

---

## Having a Ball

Gwyn took a deep breath as she looked in the mirror, Aleanora was behind her working on her hair with the guidance of one of the House Tilor servants. She was only permitted to have one lady-in-waiting attend with her to the ball, which she just *knew* was a slight from the twin jerks. It was the first time she really had to *choose* which of her three Crew she would bring, and even the other two had agreed that Nora should go, despite the fact that Ilyana was *technically* the ‘right’ choice due to her rank.

*So annoying! Why do I have to choose, and why does a dumb title matter so much?*

“Gwyn, stop making that face,” Roz admonished from beside her. “We can’t change anything, so stop simmering. You have steam coming from your ears.”

Taken aback, Gwyn gasped, her eyes widening as her hands flew to her ears, expecting to encounter some of her magic leaking. Yet, she found nothing out of the ordinary.

Roslyn erupted into laughter at Gwyn's faux alarm, causing the princess to scowl at her. The exchange, however, coaxed a soft chuckle from Aleanora. The teen, eager to start her studies at the Upper School when the new year rolled around, had been putting in a tremendous effort with both House Scholars.

“Come on, Gwyn, cheer up,” Aleanora urged, managing to keep her amusement in check. “Ball or not, this is a time for you to celebrate. You’ve done so well at the Lower School!”

Roslyn was quick to voice her agreement. “Absolutely! You’ve made it to Class Three!”

However, this news only seemed to deepen Gwyn's frown. “True, but Adrienne only reached Class Five.”

Unfazed, Roz flashed her a reassuring smile. “Don't worry about her, she'll catch up. I have a feeling that your showing in Magical Studies is what clenched it, plus I heard your examination duel with the instructor was a sight to behold.”

Exhaling heavily, Gwyn looked at Roz in the mirror and changed the subject. “Why don't you throw a ball like this, Roz? I'd rather attend yours.”

Roslyn reflected Gwyn's hopeful gaze in the mirror and gave her a sympathetic smile. “A traveling noble like me doesn't usually host balls in cities where they don't live permanently.”

## Manabound - Equilibrium

Yet another sigh escaped Gwyn. “What about me? Taenya said I need to host a ball...”

Roslyn’s tinkling chuckle filled the room, her dimples forming on her cheeks that made the elf look adorable. But Gwyn didn’t want adorable right now.

“Well, being a princess, your situation is somewhat different,” her bestie said.

“So? You’re the heir to a duchy! That’s just one step below me, and in my opinion, you’re more important. You’ll actually rule over a duchy. I don’t have a kingdom.” Gwyn’s expression softened. “I can’t wait to get all dressed up for you at your next ball when we return to Strathmore. Actually, are we going back over the break?”

Roslyn’s cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink. “N-No. We’re staying here. Three weeks isn’t enough time to travel there and back.”

Gwyn sighed again, her tone a touch forlorn this time. “I wonder what my mom is doing right now...”

In the mirror, Gwyn noticed Roslyn exchanging a knowing glance with Aleanora, who nodded and gestured for the servant to follow her out of the room. Once they had left, Roslyn turned to face Gwyn directly.

“What’s bothering you, Gwyn?” she asked, her voice gentle and full of concern.

Closing her eyes, Gwyn took a moment to decipher the whirlwind of emotions coursing through her. The heart of the matter was crystal clear to her; it was the fact that she was here, attending balls and studying, while her mom was somewhere out there, and they didn’t know where. Because of her, Taenya, Sabina, and Amari had to meet with the Crown Prince. Her temper nearly resulted in Aran getting extremely hurt, and her emotions were in constant flux, a tumultuous storm of hurt and anger, with only the occasional bouts of happiness when she was around friends.

Why was this happening? Why did she feel this way?

She knew she should talk about these feelings, most likely with Sabina, but each time she mustered the courage, she froze, unable to voice the turbulent sea of emotions within her.

The two-year anniversary of the Flash was approaching, a reminder of everything she lost, and everything she’d been forced to become. It was a small comfort that she knew her mother was alive.

*But what is taking so long for her to find me? Is she even looking?*

She almost used her **[Frozen Heart]**, but Roslyn, perceptive as ever, enfolded Gwyn in a warm hug as tears began to stream down the princess’s cheeks. Wiping a tear from Gwyn’s face, Roslyn offered soft words of comfort. “You’re here because you’re still only twelve, Gwyn. You have people that are searching for her.”

Laughing through her tears, Gwyn retorted, “You’re only saying that because you’re already thirteen.”

Adopting a playful smirk, her friend replied, “Of course not, I’m merely reminding you to heed your elders. We do know best, after all.”

“Oh really?” Gwyn shot back, the ghost of a smile appearing on her tear-streaked face. “And what’s best?”

“Well, the first order of business,” Roslyn began, her voice tender yet firm. As she spoke, she gently placed a hand under Gwyn’s chin, lifting it slightly. “We’re going to clean up that pretty face of yours. Then we’re going to finish getting ready, and head to the ball.”

Gwyn nodded mutely as Roslyn physically rotated her toward the mirror, then walked to the door to allow Aleanora and the servant back in.

Nora gave her a reassuring squeeze on her shoulder as she stepped up to continue styling Gwyn’s hair, while Roslyn grabbed Gwyn’s tiara from its box.

*I’m a hot mess express.*



Gwyn and Roslyn stood poised at the entrance of the Royal Palace’s Grand Ballroom. Behind the princess, maintaining a step’s distance to the left, was Aleanora, the high elf lady-in-waiting ready to perform her duty as an... assistant. Just a few paces further back stood Taenya and Amari, both in their finest ceremonial armor. Accompanying them were Roslyn’s own Tiloran knight and her paladin, Khalan.

The grand hall hummed with conversation and the soft strains of music, but as the herald announced their arrival, all chatter in the area near the entrance quieted down. “Presenting Princess Gwyneth of House Reinhart and Lady Roslyn of House Tiloran, along with their esteemed retinue,” his voice boomed across the ballroom. Curious gazes turned their way, a sea of eyes assessing and observing them.

Roslyn, accustomed to such scrutiny, slipped on a graceful, regal smile. Gwyn, though less accustomed, tried to mirror her friend’s confidence. As they moved forward, Taenya leaned in close to Gwyn whispering with confidence, “We will be close by. Try to enjoy yourself.”

Gwyn nodded, her heart pounding against her ribcage. As they entered the swirling crowd, Taenya and Roz’s knight moved to somewhere else, while their paladin protectors discreetly faded

back, remaining close enough to intervene if necessary, but far enough to give them some semblance of freedom.

Gwyn felt a yearning to call upon her magic if only to give herself a sense of control amidst the overwhelming environment. Yet, she knew better than to activate even her **[Mana Sight]**, as the slightest glow in her eyes could draw unnecessary attention, and a ballroom in the Royal Palace was not the place for unnecessary attention.

Feeling her throat grow dry, she was relieved when Roslyn turned to her and asked, “Are you thirsty, Gwyn?”

“Very much so,” Gwyn replied, and with a nod from Roslyn, the three of them began their trek towards the servers bearing trays of drinks.

Their journey was slow and punctuated by a myriad of greetings and conversations. While Gwyn was the princess, it was Roslyn who drew the most attention. As the heir to the Tiloral Duchy, she had a presence in the Kingdom of Avira that Gwyn simply didn't have.

*Not that I mind. I hate things like this.*

Gwyn felt a little out of place but was nonetheless included in the conversations by virtue of her royal status. An elegantly dressed lady with a thick accent leaned in, her eyes bright with interest. “And you must be Princess Gwyneth. A terran princess in Avira... how fascinating.”

“Yes—” she started, but before she could even say anything else the woman turned and walked away. She clenched and unclenched her hand as she sought to calm herself before moving on.

*Jerk.*

Finally arriving at where they saw the servers, the trio was left disappointed as a towering Telv man distributed the last drink. He sent an apologetic glance their way before scurrying off to refill his tray.

Aleanora stepped forward and suggested, “What about the bar?”

With a shrug, Gwyn agreed, and they began navigating the throng toward the bar. The servers, busily tending to the crowd, eventually noticed their arrival and handed over a trio of fruity concoctions. The sweet aroma wafted up as Gwyn took a sip, the taste reminiscent of strawberries. An unexpected delight in an otherwise suffocating evening.

The three of them found a spot to stand, the hum of the crowd serving as a comfortable backdrop for their quiet conversation. As they stood there, Gwyn couldn't help but want to leave, fortunately, Roslyn's presence, along with Aleanora's, provided a comforting anchor.

She caught sight of a few servants carrying gifts to some unknown location, which reminded her that Taenya had brought the ones they had provided, including a more fancy one that the woman had gotten for the prince.

As they stood there, sipping their drinks, the melodious tunes of the live orchestra filled the air, and Gwyn found herself enjoying it despite it not really being her style.

*They don't have the music I like here, though...*

Their peace was abruptly disrupted by the arrival of a group of older teenagers. The air around them felt charged with arrogance, their eyes scrutinizing Gwyn and her friends. Upon spotting Gwyn's tiara, one girl, a look of disdain crossing her face, challenged, "Who are you? You're terran."

*Excuse me?*

Gwyn narrowed her eyes and she almost raised a hand, but Roslyn, acted quickly before Gwyn could retort. Raising an eyebrow, she coolly intervened on her behalf, "I do not believe that is the proper way to greet your betters."

At this, the girl scoffed. However, a swift whisper from her companion caused her expression to shift, her eyes widening in recognition before offering a hasty curtsy. "My apologies, Lady Tiloral. I did not recognize you."

Unfazed, Roslyn dismissed her with a wave of her hand. "Of course not. You are dismissed."

Roslyn then turned to Gwyn, shooting her a significant look, and the princess followed the elf's lead as they both turned around. Aleanora whispered a moment later, reassuring them that the girls had indeed retreated.

Roslyn, dropping her voice, explained, "You cannot allow anyone here to speak to you that way. She was put up to it, to see how you'd react. If you allow it, every other person that speaks to us tonight will treat you with disrespect and look down upon you."

Gwyn closed her eyes and took a deep breath, she...

*Magic is so much easier than politics.*

This was a ball, yes, but also a battlefield in its own way. A battlefield of words and impressions, where every word mattered, and every reaction had its consequences. For a moment, Gwyn locked eyes with Roslyn, a newfound understanding passing between them.

They both hated it with a fiery passion.

As Gwyn stood beside Roslyn, the two young women became the subjects of many passing conversations.

## Manabound - Equilibrium

The first interaction was with a man of apparent importance, given the way other nobles reacted around him, giving an inordinate amount of deference as he greeted everyone while making his rounds. He approached Roslyn, an amicable grin on his face, asking, "How is your grandfather, my dear? It's been some time since I last saw him."

Roslyn's response was a courteous smile, her words smooth and polite, a vague answer about her grandfather's health and his continued involvement in political affairs. The man asked about other family members by name, and Roslyn easily kept the conversation going until the man wished them a pleasant evening.

As the man walked away, Gwyn learned that he was another duke and thus had known her grandfather for years.

Gwyn's eyebrows rose slightly, observing Roslyn navigate the conversation with the ease of a seasoned diplomat. She seemed to almost know who each noble was, or at least, the important ones, and she would almost casually slip into conversations with people as if they were long-time acquaintances. She would smoothly introduce Gwyn to each and every person, and most were polite, but she could tell that they really didn't care about her unless it was to discuss grandsons this, and sons that. Despite the limited training she'd received, Gwyn was beginning to understand the nuances and undercurrents in such discussions, a realization that made her uneasy.

*Why does everyone want to play matchmaker?*

A well-dressed noblewoman, adorned in precious gemstones, joined the conversation next, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. "Lady Roslyn, a pleasure. I eagerly anticipate discussing several new business opportunities with your mother that would be beneficial to both of our Houses. Will she be visiting you here in the capital at all?"

Roslyn's warm smile never wavered as she skillfully redirected the conversation. "My mother is always open to mutually beneficial business discussions," she responded, emphasizing the mutual aspect of any such dealings. "However, as I am sure you can understand, managing the profitability of the kingdom's sole port dominates her time. Why, I am just sure she would love to entertain you in Maireharbora and show you the recent expansion the city has undergone." The noblewoman nodded appreciatively and moved on, leaving Gwyn impressed by Roslyn's skillful maneuvering of the conversation.

A pause allowed for some brief interaction between the girls, Roslyn taking a sip of her drink while Gwyn muttered, "This is more intense than I thought."

Roslyn simply laughed softly, patting her friend's arm, "You'll get the hang of it. Remember, side by side?"

Gwyn gave her friend a smile that she didn't feel. "Against the world."

The two friends were drawn back into the fray when another man approached, expounding how unbothered he was by the chatter concerning Duke Tiloral's political moves. He expressed his happiness at seeing Roslyn and casually mentioned his hopes of introducing her to his son sometime that evening. Roslyn handled it with grace, promising to make the introduction later.

"I don't know how you do it," Gwyn whispered.

Roslyn took a sip of her drink, her eyes sparkling like a pair of perfectly shaped amethysts. "What's that?"

"All the stuff about boys... This is supposed to be a birthday party, and we've seen more adults and old people than people our age. And they all want to introduce us to boys," Gwyn grumbled.

Nora lightly laughed into her hand. "It's what nobles do. They plot and plan the best marriages for their children, hoping to find the right connection that will benefit their Houses. Even Ilyana is going to have to do the same thing for her siblings, despite the current disagreement in that House."

Gwyn's nose scrunched up and Roslyn leaned over, whispering, "Don't worry. No one can make you marry anyone you don't want to. You can always find someone you like. There are a couple of cute boys in the school that fancy you."

Gwyn grimaced at the thought of interacting with boys, and her gaze lingered on Roslyn while she attempted to figure out what was swirling inside her. A discontent feeling settled in her stomach, that gnawed at her, and even though she didn't know what it meant, she knew that it made her want to puke.

The heiress raised her brow which jerked the princess from her thoughts. "Gwyn? You've been staring at nothing... What are you thinking?"

*Not nothing...*

Gwyn's blue eyes met Roslyn's violets and held onto the only person who truly got her. *Well, Sabina does but she doesn't count. She's got a cheat.*

"I don't want to talk to boys, Roz."

It was more of an outburst, a complaint that held an undertone of discomfort. The entire idea of interacting with boys, or even thinking about them in *that* way felt... off, somehow. It was probably because of all the people that had kept trying to force her to marry them since she arrived.

She hated the idea of it.

All she needed were her friends, and she had some great ones finally. Adrienne, the Crew had finally come around, and of course Roslyn.

*I don't need any boys.*



Roslyn paused, studying Gwyn as if seeing her in a new light. The plea wasn't just a typical young girl's disdain for boys or a veiled request for some respite from the social pressures of the evening. There was something deeper in her tone, an undercurrent of genuine discomfort that tugged at Roslyn's awareness. It was as if Gwyn didn't just dislike the idea of talking to boys, but the thought genuinely unsettled her.

She knew about the incident in her grandfather's court when her best friend had been introduced to high society, where Count Telford had tried to force her friend into a marriage. Roslyn had watched that one and her own anger had her seeking whatever response possible to aid the princess.

Gwyn had also told her about the bandits where one of the guards had died, a man she had respected and built a friendship with.

Then there was the landed knight, whose son had wanted to kidnap her.

And of course, they now knew that Gwyn's mother was out there somewhere. For certain this time.

Which was a relief, but Roslyn could only imagine how much that consumed her best friend's thoughts and desires. So, the lack of even a hint of interest in boys hadn't seemed too big of a deal.

While the extent of her dislike was new information, Roslyn took it in stride, considering what it meant for her friend. For a brief moment, Roslyn felt a pang of empathy for Gwyn. How difficult it must be for her, she mused, having to navigate through a society that would inevitably expect her to mingle and consider courtships with boys, while such interactions brought her discomfort.

Roslyn gave a nod, offering a comforting arm around Gwyn's shoulders. "Alright. No boys." The words were as much an acceptance of Gwyn's discomfort as they were a promise. She would support Gwyn, just as she always had, and shield her from any uncomfortable situations as best she could.

Roslyn, however, felt a deep curiosity blooming. She found herself wondering if Gwyn's discomfort with boys suggested something more about her friend. It was a thought she tucked away for later, something to perhaps gently probe when the time was right.

But for now, it was enough that Gwyn knew that she was *there*.



Turning her attention back to the grandeur of the ball, Roslyn decided they would navigate this event together, on their own terms, keeping away from any boys who could add further discomfort to Gwyn's evening.

Gwyn gave her a small smile that held more emotions than her friend was struggling with lately, and Roslyn thought it was a symptom of her magic.

*Or something else is affecting her emotions. She's having a rough time right now.*

*I wonder if Gwyn's knights have had that discussion with her.*

Roslyn would have her servants prepare another... emergency pouch. It was something that her mother suggested, and it hadn't steered her wrong, yet.

Just in case.

With a sympathetic shake of her head, Roslyn refocused on their surroundings. It was up to her to guide Gwyn through this.

Her friend needed her, and Roslyn Tiloral had been readied her entire life for the great game.

A sudden commotion in a corner of the room caught her attention. A group of noble girls about their age had suddenly rushed toward a figure in a beautifully embroidered gown. Squinting her eyes, Roslyn recognized the recipient of the impromptu attention—Princess Elora.

Drawing Gwyn's attention to the scene, she subtly inclined her head in that direction. "Look there, Gwyn. It seems Princess Elora has attracted her usual entourage of fluttering butterflies."

Gwyn followed her gaze, her expression transitioning from curiosity to amusement as she watched the spectacle unfold.

Roslyn leaned in closer, her voice a soft whisper against the cacophony of music and chatter filling the ballroom. "Honestly, one would think they are genuine admirers. But they're more like moths, attracted to the flame of influence and power she wields. Elora's light can offer them momentary warmth, and they mistake it for a beacon of their own ambitions, and all too soon that... girl will discard them like the bugs they are."

A soft chuckle escaped Roslyn's lips, as she gave a sidelong glance at Gwyn. "Oh, the drama of a royal ball," she quipped. "Where even friendship is the first step into the Polite War."

"I think I prefer the ducal court," Aleanora added.

Roslyn couldn't do anything but agree with that sentiment. The royals were a stain on the kingdom, and it seemed that they cared little for the people they were supposed to rule.

She glanced at Gwyn, realizing that her friend would make a much better ruler than any in Avira's royal family ever could. The terran princess truly cared for her people and friends, and she would fight right alongside them.

*She's someone I'd definitely follow as Duchess.*

Roslyn's eyesight shifted as an elderly lady draped in an elegant gown approached them with a boy roughly their age, but not one she recognized.

*Not at the Academy then.*

The woman looked familiar, and Roslyn had to dig deep, cheating a bit with her **[Insightful Memory]**.

*Ah, a countess from the Duchy of Nieth. Met with Grandfather a few times.*

The countess smiled, her eyes showing genuine affection as she greeted her. "Dear child, you've grown since I last saw you," she said, her eyes gleaming with nostalgia. "Such a young lady, now." The young man stood beside her as he cast curious glances toward Gwyn.

Roslyn stepped forward, putting herself between Gwyn and the boy, as she grasped the countess's hand with two of her own. "It is a pleasure to see you, Countess. It has been a long time."

*I barely remember you at all.*

The woman's eyes crinkled in delight as Roslyn recognized her, but then her shrewd eyes with their crow's feet took notice of her protective stance in front of her friend.

The woman's eyes then turned to Gwyn. "And who might this pretty young woman be?" she asked.

With a warm smile, Roslyn turned toward Gwyn while angling to keep herself between the boy and Gwyn. "This is my closest friend, Princess Gwyneth," she introduced her. "We attend the Royal Academy, together."

The old woman's eyes lit up at the introduction. "Why, you are a beauty, young lady. And tall if you attend with Lady Tilorai. How are you finding our fair kingdom? I dare imagine it is much different than you are quite used to."

Gwyn returned the woman's smile, albeit somewhat hesitantly. "The nobles here do love their games," she said.

Roslyn winced internally.

*We don't talk about the Polite War in these settings!*

The woman laughed, a knowing smile gracing her features. "Ah, yes, they do. They certainly do. Hopefully, you won't have to worry about that for a few more years."

Gwyn shrugged. "I was introduced to it when I was ten."

At this, the woman's eyes widened, and the young man beside her took a step back, his eyes widening in recognition. "You're... you're the Fire Princess!"

*That's not good.*

Gwyn chuckled lightly, but Roslyn caught the underlying annoyance, and with a wave of her hand, the princess channeled a small bit of mana. A tiny bit of fire sprang to life, hovering above her hand just like a candle's flame.

The countess stared at that flame for a moment beyond what was proper, and when she looked up at Gwyn it was filled with pity and remorse. "I think you'll do alright, my dear," she said with a knowing nod. Her eyes again darted to scrutinize Roslyn, taking note of how she stood, before giving a small smile. "Come along, boy. Let's go find your parents." With that, she took her grandson by the arm and left.

As they disappeared into the crowd, Roslyn and Gwyn shared a moment of relief before a servant offered them fresh drinks, and they continued to mingle, bracing themselves for the next round of conversations in the grandeur of the ballroom.

Roslyn continued to observe Gwyn, ensuring her friend was alright, and while they talked, she couldn't help but notice the myriad layers that composed her friend.

Gwyn was no longer the innocent girl lost in a world not her own who had only desired a friend.

Instead, she had become a young warrior, one who had already seen the raw, brutal side of life and the so-called Polite War that Roslyn's people played. Gwyn had fought battles, killed, lost her people, and experienced heartache at a tender age.

Yet, despite the harsh lessons she had been forced to learn, a certain spark in her eyes remained. It was a spark of resilience, of strength, and unbowed spirit that was as breathtaking as it was inspiring.

The hardships had shaped her, made her grow, but they had not dimmed her inner fire.

Roslyn admired this strength in Gwyn.

But, she also saw the heavy toll it took on her.

That spark had grown into a roaring flame, one that her friend threatened to unleash at a moment's notice, and it was up to Roslyn to temper it. To give her an outlet and let her friend vent that excess heat that threatened to smother her from the inside.

Gwyn often desired to freeze her heart, to shut her emotions away with magic and pretend as if nothing was wrong. Roslyn wasn't sure why no one else saw it as she did.

## Manabound - Equilibrium

It was so obvious when you knew every little line on someone's face, every tell of emotion, and how much that person *hurt*.

*Oh, I wish I could shoulder some of that for you. To help you get through all of this until you found your mother. I wish I could take all of the pain away.*

It was in these moments, Roslyn felt a wave of determination wash over her.

She was fiercely committed to being Gwyn's support, her anchor in the stormy sea of life. To offer warmth to her friend's heart, no matter how often Gwyn tried to encase it in ice. Roslyn would be there, a steadfast presence, providing the comfort and support Gwyn needed. Her devotion was as unyielding as it was silent, a promise she had made to herself, a promise she intended to keep, no matter what.

And if anyone had a problem with that, well, they'd have to answer to Lady Roslyn of House Tiloral.

*Side by side, against the world.*

And she meant it. She would fight anyone for her best friend.

Of course, that was when Prince Aran approached them.



"Gwyn, trouble," Roslyn said quietly.

The sound of Roslyn's hushed warning washed over Gwyn, causing her to shift her attention toward the incoming disturbance. She found herself locking gazes with none other than Prince Aran, the now thirteen-year-old boy who she thoroughly detested, was approaching them. His grey eyes shone with confidence as he greeted them, his voice cool and measured, as if every movement and word had been carefully choreographed and practiced.

"Greetings, Princess Gwyneth, Lady Roslyn," he began, offering them a courteous nod. His gaze fell on Aleanora, Gwyn's high elf lady-in-waiting. "And Lady Aleanora of House Olacyne," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Gwyn gave him a nod, while Roslyn performed a slight curtsy that signified her slightly less standing, but Nora performed a perfect deep curtsy in response, murmuring 'Your Highness', but Gwyn couldn't miss the wary look that flickered in her eyes.

Not lingering on Nora, Aran turned back to face Gwyn and Roslyn. "Thank you for attending tonight," he started, lowering his voice as he did so. "I understand that your attendance may be more

obligation than desire, however, I would like to have a private conversation with Princess Gwyneth if she would permit.”

Roslyn's eyes narrowed at his words, and she quickly stepped forward. Her voice was steady, anger simmering just beneath the surface. “Gwyn has nothing to say to you, Prince Aran. She doesn't need to go anywhere alone with you and if you wish to talk to her, you can do so here.”

Gwyn sighed lightly, placing a hand on Roslyn's shoulder. She appreciated her friend's protective instincts, yet she knew she had to face Aran. “It's alright, Roz,” she murmured, looking at the prince. “Where would you like to talk?”

“In the gardens,” he replied after a moment's pause.

Roslyn was far from pleased. Her voice was sharp as she warned him, “If you try anything—”

Gwyn interrupted, giving her a reassuring smile, “Don't worry, Roz. If he tries anything, I'll roast him.”

The prince winced but quickly regained his composure. “I assure you, I will not do anything unbecoming of my station, Lady Roslyn.”

Her eyes still narrowed, Roslyn shot back, “You better not. Her fire will be the least of your worries. House Tiloral never forgets.”

Gwyn gave her friend's shoulder a comforting squeeze. Roslyn's lips moved silently, mouthing 'be careful', as Gwyn stepped forward to walk with the prince. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Amari shadowing them discreetly. There was an undercurrent of unease, but Gwyn knew she had to face this, for her own sake.

Stepping outside onto the terrace, the crisp night air wafted gently around them. The royal gardens stretched out below, their beauty bathed in soft, ethereal moonlight from the two Sisters. Amari moved subtly, positioning herself by the door yet giving them space. It was a delicate balance of duty and discretion, and Gwyn appreciated her paladin for it.

Prince Aran tracked her gaze and commented quietly, “The paladins don't give you much freedom, do they?” His voice was laced with a hint of smugness that Gwyn didn't miss as she realized none of his Royal Knights were present.

*Confident? Or the usual false bravado?*

She shook her head, meeting his gaze squarely. “I have plenty of freedom, Aran, because they're there to ensure it.” Her words echoed a conviction she felt to her core. Their presence was not a limitation; it was a security that allowed her to live as she pleased.

Aran hummed thoughtfully, falling silent for a moment. Gwyn couldn't help but imagine how quickly she could summon her fire magic before his knights could intervene if he provoked her.

Her thoughts of toast were interrupted by his voice once more.

"I wanted to apologize," he said unexpectedly.

Gwyn blinked in surprise, her brow arching upward. "Excuse me?" she echoed. His apology was unexpected, to say the least. She was curious to hear what he had to say, her skepticism lingering.

Aran looked at Gwyn, a touch of sincerity in his eyes. "I should never have treated you the way I did. The sword spar, the magical duel... they were both immature of me." He seemed to struggle to find the right words, his usual arrogance replaced with a new hesitance. "I... I have embarrassed myself, more times than I care to admit, in front of those who I should have been leading. I was under a lot of pressure from my father, but that's no excuse. It was wrong."

Gwyn's eyes narrowed, incredulous at his admission. "Under pressure? Are you serious right now?" She nearly spat the words out. "Do you have any idea what I've had to deal with since arriving in this... this... *shit* world? The attacks—and not just by snobby princes and princesses? The constant threat of death? My people have been killed, Aran. They invaded the first home I had in this world and my handmaiden died at my feet taking a bolt that was meant for me. I've been forced to fight an entire army and defend myself against more people than I can count. I've had to kill to survive. I *burned them alive*. Do you understand? Do you truly understand how *difficult* it was to not go too far when we fought? To not just turn you to *ash* when you shoved a spike of ice through my shoulder? And you're telling me you couldn't handle pressure from your father? That's why you've been acting like a bully, that's why you literally stabbed me with your magic? Are you joking? Tell me, Aran!"

Aran winced, the full weight of Gwyn's words crashing over him. He was shorter than her, she noticed, as her anger sought to boil over while she stared down at him. "I'm sorry, Princess. You're right... my problems pale in comparison. I'll stop bothering you, and I'll try to get my sister to do the same." His voice lowered a bit. "I also wanted to congratulate you on your placement in Class Three. I understand if you don't trust me, but I would like the chance to start over."

"Start over? You..." Gwyn threw her hands up, her frustration boiling over. "No, Aran, we are not 'starting over.' If you truly want to make amends, then you'll leave me alone for the rest of the school year."

Aran's gaze was steady as he nodded. "If that's what you wish, I'll respect it. And, thank you... for your restraint... Unless our stations require us to interact, I'll leave you be."

"Fine," Gwyn bit out, her patience worn thin.

With a final, respectful bow, Aran turned and walked away, leaving Gwyn standing alone on the terrace. Finally alone, of course with the exception of Amari, she let out a yell of frustration into the empty night.

Boys!

Why did they have to be so *damn* annoying?

*I just can't even!*