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## Shadows in the Night

Gwyn slumped in her seat, the classroom's drab walls and the professor's dry lecture on some ancient war doing little to hold her attention. It was another history lesson for a country she wasn't truly a part of, and with everything else on her mind, it seemed so distant, almost irrelevant. Instead, she found herself doodling in her notebook, letting her pen wander as freely as her thoughts.

She was trying out a new drawing style, something a bit more expressive and cute, but even that couldn't fully distract the whirlwind in her head.

The classroom felt too small, too ordinary for the kind of life she was living outside its walls. The tales of ancient battles and strategies felt dull compared to her own experiences, filled with real-life challenges and adventures. She felt different from her classmates, almost like she was living in a parallel world where the stakes were higher, the dangers more immediate.

None of them understood.

*Well, Roz does. But she's not in this class.*

It had been two weeks since the attack and, luckily, since that day that Roz showed up at the estate, there had been nothing else.

Well, that is nothing except Gwyn's birthday party, an event that had been an exercise in frustration. This time it had to be a large affair and she even had to invite the royal twins. Taenya explained why they were making it a spectacle but Gwyn had been too annoyed to pay attention. In the end, it had been just as bad as she thought, and the less she remembered about her altercation with the other princess the better.

At least Roslyn had been there.

She glanced down at her wrist and smiled. Gift giving hadn't been as... competitive as the previous year, but it was still nice. Roz had given her a beautiful silver bracelet that had two charms on it, one of a gryffon and one of a dragon. She'd also given her some earrings that she could use for the top of her ears kinda like Roz already had. Taenya had told her what the piercing was called, but she couldn't remember. All she knew is that she was looking forward to getting the piercings done to wear them, but that had been put on hold until her *mamma* arrived.

Glancing around, she saw other students scribbling notes or staring blankly at the professor. They seemed so absorbed, or at least good at pretending to be. In contrast, Gwyn felt like she was just

going through the motions, her mind constantly being pulled back to the more pressing matters in her life.

Like how Roz had spent two weekends with Gwyn at her manor, but she was supposed to be going back to her own estate this weekend. Gwyn had wanted to go spend it with her, but Taenya had told her that she had plans to meet with some noble. Which was something she'd either forgotten about or didn't pay attention to when told.

She was fourteen now, and the number of invitations by nobles for her to visit somehow seemed to go up rather than down despite her House's tumultuous relationship with the noble faction. Granted, most of the invitations had been from lower nobles that Taenya declined, so that may have something to do with it. The noble she was going to visit this weekend was a countess along with her son and daughter.

But that was this weekend. With a soft sigh, she turned back to her notebook. Maybe if she could just get this sketch right, she could find a bit of calm in the storm of her busy life. The notebook offered a small escape, a place where she could channel her energy and momentarily forget about the weight of her responsibilities.

It probably shouldn't have been a surprise to her that she didn't even realize when the lecture had finished. The classroom around her buzzed with the shuffling of books and papers as students prepared to leave. She was the last one still seated as she glanced around, her mind still partially lost in her thoughts. Gwyn turned the page of her notebook to ensure no one could see the doodles that reminded her of the characters of the anime shows they had watched back on Earth. Except this time, the characters were the people closest to her.

She allowed herself a small smile. *Calista looks quite cute in chibi style if I say so myself.*

The professor's final words about the assigned reading barely registered in her thoughts. With a small sigh, Gwyn closed her notebook, carefully tucking it into her bag so as not to draw attention to the fact that she hadn't paid any attention during class.

As she finally stood up, slinging her satchel over her shoulder, she watched with a frown as Aran approached her. Gwyn's brows furrowed as he neared, and she braced herself, wondering what he could possibly want now.

"Miss Reinhart," he started, addressing her like any other student but his voice held a hint of caution, "I have respected your request and kept my distance all year. I was hoping, perhaps, for a chance to start anew."

Gwyn's eyes narrowed slightly, scrutinizing the prince's expression for any sign of duplicity. She remembered well all the crap his attention had brought her and Roz in the past. "And what do you mean by 'start anew'?"

Aran shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I’ve had time to reflect, to understand my errors. I know I can’t undo the past, but I’ve come to believe in second chances. I’d like to prove that I can be a better person.”

Gwyn remained skeptical, her experiences having taught her to be cautious with trust. “A second chance, huh?” she mused aloud, her tone noncommittal. “And what about how your family is treating Roslyn? She’s my best friend, and an attack on her is an attack against me.”

He frowned. “I have kept my distance from Miss Tiloral, as well. But... I will speak to my sister on the matter. I cannot make any promises for her. You... know how she is.”

“I’ll think about it, Aran. But understand this—if it happens—it will be on my terms.”

Aran nodded. “Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

She was about to turn around when he said something else, “Miss Reinhart, my father’s attention is currently focused on external matters. But it will not always be that way. While his gaze is elsewhere, others are becoming more... ambitious.”

As he walked away, Gwyn couldn’t help but ponder his words. It was a surprising turn of events, and one she would need to consider carefully. She shook her head slightly, clearing her thoughts as she made her way out of the classroom. She would need to discuss this with Roslyn.

*It feels like a trap. But he did keep his word this year. Maybe if I can get him to be my friend then the royals will back off...*

*Yup, I definitely need to talk to Roz. This is her area of expertise and she did promise to take charge of this kind of stuff for me.*



Later that evening, Gwyn dramatically flung herself onto Roz’s bed, the impact sending a small cloud of cushioned air swirling around her. She exhaled loudly, turning her head to catch a glimpse of Roslyn, who was immersed in what appeared to be a homework assignment at her desk. Roz, sensing Gwyn’s gaze, swiveled around in her chair, her expression a blend of amusement and inquiry.

“What’s wrong now?” Roz asked, tilting her head in that familiar and cute, knowing way.

Gwyn, feigning shock, propped herself up on one elbow. “Pfft! Can’t I come hang out with my most bestest friend in the whole wide universe?”

Roslyn’s response was a simple, yet skeptical eyebrow raise.

“Fine!” Gwyn cried out. “Aran came and talked to me today. Remember how you and I talked about our respective roles? You know, you, the brains, and me, the brawn, of our dynamic duo. Well, he said some stuff, and I don’t know what to think. I’m at a loss.”

Roz’s eyebrows knit together, signaling her deep concentration. “First, do not denigrate yourself. You are a very intelligent young woman. Now, tell me everything,” she urged.

Gwyn told her, making sure to leave nothing out, even including the small details like his facial expressions when he said certain things or how he reacted to what she said. While she didn’t know what to do with it all, Roslyn did and her best friend was a genius when it came to this. She was the political puzzle master.

*I’m lucky to have her as she always sees the things I miss.*

Roslyn listened intently, her analytical mind sifting through Gwyn’s narrative. “Using his overture to our advantage isn’t a bad idea,” she finally said. “But bear in mind, Aran is not seeking friendship out of the goodness of his heart. In fact, I highly doubt he’s seeking friendship at all. Remember, ‘embrace the snake in your garden, but never forget the sting of its fangs.’”

“So, the old keep your friends close and enemies closer, huh?” Gwyn asked, a frown creasing her forehead.

“Exactly,” Roslyn confirmed with a sly smile. “Aran is manipulative. If you decide to engage with him, I need to be in the loop. He’ll try to drive a wedge between us.”

Gwyn chuckled lightly. “As if he could. We’re unbreakable, Roz.”

Roslyn’s smile turned somewhat predatory. “Exactly. You are *mine*.” She paused, correcting herself. “I mean, you are my dear friend,” she added with a cough.

Gwyn rolled onto her side, pondering Roz’s words, but then shook her head and continued, “Of course. The twin twits aren’t going to be able to damage our friendship.” She sighed. “But what are your thoughts about what Aran said about his dad?”

“His father? Clearly the Crown Prince is dealing with the war in the north. As far as these so called ‘others’? They are either members of the noble faction, which is what I suspect, or members of the royalist faction trying to gain influence. Whomever it is, is likely related to the attack I experienced this week. Lord Riggell is handling it though.”

“Are you sure? Do you need anything from me?”

Roslyn hesitated, her gaze shifting away briefly before returning to Gwyn. “Not right now, but I promise, you’ll be the first to know if that changes.”

Gwyn’s voice took on a hopeful tone. “Are you coming to the estate this weekend? Spend some more time with me?”

“You’re not just inviting me because you haven’t started on this essay, are you?”

“N-No! Of course not.” Gwyn replied, a little too quickly, her cheeks flushing with a mix of guilt and feigned innocence. Sensing the skepticism in Roz’s eyes, she quickly shifted gears. “Calista really enjoys having you around, you know. She’s been a bit lonely staying at the estate full time now.”

Roslyn’s expression softened at the mention of the young dragon. “Is she? Well, Cali is quite endearing,” she admitted, a gentle smile playing on her lips. “It’s been a bit sad not having her around here.”

“Yeah,” Gwyn agreed enthusiastically, seizing the opportunity. “She’s really enjoyed having you over, you know? She was really upset when someone tried to hurt you. But enough about that, Taenya and Sabina told me she’s been trying to learn their magic. They say she’s really impressive.”

Roslyn chuckled lightly. “That does sound like a sight to behold. Maybe I could teach her a thing or two about wind magic.”

Gwyn nodded, her face lighting up. “She’d love that! And I think it would be good for her to spend time with someone else who’s magic-savvy.”

There was a brief pause, during which Roslyn seemed to be considering the proposition. However, she soon diverted the conversation. “She has you for that, Firebug. I’m not really *savvy* with magic. Not like you.”

“Don’t say that, Roz. You’re doing great! Your steps are getting higher, and before you know it, you’ll hit your second refinement just like me! You’re so good.”

She really was too, despite her shyness when it came to practicing in front of others. Roslyn had improved drastically ever since their little nighttime adventure. Sadly, they’d yet to have another. Gwyn would have loved to do one, but with the attack on her friend, she didn’t want to risk it.

Gwyn wanted her friend protected.

Her elvish friend must have noticed she had lost herself to her thoughts because she lightly cleared throat. “Speaking of magic, have you been keeping up with your experimentation? Weren’t you trying to add more... versatility to your imprinted spells?”

Gwyn, realizing her attempt at persuasion had been deflected, sighed internally but played along. “Yeah, I’ve been working on it. Trying to get a better handle on combining different elements. It’s tricky, but I’m getting there.”

Roslyn nodded, apparently satisfied with the response. “Good. It’s important to keep refining your skills. Remember, your magic is a crucial part of who you are as a mage. Plus, as you always say, you have to handle the *fighty* things for us.”

That forced a giggle from Gwyn. Hearing her friend say ‘*fighty*’ was just too much.

“Right you are, Roz. Leave it to me.”

They talked for a bit more after that before Roslyn went back to her homework and Gwyn just lay on Roslyn’s bed cuddling a pillow. Relaxed in the comfort of their shared space, they both just enjoyed a rare moment of quiet companionship.

“Hey, Gwyn,” Roslyn began tentatively, “would you like to draw for a bit? I always love seeing your creations.”

Gwyn’s eyes twinkled with mirth as she caught the faint blush on her friend’s cheeks. “You really enjoy it when I draw you, don’t you?” she teased gently.

Roslyn’s blush deepened, her voice carrying a hint of embarrassment. “I-I do. You’re just so skilled that... I’m sorry if I’m being overly selfish.”

“Don’t be sorry!” Gwyn laughed, her heart warmed by Roslyn’s candid admission. “You’re the perfect subject for my art. Your expressions, the way you carry yourself—it’s all so inspiring.”

Roslyn tried to hide her blush, but it was clear she was flattered. “Well, when you put it like that, how can I resist?” she said with a shy smile.

Gwyn felt her tummy warm up, and she quickly looked away.

*Don't be weird. It's just Roz.*

She quickly changed the subject. “I wish I could take pictures and blow them up like Aunt Katie did. She loved to take pictures of all sorts of things and then she would make them into these big pieces that she put on her walls. I think mom said her work even got featured in a gallery once.”

“That sounds lovely. I remember you telling me about pictures that you’d take on your eye phone.”

Gwyn giggled, then tried not to cringe at how lame she sounded when she made that sound. “Close enough.” She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. “You’ve been working for a while, what do you say I get you a strawberry drink? I think you deserve a treat for working so hard today. I’ve just been lazy.”

“Yes!” Roslyn’s eyes sparkled with excitement at the mention of their favorite drink.

Gwyn hopped off the bed and made her way to their small drink cabinet. She slapped her cheeks a couple times. *What am I doing? Stop being weird, me.* With a sigh, she quickly prepared two glasses of the sweet, refreshing strawberry drink before freezing it with her [**Cryomancy**].

As she handed a glass to Roslyn, their fingers brushed, sending a pleasant shiver up Gwyn’s spine. She almost slapped her own face again because how awkward she was acting.

She forced herself to fill the silence. “I can’t believe we’re fourteen already, Roz.”

*Ugh. Really? Damn it, Gwyn. Get it together, dummy. That was so cringe.*

“This school year is nearly over too.” Roz looked down and bit her lower lip. “We’ve sure been through a lot together. But I certainly wouldn’t change any of it. Would you?” Her eyes turned back up as the corners of her lips curled upward.

Gwyn returned that beautiful, shy smile with one of her own. “Never.”

The two friends sat down, sipping their drinks and chatting about everything and nothing. The room was filled with laughter and light-hearted banter, a welcome respite from the stresses of their lives.

Eventually, Gwyn set up her sketchpad and charcoal pencils, her artistic gaze focusing on Roslyn. As she began to draw, her movements were fluid and confident, capturing the essence of her friend in each stroke. Roslyn’s gaze stayed glued to Gwyn as she worked and every time Gwyn glanced up, she found her friend staring at her intently. She was so focused that it made Gwyn feel a bit self-conscious.

“Do I have something on my face?” Gwyn asked playfully.

Roz blushed and glanced away but then shook her head. “No, I just enjoy watching you do that. Your face scrunches up when you’re focused.” She mumbled something else that Gwyn couldn’t hear, but then Roz just shook her head and tipped her glass of strawberry drink up, draining the rest of it as if it were some alcohol the adults liked.

Roz shivered.

Gwyn giggled. “Hard stuff?”

Her friend narrowed her eyes. “Stop it. It’s cold!”

That made her chuckle. She went back to her drawing, thinking about what she would do. Then it hit her.

Instead of doing her usual thing, Gwyn decided to change things up. This time she was going to try and capture how her best friend looked when she used her magic.

That happiness and wonder that always adorned her face when practicing magic that only Gwyn got to see. The glow in her eyes as mana coursed through her. The earth and plants that heeded her call while her hair whipped up with the wind.

Gwyn couldn’t help but smile as she got to work.

Time seemed to slow as they lost themselves in the moment, the outside world fading away. In that room, it was just Gwyn and Roslyn, two friends who found solace and joy in each other’s company.



The rain poured down, each drop a drumbeat against the cobblestone streets of the city, cloaking the night in a veil of darkness and mystery. Sabina moved with a predator's grace, her figure barely more than a shadow against the backdrop of the dimly lit lamp posts. The oil lamps flickered, casting long, wavering shadows that danced in the downpour.

Her Shadow Guard were deployed strategically throughout the area. Their mission was to uncover the culprits behind the alarming disappearances that had plagued House Tiloral over the past two weeks. Guards and servants alike had vanished without a trace, and the pattern was too consistent, too targeted, to be a mere coincidence.

It was the weekend, and everyone involved was afraid another attempt on Roslyn would be made. That was the reason they were here, because no one knew the truth.

Roslyn wasn't at the Tiloral Estate. She'd been hidden by Sabina's magic and taken to the manor. Even Gwyn didn't know Roslyn was there, and wouldn't until they returned.

But none of that mattered at the moment.

With every step, Sabina's senses were on high alert, her mind attuned to the slightest disturbance. Her **[Shadowmancy]** allowed her to blend seamlessly into the darkened environment, her presence virtually undetectable to the untrained eye. She communicated with her team through subtle, telepathic nudges, a silent yet efficient method of coordination befitting their stealthy operation.

The rain muffled the sounds of the city, creating a hushed, almost eerie atmosphere. The usual nocturnal chorus of the urban night was subdued, replaced by the steady rhythm of the downpour. Sabina's eyes scanned the shadows, her instincts honed from years of training and experience guiding her movements.

As she approached a narrow alley, a flicker of movement caught her attention. She paused, her gaze narrowing. The Shadow Guard had learned to trust their instincts, and Sabina's were screaming that something was amiss. With a swift hand signal, she summoned a pair of her operatives to her position. They arrived soundlessly, their expressions mirroring her own caution.

Together, they edged closer to the alley, their movements calculated and deliberate. Sabina reached out with her **[Detect Emotions]** ability, attempting to sense any sign of life or ill intent lurking in the darkness. The heavy rain made it difficult, the emotions of the city blurred and muted by the storm.



As they reached the mouth of the alley, Sabina held up a hand, signaling her team to halt. She peered into the darkness, her eyes adjusting to the lack of light. There, just beyond the reach of a lamppost's glow, was a figure sitting and leaning against the wall. It was too still, too deliberate.

She gestured for her team to fan out, preparing to confront whatever—or whoever—awaited them in the alley.

Sabina's team closed in on the figure, their steps careful and calculated. The dim light revealed a chilling sight—the body was lifeless and abandoned. His uniform, soaked from the rain, clung to his body, and his eyes stared blankly at the sky above. *House Tiloral... not again.*

As they began to examine the body, a sudden, urgent warning echoed in Sabina's mind. **'Alert! Incoming attack!'** Lucian's telepathic shout was sharp and clear.

In an instant, the night erupted into chaos. One of Sabina's Shadow Guards let out a sharp cry of pain before collapsing to the wet cobblestones as an unseen force struck him down.

*An ambush... another mind mage!*

**'Mind Barriers up! Lucian, reinforce them!'** Sabina sent out the command, her mental voice cutting through the rain. She quickly erected her own mental defenses, feeling the pressure of an unseen enemy trying to breach her mind.

Black mana roared through her and she cut off the connection with a mental slash. Immediately her senses stretched out, searching for the elusive mind mage. There, a fleeting trace of their presence, like a shadow slipping through the night. Sabina didn't hesitate; she burst into motion, her feet pounding against the slick streets as she pursued the fleeing signature.

The rain blurred her vision, but her focus was unwavering. The mind mage was fast, but Sabina's determination drove her forward. She could feel the presence growing fainter, the distance between them widening. *Not going to let you get away.*

She pushed herself harder, her breath coming in sharp gasps as she wove through the narrow streets. The mind mage was heading away from the Vermeil Highland where the Tiloral estate resided and toward the Old Town, a maze of alleyways and backstreets that could easily become a trap.

But Sabina was undeterred. Her body moved with a dancer's grace that would put even Ilyana to shame, her mind sharp and alert despite how tense she felt.

As she rounded a corner, she caught a glimpse of a cloaked figure disappearing into an alley. Without slowing down, Sabina followed.

Sabina raced through the darkened street. The sound of her team's footsteps echoed behind her, a steady rhythm in the night. **'Keep going, we're right behind you,'** Lucian's voice echoed in her mind.

As she crossed a bridge and turned down an alley, an ambush sprung to life. Figures emerged from the shadows, blades glinting in the dim light of the oil lamps. Sabina's team was quick to respond, drawing their swords and engaging the attackers in a flurry of steel and shadows.

The clash of swords rang out, mingled with the grunts and shouts of combat. Sabina found herself face to face with one of the assailants, her own blade parrying and striking with lethal precision. Lucian and her Shadow Guards fought with deadly efficiency, their movements honed by training they received by Amari and Taenya.

In the midst of the melee, Sabina felt a sudden, intense pressure on her mind. One of the mind mages was attempting to breach her mental defenses. Gritting her teeth against the assault, Sabina focused her energy and retaliated with a powerful mental attack of her own.

Black mana responded to her call and she twisted her magic into a bolt like Gwyn would and used it to lash out with her shadows like she hadn't before. The **[Shadow Bolt]** lanced through the air, nearly invisible in the night that made it even deadlier, targeting the mind mage. Her **[Mana Sense]** helped her get a feel for when it hit, but it was the scream that pierced the night as the mage crumpled to the ground that left no question on her accuracy.

To her left, she heard a cry of pain as one more of her people went down and she followed the mental connection only to see Lucian appear behind the attacker. Before the woman could react, twin daggers pierced through her back.

The fight surged on, the night air filled with the sounds of clashing steel and strangled cries. With a swift motion, Sabina unleashed her **[Shadowmancy]**, the shadows around her coalescing into tendrils of darkness. They lashed out like whips, ensnaring two of the attackers. The shadow tendrils constricted with a crushing force while others stabbed like spears, and the two figures fell lifelessly to the ground, consumed by the darkness.

Lucian darted through the fray. His movements were a blur, almost too fast for the eye to follow. With a pair of daggers in hand, he struck with lethal efficiency. One of the assailants lunged at him, only to be met with a swift and fatal strike. Lucian's daggers found their mark, and the attacker collapsed, blood seeping from the wounds.

The alleyway, once filled with the sounds of battle, began to quiet as Sabina and her team gained the upper hand. The remaining attackers, realizing the tide had turned against them, started to falter. Fear crept into their eyes as they faced the formidable prowess of Sabina and her Shadow Guards.

As the last of the enemy fell, the night returned to a tense silence, broken only by the ragged breaths of the victors. Sabina stood amidst the aftermath, her heart still racing from the adrenaline of the fight. She scanned the area, her eyes piercing the darkness for any further threats.

But in that moment of watchful calm, the air was suddenly pierced by the lethal whisper of arrows. The sudden barrage sliced through the night with deadly accuracy, catching Sabina and her team utterly off guard. The quiet, tense atmosphere they had just reclaimed was shattered, replaced by the chaos of a new, unseen enemy.

And Lucian was caught in the open.

Three arrows struck him in rapid succession, thudding into his torso with terrifying accuracy. He staggered from the impact, a grunt of pain escaping his lips before he collapsed to the cobblestone street, his body echoing a heavy, ominous thud.

Sabina's instincts immediately kicked into high gear. "Cover!" she cried out, her voice laced with urgency and concern. The Shadow Guards sprang into action, their training taking over in the face of this sudden ambush.

With a swift motion, Sabina raised her hand, conjuring a psionic shield in the blink of an eye. Her **[Telemancy]** flared up, forming a barrier just as more arrows shot from the rooftops. The projectile hit the invisible barrier with a forceful impact, shattering upon contact and sending splinters skittering across the wet ground.

The other Shadow Guards, utilizing their **[Shadowmancy]**, conjured protective shadows to deflect and absorb the onslaught of arrows. Despite their quick response, one guard was less fortunate. An arrow found its way through the hastily erected defenses, striking her in the shoulder and eliciting a sharp cry of pain.

Several of the team members cast spells toward the archers, while another fired a crossbow. But she wasn't able to see the effectiveness of their counter because another team member gasped and went limp as blood poured from every orifice on his head.

*'Mind barriers! We're too exposed, pull back! Now!'* Sabina's command echoed in the minds of her team, her mental voice ringing with both urgency and authority. Without hesitation, two guards carefully lifted Lucian, his limp form hanging between them. The other, injured but still mobile, was assisted by a fellow Shadow Guard as they began a tactical retreat.

Sabina covered their withdrawal, her senses stretched to their limits, trying to detect any hint of the assailants. Extending her **[Detect Emotions]** ability, she hoped to catch a fleeting sense of their presence. But what she found, or rather didn't find, sent a chill down her spine—an unnerving void where she had expected to find the emotional trace of their attackers.

As Sabina and her team hastily retreated through the labyrinthine streets, the situation with Lucian worsened. His breathing grew labored, and his once-strong frame now seemed frail in the arms of his comrades. Sabina's eyes flickered to him constantly, her mind calculating their next move.

“We need to get to Temple Row,” she barked out, changing their course. The temples had healers, and Lucian needed one fast. They quickened their pace while Sabina covered the rear, using all of her magic to search for anyone coming after them.

She only hoped that the Tilor Estate could handle their own defense for the night.

Luckily, the young heiress wasn't there.

The streets were a blur around them, the lights of the city a mere backdrop to their urgent goal. They dodged through alleys and courtyards, Sabina's second leading methodically despite the enveloping darkness.

Suddenly, Lucian stirred, his lips parting as if to speak. But instead of words, a pained gasp escaped him, his body tensing before going limp. Sabina's heart skipped a beat. “Lucian!” she called, but there was no response.

The realization hit them all at once: Lucian was gone.

The group halted for a brief, heart-wrenching moment, each member processing the loss in their own way. Then, with a heavy heart, Sabina gave the order to keep moving. There was no time to mourn; not yet. They had to get back to the estate, regroup, and plan their next move.

The rest of the journey was a silent march, each step heavy with the weight of their loss. The night had claimed several of their own, and its darkness seemed all the more oppressive for it. As they neared the estate, the familiar walls offered little comfort.

They had returned, but not unscathed.

She would need to report what happened to Amari and then the monastery.



Gwyn was in the carriage and was happy to be returning home. The ride back to the estate was a quiet one, with Gwyn's thoughts swirling in her head. The afternoon had been an exhausting blend of subtle matchmaking and thinly veiled insinuations. She leaned against the soft cushions of the carriage, her mind replaying the events of the day.

She had met with the noblewoman that had extended her an invitation through Taenya earlier in the week. And it was... something.

The countess, with her warm smiles and gentle nudges, had clearly hoped to see some sparks fly between Gwyn and her children. But for Gwyn, the whole experience was far from pleasant. The countess's son, though only twenty, had already been through a divorce and seemed keen on

monopolizing Gwyn's attention. His relentless self-focused monologue had left her feeling drained and somewhat nauseated at the thought of any romantic entanglements with him.

*Or really any boy. Why are they like this? You're supposed to feel fluttery butterflies in your tummy when you see someone you like. I don't get that with any of these boys.*

Gwyn frowned.

*Is there something wrong with me? I'm not broken am I?*

Gwyn couldn't quite put her finger on it, but something about the idea of marriage just didn't sit right with her. She never felt those warm feelings or tinglies when she looked at boys. They were just... boys. Then interactions with boys like that... really just made her feel weird. Almost like she wanted to be sick just thinking about it. She shuddered slightly at the memory, feeling a wave of relief wash over her now that she was away from the countess's estate.

Her encounter with the countess's daughter, a seventeen-year-old girl, had been a different kind of overwhelming. The girl had latched onto Gwyn almost immediately, showering her with compliments that made Gwyn's cheeks burn with embarrassment. Her words were flattering, yet they made Gwyn feel oddly uncomfortable. It wasn't the girl herself—she was quite pretty and her giggles were infectious—but the intensity of her attention made Gwyn feel exposed and vulnerable.

At one point, the girl had invited Gwyn for a walk in the garden, a welcome escape from her brother's incessant chatter. But as they strolled among the paths, the girl's whispers in Gwyn's ear sent unexpected shivers down her spine. Gwyn found herself at a loss, her usual confidence faltering under the girl's intense gaze.

It had been too much for Gwyn. The combination of the girl's forwardness and her own confusion about what the girl had said had left her needing an escape. Thankfully, Amari had been nearby, and Gwyn had seized the opportunity to excuse herself, citing a need to discuss something urgent with her paladin.

Now, as the carriage rolled through the gates of the estate, Gwyn felt a mix of relief and confusion. She knew one thing for sure: she was not ready for the kind of relationships the countess was hinting at. The thought alone made her uneasy. She needed time to figure out her own feelings, away from the pressure of expectations and the confusing emotions that today had stirred within her.

However, all of her reverie was shattered when the carriage jerked to an abrupt stop.

The door opened and Amari's face appeared with a grave expression. "There's been a development. Come with me, be prepared to use magic."

Gwyn felt a surge of adrenaline at Amari's words. She quickly gathered her composure and stepped out of the carriage, her senses immediately on high alert. The usually serene atmosphere of the

estate was replaced by a palpable tension. Guards were moving with purpose, and there was a sense of urgency in the air that Gwyn couldn't ignore.

As she followed Amari at a brisk pace, her mind raced. *What could have happened? An attack? An intruder?* Her hand instinctively went to her side, but she hadn't carried Raafe's Legacy with her.

They moved swiftly through the grounds, and Gwyn noticed the heightened security. Every guard they passed was armed and alert, their eyes scanning the surroundings. The seriousness of the situation was not lost on Gwyn; something significant must have occurred to warrant such a response.

"Amari, what's going on?" Gwyn asked, her voice steady despite the churn of anxiety in her stomach.

Amari's eyes remained fixed ahead as they walked. "There was an attack. We need to get to Taenya. Just be ready for anything."

Gwyn nodded, her mind already cycling through potential scenarios and strategies. The training she had undergone, the battles she had faced, all seemed to converge in this moment, preparing her for whatever lay ahead.

As they approached the main building, Gwyn could see more guards stationed at strategic points, their expressions grim. The seriousness of their demeanor only added to the gravity of the situation. Gwyn drew upon her mana, feeling the familiar warmth of her magic at the ready.

Taenya emerged from the building, her face showing a mix of concern and authority. She gestured briskly, waving Gwyn and Amari inside, while simultaneously commanding more guards to patrol the grounds. Her voice carried the unmistakable tone of leadership, leaving no room for doubt or hesitation.

Just then, Rhion landed gracefully nearby, his drak'valan features set in a stoic mask. He quickly reported to Taenya. "No sight of anyone suspicious on the grounds," he said, his voice firm.

Taenya nodded, her gaze sweeping over the estate. "Thank you, Rhion. I need you to take command of the Guard outside. Keep everyone on high alert."

"Understood," Rhion replied, before turning to execute her orders with a swift efficiency that spoke of his experience and skill.

Gwyn, feeling the weight of the situation, turned to Taenya. "What's happening? What's going on?"

Taenya's eyes met Gwyn's, and for a moment, there was a flicker of something akin to hesitation in her gaze. But it was quickly replaced by a steely resolve. "Come with me," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Gwyn followed Taenya, with Amari at her side, into the heart of the estate.

They entered one of the parlors, one filled with people waiting for them. Sabina sat slumped in a chair, her clothes stained with blood, her posture speaking of sheer exhaustion. Two members of her Shadow Guard were also present, their expressions mirroring Sabina's fatigue. But it was the sight of Roslyn and Khalan that caught Gwyn off guard.

"Roz? What are you doing here?" Gwyn's voice was tinged with surprise and concern. She noticed the tears streaming down Roslyn's face and immediately rushed to her side, wrapping her arms around her in a protective embrace.

"Gwyn, focus," Taenya's firm voice cut through the tension. Gwyn reluctantly pulled back but kept an arm securely around Roslyn, her eyes searching for answers.

"What's happened?" Gwyn asked, her gaze shifting between the occupants of the room.

Taenya exchanged a glance with Sabina, who still had her eyes fixed on the ground. Gwyn's heart sank as she realized something terrible had happened.

"Sabina has been trying to catch people targeting House Tiloral for the past two weeks," Taenya began, her voice steady but heavy with the weight of her words. "Tonight, they were ambushed. Several members were killed, including Lucian."

Gwyn felt a sharp pain in her chest. "W-What?" she stammered, disbelief clouding her voice. "H-How? What happened?"

Taenya nodded solemnly, and Khalan took over the explanation. "The attack on Sabina's team was both a distraction and a target of opportunity. The Tiloral Estate was also attacked. Lord Riggell was killed, as was a maid in Lady Roslyn's room. The temple is dispatching a squad of paladins to assist House Tiloral as we speak."

Lord Riggell was House Tiloral's representative to the House of Lords and a kindly man who'd helped her numerous times in the past. She didn't know what was going on and the uncertainty was filling her with fear. *Why is Roz being targeted?*

House Tiloral was supposed to be safe. Neutral. A strong ally that no one would dare attack, but now they were and Gwyn knew it was because of her. Because they had chosen to be her ally.

All of this was her fault.

More people had died because of her.

Gwyn's head snapped toward Roslyn, who was still in tears, and held her even tighter. She turned back to the others, her eyes blazing with a mixture of anger and determination. "Who was behind it?"

Sabina finally looked up, her eyes filled with a cold certainty. "It was House Racine."

Taenya's frown deepened. "We can't be sure of that yet."

“I am,” Sabina insisted, her tone leaving no room for doubt. “It couldn’t be anyone else.”

Roslyn, tears still glistening in her eyes, turned towards Gwyn, her gaze firm and resolute. “Our Houses have both suffered losses tonight,” she said with newfound determination. “House Tilorai cannot let this aggression go unanswered. Gwyn, will you stand by me in this?”

Without hesitation, Gwyn met Roslyn’s gaze and nodded firmly. “Always, Roz. We’re going after them,” she affirmed, her voice filled with a fierce resolve.

Taenya stepped in front of the two of them. “Then we will plan our response meticulously,” she declared. “No half measures will be taken. They will come to regret the day they dared to target us.”

A silent understanding passed between Gwyn and Roslyn as they exchanged a determined look. “They definitely will,” Gwyn agreed, her tone laced with a promise of retribution. “After we’re done with them, they’ll wish they had never crossed our path.”