resolving to remain by the mother's side, she moved closer to the regal red drake.

Making a pained sound, the mother eventually turned its head and lay down next to the baby. One last look was all she gave Gwyn before it lay there, pointing its head toward its offspring. A position that the drake didn't leave until it took its last breath; the gaze never moving away from the body of its child.

Gwyn fell to her knees, sobbing. She felt Taenya wrap her arms around her.

They sat like that for who knows how long.

She finally tilted her head up at her adopted aunt. "Why is this world so cruel?"

Taenya gazed down lovingly at Gwyn.

"We have not yet learned the true value of a life. Eona needs people like you to guide it into a future we could have never dreamed of. You and other terrans like your mother have lived better lives. Listening to your stories and tales, and hearing about

your world, makes me hope for something better. *You* are better. No matter what has happened, you have remained strong. Don't give up on us yet."

Gwyn nodded. "It's so hard. There are so many bad people, Taenya."

The woman smiled sadly. "I like to think that there are some good people too." Taenya looked at the drake. "Good *beings*. You have a heart of gold, Gwyn. No one else I know would have rushed to this thing and tried to comfort it in its last moments."

"She was just a mother, trying to protect her baby. I just saw, mom. I can only imagine what she's feeling, knowing I am gone. Do you think she is okay?"

Taenya took a deep breath. "If she's anything like you? Your mother will never stop searching for you."

Gwyn nodded, before looking at the drake. "Taenya?"

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath. "What will people do when they find her?" she asked, gesturing toward the drake with her head.

"Well—"

"Tell me the truth. Please."

"They will harvest her for her parts. Research her. See what makes her what she is, and how to effectively kill others like her."

Gwyn's breath hitched in her throat. She turned and gave the drake a long look. Trying to think of what the red drake would want. They would never be able to bury her, she was too big. As big as a large van, like those that used to deliver packages.

"Can we bury her baby? And... And I think we should take her core."

Taenya's eyes softened. "Of course. I will gather the guards and we will bury her baby with respect. Are you sure you wish for us to... retrieve the core?"

Gwyn nodded.

"Yes. I think I have her fire now. I think it is only fitting that we use the core." She felt the tiny core attached to her earring. "These have helped me with my magic. In stories in my world, there were people like me. Mages and wizards of great power. They all had something in common, I think."

Taenya's eyes scrunched up in thought.

“What is that?”

“A mage staff and a drake’s core will make it stronger than anything else around.”

*Then, when I use fire against men like this... It will be like you are helping me, and all the evil will **burn**. Just like you did in this field.*

She placed her hand one last time on the drake’s snout, just behind its horn.

Gwyn walked away as Taenya gathered the guards to set on the task Gwyn had given her. Sabina helped her up onto the horse and started riding back to camp.

She glanced behind them, seeing the guards moving the baby.

The big drake mother’s body lay there, a sorrowful end to what should have been a happy story. Ruined by one who only sought power. *Thank you for taking care of that evil man for me. I wish I was here to help you. Maybe we could have been friends.*

Sabina reached back and gave her a small squeeze. Gwyn smiled and hugged the woman’s back. *I hope you’re okay. I am sorry I pushed you.*

~I will be alright. It has just taken time to... reconcile my feelings. I do not blame you. I would do such a thing over again if it would protect you. It’s just difficult on my mind.~

Gwyn squeezed Sabina again. *I’ll protect you.*

She felt a mental nudge in reply and it made her smile.

Gwyn looked ahead, ready to continue the journey. Sad and happy to have been able to make it to the drake in its last moments, hoping that it had brought a small amount of comfort to not be alone.

The drake also proved something else to the princess. If drakes are roaming the land, surely there are dragons somewhere.

Now, I just need to find them and show off my new flame.

Nothing will be able to harm my family when that day comes.