
Promises Promises

Roslyn yawned and opened her eyes, squinting at the light filtering into the room. She stretched gently, careful not to disturb the peaceful scene beside her. She watched Gwyn sleep for a moment, her best friend's face softened in slumber, looking so different from her usual fiery self. At some point during the night, Gwyn had draped a leg over Roslyn in her sleep.

Calista was still asleep on the floor, but one of her black wings was covering Gwyn like a blanket. It was kind of funny seeing the wing over Gwyn, almost as if the dragon was trying to say, 'This one's mine, keep away.'

Roslyn lay still, her gaze fixed on the ceiling above, lost in contemplation. Each day that passed seemed to bring a new challenge, a new weight upon her shoulders. Since moving in with Gwyn, their combined House's defenses had strengthened, which was a small comfort amidst the uncertainty that clouded their days.

She wasn't even sure if the Reinhart Estate was safe, but at least here they had plenty of guards and she had Gwyn.

She'd penned a letter for her grandfather about Lord Riggell's death, and she'd all but shut down the estate. It had become a matter of safety, and without additional resources from home, there was no way she could keep this up. Ser Sabina had tried to help, and had been lured into an ambush.

Which was the last straw for Roz.

Taking the initiative, Roslyn had met with the headmaster of the Academy and informed her that she would be leaving after the year was finished.

Things were just too dangerous.

Her decision to leave the Academy at the end of the year was a heavy one, made heavier by the knowledge that it might influence Gwyn's choices. She desperately still needed the knowledge the school could impart.

Gently, with the utmost care, Roslyn shifted Gwyn's leg off her, her movements delicate to avoid disturbing her sleeping friend. Looking at them, Roslyn felt this happy little flutter in her chest. It was nice having Gwyn so close. It made her feel safe in a way she didn't know she needed. With all of the attacks, being able to have Gwyn by her side literally every day made everything better. It helped her to not focus on all that had happened nor what could.

Manabound - Resilience

However, it was this very closeness that stirred unfamiliar emotions within Roslyn, a mixture of warmth and confusion that left her both elated and troubled. She found herself increasingly drawn to Gwyn, captivated by her smile, the light in her eyes, and the mere sound of her laughter.

Ever since she stopped using that spell she's been doing so much better.

She had an idea of what it was, but it wasn't something she could have. But try as she liked, it felt as if she couldn't stop it. It scared her in a way she couldn't express.

But the more she tried to deny it, the more she wanted it.

It didn't help that Gwyn knew her in all of the ways that no one else did.

Roslyn couldn't help but smile softly. With her magic, Gwyn always seemed so strong, like nothing could ever scare her. But right now, she just looked like another girl. It was a nice reminder that behind all that bravery and magic, Gwyn was just like her in some ways.

As Roslyn sat up, careful not to wake Gwyn, she pondered over these emotions, trying to make sense of them. The protectiveness Gwyn showed, the way she made Roslyn feel cherished, was something she hadn't realized she yearned for. Yet here she was, grappling with feelings she couldn't quite name, feelings that both thrilled and frightened her.

With a deep breath, Roslyn prepared to start another day, a day filled with the challenges of nobility, the responsibilities of her station, and the ever-growing complexity of her feelings for Gwyn.

After Roslyn carefully got out of bed, she took one last look at Gwyn and Calista, thinking they did look really cute. It was a bit of a relief, knowing she had Gwyn in her life, someone who could be both a friend and a protector.

They had come to an agreement; Roslyn would handle the more... political things, while her best friend would take care of anything martial—or as Gwyn phrased it, she would focus on the burny-stabby side of things while Roz did the talky-plotty.

And right now, Roslyn knew she needed her warrior princess.

Stepping out of Gwyn's suite, her thoughts still lingering on the peaceful scene she had left behind. But then one of the maids was passing by with a basket of laundry.

A quick check with **[Insightful Memory]** gave her the woman's name.

"Good morning, Elise," Roslyn greeted with a polite smile.

Elise turned, her face brightening upon seeing Roslyn. "Good morning, Lady Roslyn. Did you sleep well?"

"I did, thank you," Roslyn replied.

“At this point Her Highness may need to get you your own room!” the older woman said with a laugh.

Roz smiled. “Gwyn’s room is just too comfortable though. Plus, it helps me feel as if I’m not being too much of a burden.”

“Oh, milady. You’d never be a burden to that girl. She adores you.”

She felt a flush climb her cheeks as she thought about Gwyn liking her. Roslyn looked away and pretended to cough so the woman couldn’t see.

“I-I am going to freshen up and get ready for the day. But thank you, Elise.”

My romance novels never prepared me for this.

“Of course, my lady. Just let us know if you need anything,” Elise said before continuing down the hallway.

Heading to the bathroom, Roslyn went through her morning routine with practiced ease. She washed her face and brushed her teeth before heading back to Gwyn’s room.

Before she could reach out for the handle, the door opened and Sansa exited, closely followed by Calista, who looked as if she’d just been roused from a deep sleep.

“Miss Sarkas,” Roslyn said in greeting.

The sun elf girl smiled. “Lady Roz,” she replied with a wink. “You took a while, Gwyneth is getting ready.”

Roz nodded and turned her attention to the other... person who emerged from the room.

“Good morning, Cali,” Roslyn addressed the dragon, who blinked sleepily in response.

Calista tilted her head, looking at Roslyn with curious eyes but remained silent.

“I know you can’t talk to me yet like you do with Gwyn, but I hope you slept well,” Roslyn continued, her voice warm. “Thank you for caring for her last night. And Gwyn really cares about you, you know. You’re a lucky dragon to have someone like her.”

Calista fluttered her wings slightly and rubbed her head on Roslyn’s side in a gesture of affection that made Roslyn laugh softly.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she said, reaching out to gently pat Calista’s head. “Well, I need to help Gwyn so we can start the day. You know how hopeless she is in the morning.”

Cali made a soft purring sound as she lumbered away from her with Sansa, smacking her gently with her tail as she passed in a way that made Roz jump and giggle at the young dragon’s antics. Calista Nyx wasn’t so little anymore, either. She came up to Roz’s chest, so about one-twenty centimeters, which was about the same as some of the larger felines on the continent.

And Gwyn said she'd get even bigger. Just the thought made Roz happy Calista was a member of the family.

Roslyn entered the room, her thoughts still lingering on Calista, when her gaze fell on Gwyn. The sight before her momentarily halted her steps. There stood Gwyn, stretching in a way that seemed almost choreographed, her movements graceful and fluid. She was clad only in her underwear and a chest covering, and the sight made Roslyn's heart race unexpectedly.

Gwyn was in front of the bed, deliberating between three different outfits laid out neatly. Roslyn's eyes inadvertently traced the contours of her friend's body, taking in the toned muscles that spoke of countless hours of training and discipline. Gwyn's physique was a testament to her dedication as a warrior. Roslyn had never truly noticed it before, not like this, but in that moment, Gwyn embodied the very essence of the knightly figures from her cherished romance novels. She was tall, undeniably strong, and her posture exuded a natural confidence.

Then Gwyn turned, her eyes meeting Roslyn's, and her face lit up with a beaming smile that radiated warmth and kindness. It was the kind of smile that could light up a room, a smile that reached her eyes and seemed to make everything around her brighter.

"Hey, Roz! Where'd you sneak off to?" Gwyn asked, her voice brimming with genuine happiness upon seeing her friend.

Roslyn, still somewhat entranced, found herself momentarily at a loss for words. Her mind scrambled to regain composure, her noble upbringing kicking in to save her from the awkward silence. Her gaze finally tore away from Gwyn's stomach, meeting her friend's eyes as she managed a response, albeit a little awkwardly. "Pee," she blurted out, her cheeks heating up at the simplicity of her reply.

Roslyn's mind raced, a mix of noble poise and teenage uncertainty clashing within her.

Focus, Roslyn, you're the Heiress to House Tilorai, for Alos' sake. Muscles shouldn't...

...

She blinked.

But her thoughts trailed off as her eyes inevitably drifted back to Gwyn... and the simple yet striking display of strength and beauty.

As if sensing her inner turmoil, Gwyn closed the distance between them with an effortless grace, her lack of attire seemingly of no concern. Gwyn's hands gently grasped Roslyn's arms, her sapphire eyes searching Roslyn's face with a look of genuine concern.

Which was warranted.

Roslyn was highly concerned right now too.

But those eyes, deep and expressive, were like pools of clarity and warmth. Pools you could get lost in.

What was wrong with her?

Roslyn tried to temper the wave of emotions that were churning in her. Not only that, her heart felt like it was about to punch out of her chest it was beating so hard. She tried to regain her composure, to anchor herself and push aside all of these silly thoughts.

Of course, she failed.

Because then her gaze inadvertently shifted to Gwyn's lips, soft and inviting, causing an involuntary whimper to escape her.

“What’s wrong, Roz?”

Realizing the precariousness of her own reactions, Roslyn hastily extricated herself from Gwyn’s hold, turning away in an attempt to hide the blush that was undoubtedly coloring her cheeks. “N-Nothing! You should get dressed. Why are you walking around like this? We have to get ready for the day and you’re dallying.” She pointed at the white and blue dress on the far left. The same one that Gwyn loved to wear while casting magic. “That one. It’s my favorite.”

Gwyn's light and carefree chuckle rang through the room, but Roslyn found herself unable to join in the mirth. Her friend's unguarded laughter only heightened the sense of confusion swirling within her. *She's so effortlessly herself now. She's slowly returning to the girl I first met. The pretty girl with fire in her eyes who was so free and genuine before her heart iced over. Was forcing a promise out of her all it really took?*

Gab!

“I’m not dallying; I was getting ready! Then you came back. Come on. Your clothes are in the wardrobe. Get dressed and I’ll brush your hair for you,” Gwyn offered with a warmth that seemed to embrace the very air around them. It was like she was using her magic with her very words, and with that fire, she heated up Roslyn’s heart.

“Mhm,” Roslyn managed to reply, her voice a mere whisper. Internally, her thoughts were a whirlwind of disarray, a cacophony of emotions she couldn't quite decipher. As she made her way to the wardrobe, Roslyn couldn't help but wonder about the strange and unfamiliar feelings that Gwyn's presence evoked in her.

What's happening to me? she pondered, her heart still fluttering uncontrollably.



Gwyn frowned as her best friend avoided looking at her while they sat and ate breakfast. The air was thick with unspoken words, creating an uneasy tension that Gwyn couldn't quite place. It didn't help that Roz was barely even eating.

Just as she was about to question her friend, the dining hall's doors opened and a large group of people entered. She quickly took note of who it was—all three of the Reinhart knights were present, along with Roslyn's two, Rhion, Ilyana and Aleanora for some reason, both House's paladins—Amari and Khalan, and finally, the evocati from the Church.

Something was brewing, and Gwyn sensed it immediately.

Gwyn set her fork down with a soft clink, her attention piqued by the serious expressions on their faces. "Looks like we have some serious business to discuss," she remarked, her voice betraying a mix of curiosity and concern.

Roz looked up and frowned. "Is everything alright?"

Taenya, taking a seat next to Gwyn, nodded solemnly. The table went silent as everyone settled in. The seriousness in her eyes told Gwyn everything she needed to know. This was retribution. Justice.

As the staff quietly cleared their plates, Gwyn leaned in, her eyes scanning the faces of her trusted advisors and friends. "I think I know what this is. So, alright, let's hear it. What's the plan? When do we act?"

As if on cue, Sabina began to outline their strategy, her voice resonating in their minds with a clarity that cut through the morning air. *'Our strike on House Racine's manor is set for a week from now,'* she projected. *'I've been carefully scouting alone for the past week. The Countess is currently absent, but her operations in the city continue. We need to disrupt them, finding any leads we can on her whereabouts and their plans.'*

Gwyn listened intently, her mind racing with the implications. *'But what about the mind mages? How do we counter them?'* she asked, her concern evident even in her mental voice.

Sabina's gaze shifted to Taenya, who gave a subtle nod. *'Without Lucian, we can't extend mental protection to others, which means we're taking only those who can defend themselves: you, me, Taenya, Amari, Khalan, and two from the Shadow Guard.'*

Gwyn chewed on her lower lip, mulling over the plan. It was a risk, but a necessary one. They had to send a message, show that Houses Tiloral and Reinhart wouldn't stand for such blatant aggression.

'And the servants?' Gwyn added, her thoughts reflecting her concern for the innocents caught in the crossfire.

'We avoid harming them at all costs. Our issue is with House Racine and its enforcers, not those who serve them out of necessity.'

Gwyn nodded. They were defending their own, and Gwyn knew that sometimes, that required taking the fight to the enemy's doorstep; but they couldn't become what they were trying to stop.

Her frown deepened as she listened to the discussion unfolding before her. She glanced at Roslyn, who was all business with her usual calm demeanor in place as she inquired about the plans for the rest of their group.

Friedrich exchanged a glance with Rhion before replying. "We'll be here, on high alert for any counterattacks. Every guard from both Houses, along with the paladin squad," he gestured towards the evocati the Church had sent, "will be here to ensure your safety, Lady Roslyn."

Ser Roderick chimed in, "On a different note, we've received a letter from your grandfather, milady. You're to leave at the end of the school year and return to Strathmore. He also suggests that Her Highness should consider doing the same. There have been attacks against the House throughout the kingdom by a number of noble faction-aligned Houses."

Leaving school, huh? Gwyn thought, her brows furrowing slightly. The idea of leaving the Academy was a big one, but with everything happening, it kind of made sense. Still, she wasn't sure that she wanted to. Leaving almost felt like admitting defeat. She stole a glance at Roz, noting the slight resignation in her friend's posture. This was big news, yet Roslyn seemed unsurprised.

"You already knew about leaving school?" Gwyn asked, her tone a mix of curiosity and concern.

Roslyn gave a small shake of her head. "Not exactly, but I had decided to withdraw after this year anyway. We're vulnerable here, especially with winter approaching which will leave us with no aid available from the duchy."

"And with mercenaries being snatched up by the Crown Prince for the war effort, our options to strengthen our defenses are limited," Roderick added, his concern evident.

Ser Janine, Roslyn's personal knight, chimed in with her calm, measured voice. "His Grace has procured passage for members of both Houses to travel through Dirn Loduhr."

The idea of traveling through Dirn Loduhr? Now that sparked her interest. *Dwarves! That would be so cool!* She had always been fascinated by the stories of their craftsmanship and underground cities.

"However, back onto the subject at hand," Ser Janine said. "Our suspicions point towards House Racine as the orchestrator behind these attacks. Finding any evidence of this in their manor could be key."

Gwyn's excitement about the dwarves was momentarily overshadowed by the seriousness of the situation. She let out a sigh. "So this attack we're planning... it's more than just retaliation. It's a statement."

Taenya's smile was one of determination. "Absolutely. We're sending a clear message to not fuck with us."

"And it's a statement I've been waiting to make," Amari finished.

The mood shifted as Roderick's expression turned grave. Everyone's attention was drawn to him. "There's more," he said gravely. "His Grace has uncovered evidence that the Lymtoria Republic is preparing for an invasion."

Gwyn felt a chill run down her spine at the revelation. The situation was escalating beyond what she had imagined. She exchanged a look with Taenya, both understanding the gravity of what lay ahead. This was more than just a fight; they were on the brink of something much larger.

"What about our people?" she asked her knight.

"I'm sure Siveril is handling the situation as we speak," she assured. "However, it seems increasingly likely that a return to Strathmore may be the safest option for us."

"I need to be part of that. I can help protect them."

"I understand your eagerness, but we must also consider the possibility that we may miss your mother's arrival if we leave," Taenya cautioned, her tone gentle yet firm.

Aleanora, who had been listening intently, spoke up with conviction. "I will stay here in the capital. If necessary, I can ensure Queen Sloane is directed to Strathmore. Should the situation deteriorate, we can leave."

Friedrich nodded in agreement. "We'll establish an evacuation plan. It's imperative that we remain one step ahead."

"Without Lord Riggell and myself, House Tiloral will not have a representative in the capital. This could worsen our standing," Roz said. "Things could get worse. I propose we keep any willing guards from my House here at the Reinhart estate, consolidating our forces." She turned to Roderick. "I'd like you to stay as well."

Roderick opened his mouth to protest, but Taenya intervened by clearing her throat. "Respectfully, let's focus on the immediate threat. Our response to House Racine takes precedence. We can address the logistics of our departure as well as defenses and representation afterward."

Roslyn bowed her head slightly in acknowledgment. "You're right. My apologies. Let's focus on the task at hand."

Nods of determination were exchanged around the room, each face set with the same resolve. “We’ll need to begin preparing immediately,” Taenya declared, standing up to signify the end of the meeting.

“Agreed. Training and preparations for the offensive team start today,” Amari added, her voice firm. “Let’s ensure we’re ready.” She turned to Rhion. “Captain Rhion, you’ll handle preparations for defense.”

“Understood,” he said. He turned to the others. “Those of us handling defense, let’s stay here and start planning.”

“I’ll get a map of the grounds,” Friedrich said.

Roslyn stole a quick glance at Gwyn before turning to the Church’s paladin. “Evocati, let’s work together. I’ll explain what I can do with magic and you can help work that in with Captain Rhion’s plan of action.”

The man nodded. “Sounds good.”

Gwyn smiled. “Let’s get to work!”

They split off into smaller groups, each focusing on a particular aspect of the upcoming attack or defense of the estate. Some headed to the training grounds, while others sat down with maps and documents, their minds already racing with tactics and contingencies. The seriousness of their situation was clear, and every member of the group was focused on the task at hand, the morning passing in a flurry of activity and planning.



Gwyn took a moment to steady her breath as Roz fiddled with the straps of her dress, the one they jokingly referred to as her ‘war dress’. It was far from the typical princess attire, lacking billowing skirts or intricate laces. Instead, it was a pragmatic ensemble designed for agility and the integration of a breastplate, bracers, and greaves. Ideal for a warrior princess who might need to swiftly cast a spell or unsheathe a sword at a moment’s notice.

The last strap in place, Roz gently leaned against Gwyn, their reflections melding together in the mirror as her best friend rested her chin on her shoulder. “Nerves?”

“Yeah, a bit,” Gwyn admitted, meeting Roz’s gaze in the reflection. “You know, with all the mind magic and... stuff. It’s kinda scary. I’ve been practicing with Sabina all week, and I’m still a bit worried. It’s not as simple as just throwing spells or crossing blades.”

“I can understand that. It’s scary to me too.”

“And... I’ve been worried. This ‘Polite War’... Well, it’s never really been polite. Why is that Roz? Why has it been like this?”

Roz hummed thoughtfully, her eyes trailing down to where her hand rested on Gwyn’s arm.

“It’s all of these changes. It never used to be like this. Maybe some small things here or there. A baron leading a small force to steal land from another baron. A count poisoning a rival. But never this. Magic... magic has made everyone want *more* and has made everyone go crazy. People are realizing that you humans—or terrans, are quite useful... or dangerous. Especially you. I made my family a target by becoming your friend—not that I regret it! It’s just, times are changing, and the kingdom isn’t as stable as we once thought. It’s falling apart, Firebug, and we’re stuck in the middle. Soon we’ll be going back home and...” She sighed. “We have so much fighting to come, and I’m scared.”

“Don’t be. You have me at your side, right?” Gwyn asked quietly. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Roz smiled softly, but Gwyn could tell it was forced. When her friend replied, it was to whisper, “Not only that... but I’ve been thinking, Gwyn. About your [**Frozen Heart**].”

Gwyn wanted to laugh at the wording, but she knew what her friend meant. And it was a touchy subject for the two of them, so she forced herself to stay serious. Plus, they both knew who was the true ice queen of their duo.

Gwyn tilted her head, curious. “Oh? What have you been thinking?”

“I think the problem with that spell is that it isn’t meant to be used all the time like you were. And you’ve been doing so well without it! I’m so proud of you, Firebug. But it’s... well, it’s a war spell, isn’t it? Meant for moments like these. Not for... avoiding awkward conversations or uncomfortable situations.”

Gwyn chewed her lip, considering. Roz had a point. The spell was powerful, a tool for the heat of battle, not a shield from everyday life. But the implications of what Roz was suggesting...

As if that was ever in question. Roz is always right. It’s why she’s so awesome.

“But I pushed you away with it,” Gwyn whispered, the weight of those past actions still heavy on her shoulders.

“I was wrong.”

Gwyn’s brain froze for a moment. “No, no! You weren’t wrong. I got carried away with it and hurt you. I’m sorry...”

Roz shook her head, her chin rubbing against Gwyn’s shoulder. “We both made mistakes, Gwyn. We’ve learned, right? Communicated more. You’ve even confided in your two ‘crazy aunt’s’ and Amari more. I was harsh, maybe. I just... I hated seeing you lock yourself away.”

Gwyn squeezed the hand that was resting on her arm. “We both should have. I was just as in the wrong. I’m sorry I did things that made you feel as if that was the only response you could have. But I guess...”

Could I really go back to using it for only fighting? Or is she just saying that to help me?

Violet eyes shifted from looking at her, to looking at their hands. Her friend’s cheeks turned pink slightly before looking away.

Roz nodded, a small smile playing on her lips before she turned away to fetch Gwyn’s armor. “I-I’ll get your armor. You should get moving soon.”

Gwyn watched Roz’s retreating figure, the tension of the upcoming mission mingling with the warmth of their conversation. “Roz?” she called out, a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

Roz paused, half-turned with the breastplate in hand. “Y-Yes?”

Gwyn’s brow furrowed, words jumbling in her head. “You’ve just... been different lately. Is everything okay?”

For a moment, Roz hesitated, her eyes darting away before meeting Gwyn’s once more. “It’s nothing important. I’m fine, just a bunch on my mind and heart. Let’s focus on getting you ready, okay?”

But as Roz assisted her with the armor, the unspoken words hung between them like a new puzzle for Gwyn to ponder as they prepared to face whatever lay ahead. Gwyn wasn’t sure how to feel about that, and it must have shown on her face because Roz set the breastplate down and gave her a hug.

“It’s not bad, I promise. I just... I don’t want to distract you before your mission.” She sighed and straightened her back.

Gwyn nodded.

Roslyn picked up the breastplate and smiled. “Well then, let’s get this armor on. Can’t have you getting hurt. We both know how you are.”

Gwyn both watched and felt as her friend’s fingers deftly secured each strap and buckle of the armor, the task mundane but performed with such care. The silence was heavy with thoughts left unsaid, and Gwyn found herself wishing she could peel back the layers of whatever was troubling Roz.

She hated to see her hurting over something. *What if it’s something I did?*

After tightening her greaves, she adjusted her bracers and strapped her sword to her hip. She stood up and allowed Roz to check over her work, her eyes scanning Gwyn critically to ensure everything was secure. Her bestie offered a small, reassuring smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “There, all set.”

Gwyn nodded, her own smile a mask of gratitude and lingering concern. “Thanks, Roz. For everything. You’re the best friend I could have ever hoped for. I’ll be back soon, then we can talk?”

“Of course, Firebug. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Always.” With a deep breath, she turned towards the door.

Gwyn felt Roz’s presence behind her like a comforting warmth in a cold night. Just before she reached the door, Roz caught her arm and turned her back around. There was a softness in her violet eyes, a depth of emotion that Gwyn rarely saw.

“Be safe, Gwyn,” Roslyn whispered, pulling her into a gentle hug. The embrace was tight and Gwyn returned the hug, feeling a swell of affection and strength from her best friend.

As they parted, Roslyn’s hand lingered on Gwyn’s shoulder before she lifted to her tip toes and placed a gentle kiss on Gwyn’s cheek.

Gwyn touched her cheek as Roslyn pulled back, a small smile playing on her lips. “I will, Roz. See you soon.” With that, she turned once more, the touch of her friend’s lips still burning on her skin as she stepped out of the room and through her home.

The setting sun painted the manor’s corridors in warm hues, a stark contrast to the cool resolve settling in her chest. The evening air was crisp as she stepped outside, a mix of oranges and pinks streaking across the sky as day bled into night.

Sansa was outside, standing there. Her eyes fell to where Gwyn’s hand rested on the hilt of Raafe’s Legacy. Gwyn could see the tears welling up in her new friend’s eyes. She stepped forward and spoke softly, “I know these weren’t the people that took him away. Or the ones that forced my family into those circumstances... But they’re on the same side...”

Gwyn nodded. “We’ll handle it. If anything happens, lock yourself in somewhere and hide. Let the others handle it, alright?”

The sun elf girl tilted her head. “You and I both know that’s not an option for me. Not if I am to be what you need me to be.”

The princess placed a hand on her future knight’s shoulder and squeezed. “There is time for that, and it isn’t now. You’ll be a knight when it’s time, for now your job is to survive until then. Don’t do anything foolish.”

Sansa nodded.

Gwyn felt a familiar flutter of anticipation in her stomach, a warrior’s readiness for the battle ahead—or at least that’s what she told herself. She wasn’t a warrior, she was just someone trying to survive until the next fight.

She glanced back at the manor once more, at the home that had become a fortress, and then set her gaze forward to where the others were ready and waiting. She strode towards them, the clinking of her armor a steady rhythm against the whispering wind, her mind focused on the mission, but her heart still tangled in the words Roz had left unspoken.

As they converged around the carriage, a sense of unity seemed to bind the group, each one a vital piece in the intricate plan laid out before them. Taenya gave Gwyn a final nod of acknowledgment, her face a mask of determination and unwavering commitment. The shadows of the evening embraced them in a cloak of darkness that shrouded their movements.

As Gwyn approached the assembled group, Taenya stepped forward, her armor gleaming in the fading light. She placed a firm, reassuring hand on Gwyn's shoulder, her gaze searching for any hint of doubt or fear. "Are you ready?" she asked, her voice steady yet carrying the weight of their impending task.

Gwyn met her eyes, nodding firmly. "Of course. It's not like I haven't done this before. Well, not exactly this, but you know what I mean. I'm ready." There was a hint of bravado in her voice, a shield against the uncertainty that the night might bring.

Taenya exhaled softly, a look of reluctant acceptance crossing her features. "I know you are. But I still wish you didn't have to be," she replied, her hand squeezing Gwyn's shoulder before letting go. She turned to face the rest of the team.

The other members of their strike force stood ready, their expressions grim yet determined. Sabina was checking over her equipment one last time. Amari and Khalan stood side by side, a formidable duo. And the two members of Sabina's Shadow Guard, Nasha and Liza, were going over the final details of their part in the plan.

'We've arranged for a carriage to take us close to the manor. From there, as planned, Gwyn, myself, Nasha, and Liza will use our magic to conceal and protect everyone from detection,' Sabina communicated telepathically to the group, her eyes scanning each member.

She then turned her attention back to Gwyn. ***'You remember the plan, right?'***

Gwyn nodded, her posture straightening as she addressed the group. "Yes. Amari, Nasha, and I will infiltrate the offices on the second floor, looking for any crucial information or evidence. Taenya, Khalan, Liza, and you will handle any resistance on the grounds. Nasha and Liza's priority is to neutralize any mind mages and ensure our coordination."

The group nodded and with a final glance at each other, they moved towards the waiting carriage. Gwyn filed in behind Taenya and the carriage door closed with a definitive thud, sealing them together as they set off into the night.

As the carriage wove through the streets, a heavy silence enveloped the team, punctuated only by the steady clip-clop of horse hooves against the cobblestone. Gwyn could feel the tension in the air, thick and palpable, as they each mentally prepared for the task at hand. She watched the shadows dance across the faces of her companions, each one a mix of focus and determination.

'Sabina?' Gwyn silently sent to her adopted aunt.

The elven mind mage turned her head to look at her before responding, *'What's wrong?'*

'You remember all the issues I've been having with using [Frozen Heart]? Roz thinks I should use it for times like these. What do you think?'

Sabina pursed her lips and looked up for a moment before nodding. *'I think that she has a point. And it has been some time since your promise. You've done well without it, but this is an entirely different situation. I agree. But use this as a trial and we can evaluate the effects after. I will be there to help you if you need it.'*

Gwyn fell back into silence as she mulled it over. Eventually she just nodded in response. She received the mental equivalent to a hug that she wanted to melt into. She really needed to confide in Sabina more. It made her feel a bit guilty that she had hidden all her troubles away from those who truly cared about her.

Finally, the carriage slowed to a stop in a dimly lit alley, the shadowy forms of buildings rising high around them. The door opened, and one by one, they stepped out into the night. Sabina was the first to exit, her gaze immediately sweeping the area, her eyes a deep void of black as she accessed her mana, a silent signal for the rest to ready themselves.

Gwyn and the two Shadow Guard followed suit. She sensed their magic take effect and then used her own, feeling the familiar rush of power as she drew upon her core, the magic tingling on her skin as she used her [Shadowmancy] to deepen the shadows to help conceal those around her. Theirs wasn't nearly as efficient as what Sabina was doing, but what they did helped Sabina fill in the gaps.

The group moved as one, a silent, deadly unit creeping through the alleys, their forms barely more than whispers against the stone walls. The sounds of the city around them muffled, the usual nightlife quieted under the effects of their combined concealment spells and magic.

As they neared the looming manor of House Racine, hidden from sight by the combined efforts of their magic, Sabina's voice echoed in Gwyn's mind, a soft but urgent command. *'Gwyn, this part's you. Just like we've practiced.'*

'Got it. Let's get next to the wall.' Gwyn replied, her focus narrowing as she led the way to a shadowed portion of the manor's outer wall. This was it, the moment they had prepared for, and she felt a surge of adrenaline as she readied herself for the next phase of their plan.

Liza scaled one of the buildings and set up on the roof to look over the wall. What came next was something they'd practiced often, but still left Gwyn disoriented.

Gwyn positioned herself at the forefront, her teammates flanking her in the shadowed alley. The manor's wall loomed ahead, a formidable barrier, but not one that could withstand their determination and magic. Liza, her mind connected with Gwyn's, fed her a steady stream of visuals from the other side of the wall, allowing Gwyn to see their destination as if she were already there.

With a deep breath, Gwyn focused on her **[Blink]** spell, feeling the familiar pull of space bending to her will. One by one, she reached out to her teammates, her magic enveloping them in a brief, intense embrace before whisking them away. There was a momentary disorientation, a feeling of being unmoored from the world, and then they were on the other side of the wall, each appearing like phantoms in the night, barely disturbing the air around them.

Gwyn **[Blinked]** and she was there. She quickly turned around and she reached up to Liza who was waiting on the nearby roof and brought her over.

The team reformed quickly, their presence on the manor grounds undetected thanks to their stealth and preparation. Gwyn nodded to Sabina. With each member in place and their magic cloaking them from prying eyes, they moved as shadows towards the heart of the manor, ready to enact their retribution.

'This is where we split up,' Sabina sent.

The night air was cool and heavy with tension as they split up, each team moving with purpose. Gwyn felt a charge of adrenaline surge through her, heightening her senses, so she wasn't surprised when Nasha jerked up a signal for them to stop. Nasha's warning came just in time, alerting them to the patrol that would have otherwise caught them off guard.

'Balcony above,' Gwyn thought quickly, devising a plan. *'I'll take us up there. Tell Amari, she's first.'*

Amari, with a warrior's nod, agreed, understanding the urgency. Gwyn focused on her **[Blink]** spell, visualizing the balcony in her mind. With a subtle distortion of space, she transported Amari, then Nasha, and finally herself to the balcony.

They crouched, hidden in the shadows, as Nasha worked her magic, ensuring their intrusion remained undetected. The door to the manor from the balcony was slightly ajar, revealing a dimly lit bedroom inside. Two maids were inside chatting and going about their evening duties, oblivious to the imminent danger.

Nasha's spell was a masterpiece of subtlety, wrapping around the maids' awareness like a veil, keeping them unaware of the intruders in their midst. Amari moved with the grace of a panther,

swiftly and silently approaching the maids. In a fluid motion, she subdued them all while ensuring they remained unharmed but incapacitated.

With the maids taken care of, the three paused for a moment while Nasha used her magic to search for any dangers.

While she did that, Gwyn hyped herself up. This was the point of no return, the beginning of their retaliation. She felt a mix of trepidation and resolve settle in her chest. They were here for justice, for retribution, and she was ready to see it through.

She took a deep breath and used [**Frozen Heart**].

Roslyn was right, this had always been a spell meant for spilling blood.



Roslyn's heart skipped as the door creaked open and Rollo, the lower ranking paladin in Gwyn's House entered. She set her quill aside, the ink barely having time to dry on her diary's page, and met his gaze, a frown already etching her features at the tension she read in his stance.

"Lady Roslyn," Rollo's greeting was succinct, his voice carrying an undercurrent of urgency that sent a shiver down her spine.

"What's happened?" Roslyn asked, her tone even, though her heart raced with anticipation of ill news.

Rollo stepped forward, his eyes grave. "It's the estate, my lady. Calista and Captain Rhion have reported multiple groups that appear to be readying themselves nearby. It's likely that an attack is imminent. We must initiate the defensive plan immediately."

Roslyn's frown deepened into a scowl of concern. She knew that the dragon and drak'valan would be flying high over the estate now. But her thoughts immediately flew to Gwyn, out there somewhere on a dangerous mission. "Very well, Vicori. Let's go. I'm ready to do my part."

As Rollo nodded and opened the door where several other paladins waited, Roslyn couldn't help the anxious whisper that slipped from her lips, "Be safe, Gwyn."

The room felt suddenly too large, too empty, as she prepared to face whatever threat loomed over their home. Her hand hovered over her diary, the urge to write one more note to Gwyn burning within her, but duty called. She stood, determination settling over her like armor. They would protect this place, and when Gwyn returned, she'd return to safety.

Hurry up and get home, Gwyn. You promised.