
A Meeting of Thorns

The echo of footsteps and distant laughter filled the dorm hallway as Gwyn and Lorrena stood before the recently posted room assignments for Year Two. The list of assignments had the names of everyone in their hall, and Gwyn's eyes scanned over it as she searched. Quickly, a frown pulled at the corners of Gwyn's lips as she spotted her and Lore's names on different sides of the sheet.

"Wait," Gwyn muttered, eyes still locked on the list. "We're not roommates next year, Lore."

The swift widening of Lore's eyes mirrored Gwyn's surprise.

Her lady-in-waiting traced her finger down the parchment, double-checking, only to affirm the unexpected news. It wasn't just that she wasn't Gwyn's roommate; they were in completely different dorms.

Her breath hitched, and anxiety flickered across her face.

Gwyn, sensing the elf's panic, was quick to react.

She grasped Lore's shoulders and drew her closer, trying to ground her amidst the unexpected change. "Hey, it's okay. We'll still see each other every day, right?"

Lorrena looked close to tears, her gaze darting from Gwyn to the list and back. "But... It's my duty... I can't... I have to—"

"Shh," Gwyn interjected gently, cutting through Lore's desperate protest. "None of that. It's fine. You have been amazing this year and I am so happy that we've grown as friends instead of just you as a lady-in-waiting. Let's continue that next year, and maybe having you in a different room will help."

The older elf nodded slowly, a shaky sigh slipping past her lips. "I'm sorry. You're right."

Gwyn dismissed the apology with a shake of her head and a gentle squeeze of Lore's shoulders. "Nuh-uh. You have nothing to apologize for. Come on, I'll help you to your room, then I can head to mine. Deal? I think Amari and Rollo are grabbing our crates with our things."

Their plan to help grab their things was interrupted by the arrival of Amari and Rollo walking out of their dorm room, already carrying their crates.

The sun elf paladins, dressed in their newly-forged set of silver and blue armor beneath a stainless white tabard emblazoned with the glittering red sun of Alos, nodded at the two girls as they approached.

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“You two know where we’re going?” Amari asked as she held out the crate in her arms, sparking an eye-roll from Gwyn.

Barely managing to suppress a sigh, Gwyn hoisted Lorrena’s crate while Amari held a fabric bag that contained all of Gwyn’s dresses in her arms and led the way while Rollo carried Gwyn’s crate.

Outside, the weather was dreary, a blanket of gray clouds covering the sky with the promise of an impending rain shower. The wind whipped around them, a frigid gust that made Gwyn thank Eona for her [**Cryomancy**] trait that gave her all but immunity to the cold.

Lorrena, however, visibly shivered. “Aren’t you cold?” she asked, drawing a grin from Gwyn.

“I don’t get cold anymore. At least not much. Here.”

Channeling her mana, she used her [**Draco-pyromancy**] to gently warm the air around each individual, prompting surprised gasps from the trio. Her eyes twinkled with mischief at their reactions, particularly Amari, who quickly recovered and narrowed her eyes.

“A bit of warning next time, Gwyn.”

Rollo chuckled. “But thank you. It is appreciated, Your Highness.”

Lore nodded along. “I agree, it’s perfect!”

“No problem, guys,” Gwyn replied. “Let’s go!”

After an invigorating walk through the Autumn morning on the campus grounds, they reached one of the dorm buildings assigned to the second-year students.

Inside the room she was assigned to, they found one of Lore’s future roommates, a friendly dwarf girl from Class Six, who enthusiastically offered to help Lorrena get settled in.

Assuring Lore they would catch up later for dinner, Gwyn left the room with the two paladins, excited to see her own dorm.

Navigating the walking paths of the campus, Gwyn, Rollo, and Amari finally arrived at the other side of the grounds.

The building before them, larger and seemingly more exquisite than the last, towered majestically amidst a cluster of old oak trees. It was a sight to behold, its stone facade exuding an aura of grandeur and a sense of history.

As she walked into the dorms, Gwyn noted a higher concentration of older students than usual, which made her look around in confusion.

When she turned to Amari for an explanation, the elf merely shrugged, equally baffled.

Upon reaching her assigned room on the second floor, Rollo insisted on entering first; protocol, he reminded her, that Gwyn found both understandable and mildly frustrating.

“I can do it, you know...” she muttered as she walked in behind him.

As she entered after him, her confusion multiplied; the room was entirely unlike her old quarters or Lore's.

A spacious common area greeted them, boasting finely crafted bookshelves laden with numerous texts and a cozy seating area circled around an impressive hearth.

Two doors adorned the room, hinting at the bedrooms beyond that left Gwyn awestruck and unable to comprehend her new setting.

“Did you know it would be like this?” Gwyn turned to Amari, her voice heavy with surprise.

Amari shook her head, her gaze taking in the lavish room. “No, I haven't been over here. This is nice.”

“This is amazing, why am I here and not in one like Lore's? And why are there only two rooms?” she wondered aloud, to which Amari could only shrug in shared bewilderment.

The answers to her questions arrived in the form of a familiar voice with an amused tone. “That's because these are the rooms for Class One.”

Gwyn whipped around as she heard Roslyn's voice behind her.

Her best friend strolled in, flanked by her pair of paladins who also wore new armor in the House Tiloral colors.

“*Oddio!* Roslyn! *Ciao!*” she squealed, rushing forward to greet her friend. The heiress of House Tiloral laughed as Gwyn lifted her off the ground in a tight hug.

She wriggled in Gwyn's hold, protesting with a laugh, “Put me down!”

Reluctantly setting her friend back onto the ground, Gwyn voiced her surprise, “Is this your room? Roz, is this your room?!”

Roslyn's laughter rang out in the room as she confirmed the news, setting Gwyn's heart aflutter with excitement and the air filled with more squealing of joy. “Roomies!”

Roslyn, her playful demeanor in full display, walked further into the room with an air of casual familiarity so that her belongings could be put down. “That's right! If you're here too, that means you managed to get placed in Class One for next year!”

Gwyn's blue eyes went wide. “But, wait. How? I thought the rankings weren't coming out until...”

But Roslyn's infectious smile interrupted her. “For everyone else, yes. But for us in Class One we find out when we get dorm assignments. As a reward for being among the highest ranked in our year, we're granted better rooms. Hence the older students in this hall. The first floor is for the boys,

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and the second floor is for the girls of each second through fourth year's Class One. Our class only consists of five girls, so you and I will share this room, Salla and Daria have the room next door, and Elora the Insufferable—clear favoritism—gets a room all to herself at the end of the hall.”

Ah, that's fine. It means I get to be with Roz! Who cares about Elora, she's just the odd one out anyways. I'd love to rub this in Aran's face, though.

Wait...

“But, isn't there a risk of room changes if they switch between classes?” Gwyn inquired, struggling to comprehend the new information.

Roslyn shook her head as the two of them started looking around their room. “Our Lead Scholar explained this all to us, this is why you haven't heard yet. Year Two is when things change. There will be three major tests—one at the start of Spring, another at the beginning of Summer, and the last one in Autumn. The results of the Spring and Summer tests influence our rank throughout the year, while the Autumn test determines our placement for Year Three. Shuffling classes at this stage is seen negatively. Year One was to get us acclimated to the concept of changing ranks. From now on, if there's a shuffle, it's more likely due to someone underperforming than someone exceeding expectations. This is where the real game begins. By being in this room, it means we're the best.”

Gwyn absorbed the new information, processing the immense significance of her new status. Then, a new thought dawned upon her, her face lighting up. “So, we're roommates!”

Roslyn responded with a warm smile and a nudge. “*Roomies.*”

Amari's laughter rang through the room. “Girls...”

Khalan joined in, his chuckles reverberating in the otherwise quiet room. “Tell me about it. At least you've been through it. All of this is completely new to me. Teenaged girls are an entirely different creature.”

The lighthearted comment drew scowls from both Roslyn and Gwyn, while Amari merely raised an eyebrow. Caught off-guard, Khalan quickly raised his hands in mock surrender. “I jest!”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” Gwyn retorted, her tone dripping with dry amusement.

The afternoon wore on as Gwyn and Roslyn busily set up their respective rooms. The individual bedrooms were private havens, complete with comfortable beds, individual desks for studying, spacious wardrobes for their clothes, and elegant vanities.

The furniture was nicer than anything they had before.

They hung up clothes, arranged books on the shelves, and carefully positioned personal knickknacks, making each room reflect its occupant. They shared quiet conversation, punctuated by

the bout of laughter when they found their secret notes from their high nobility class, adding a layer of homeliness to the task.

The work was tiring but satisfying.

Finally, with the last of Roslyn's books shelved, they emerged from the elf's room. Gwyn exhaled, her body heavy with exhaustion. "That was so much work!"

Amari chuckled from her perch on the couch in the common room. "Really? How about a training session?"

Gwyn raised an accusatory finger toward her. "None of that!"

In the quiet that followed, a realization washed over Gwyn.

She was here, in a Class One dorm room. She had managed to actually go from zero to hero. She snorted. But in all seriousness, she couldn't believe she actually did it.

She couldn't help but wonder if her rapid progression had set a new record, but she shrugged off the thought.

It probably had a lot to do with her Magic Studies class, especially after the... *incident* that the Lead Scholar Lirael had profusely apologized about.

Darn, crappy kingdom enchanters.

Mom's so much better.

In the end, she didn't care.

And it hadn't caused her any harm.

She had succeeded despite the odds, and she would continue to do so.

Her gaze found Roslyn's, and in the shared silence, they both broke into grins.

They were here together.

Roomies with my bestie.

The words echoed in her mind, sealing the memory of this day, marking the beginning of a new chapter in their lives.

This was just the start.

She had come a long way but knew the journey ahead was far from over, she had to maintain her ranking through three more years of school. *Unless Mom wants to take me out when she gets here...* She shook her head, those decisions could come later.

As she stood there, looking around the room she would now share with her best friend, she was filled with a quiet sense of achievement and anticipation for what was yet to come.



As the last day of the school year drew to a close, Gwyn and her friends made their way through the grounds of the academy. Despite the grey, stormy clouds that had lingered all week, everyone was excited about taking a break from school.

Gwyn walked with her friends from the year: Roslyn, Adrienne, Lorrena, Salla, and Daria. Laughter filled the air around them, along with words of excitement, plans for the break, and hearty congratulations for Gwyn's ascent into Class One.

Gwyn and Roslyn were in the middle of the group, their laughter ringing out as they shared their plans.

"You know," Roslyn began. "We could host study sessions in our room next year, there's plenty of space."

"That would be a great idea, Roz," Gwyn agreed. "Much more private than this year."

Their suggestion was met with enthusiastic nods from Adrienne and Lore. "That would be so helpful, especially with the differences in the testing," Adrienne said, a hopeful look on her face.

Their laughter and chatter filled the cool afternoon air as they approached the academy gates. It was then that their talk shifted to the upcoming holidays. Adrienne couldn't contain her excitement, "I'll be visiting my Aunt and Uncle in the capital. They're due for a visit, you know."

Daria and Salla chimed in next, each mentioning going to their respective homes nearby.

Just as Gwyn was about to share her plans, she spotted a familiar figure waiting at the gate. Ser Taenya stood tall and proud beside the House guards, her presence immediately bringing a sense of comfort.

The knight strode over, her warm greeting making the girls smile. Her gaze fell on Gwyn, her expression turning serious. "Gwyn, we've received an invitation," she began, holding out a sealed envelope. "We need to prepare to leave as early as tomorrow."

Gwyn nodded, understanding the implications of the invitation. She turned to her friends, expressing her best wishes for their break and assuring them she'd see them all when the new school year started. A flurry of goodbyes and promises to write and share adventures followed.

Roslyn was the last to say goodbye, her grip tight as she pulled Gwyn into a hug. Her eyes, full of concern, met Gwyn's as she stepped back. "Be careful. Keep Amari with you. Remember what we all talked about."

"I will," Gwyn assured her, a serious expression settling on her face. "See you soon, Roz. I'll miss you!"

With a playful push and a laugh, Roslyn shook her head. "Silly, it's only three weeks. We'll see each other soon."

Her words echoed in Gwyn's head

Soon.

Then we get to literally live together.

She allowed herself a small smile.

Perfect.

The excitement of the day mixed with the bittersweet feeling of parting, but the promise of what was to come filled her with a roller coaster of emotions.

She couldn't wait for what the new year held for them.



The quietness of the night was soon shattered by the arrival of a group of people. Taenya was huddled with Sabina in an office, their heads bent over a variety of documents. The door creaked open to reveal Amari, Rollo, and another man clad in the traditional robe of an umbral monk. The black fabric loosely hugged his form, allowing for unrestricted movement.

His hood obscured most of his face, but his ears were visible through slits which clearly identified him as a moon elf. As they stepped into the room, he pulled back his hood, revealing a calm and serene face of a man that appeared to be Taenya's age.

Although she had to admit that his skin, which was the color of midnight orchids, was much smoother than hers.

Probably because he doesn't get as much sun. That's definitely it.

Taenya stood to greet them, her hazel eyes lingering on the monk. Amari flashed a warm smile, turning to introduce the man. "This is Dolofonos-Monk Lucian. He will be joining us, with Her Highness's approval, of course."

Lucian bowed smartly, his voice steady as he spoke, "I am honored to be given this opportunity to collaborate with your House and Her Highness. Although my status as a monk prevents me from tying myself to your House as my brother and sister in Alos have, I assure you, I shall be a member in all but name."

Taenya tilted her head. “Dolofonos?”

The monk smiled, his sharp incisors, while not as long as a raithe’s, were still quite predatory. “It’s a rank within the Monastic Order of the Umbra. Similar to the rank of Evocati that Amari, here, holds,” he explained. “While she and the Vicori focus on maintaining the light, those of us amongst my Order protect the innocent from the dangers of the night.”

Oh. He’s one of the Church’s assassins. I didn’t think they were real.

His gaze shifted to Sabina, his head dipping in a gesture of respect. “I have heard much about you, Ser Dominis. Your use of magic is truly inspiring. Together, we can help the Church develop policy for how to interact with and best utilize those such as us.”

Then he tilted his head and *looked* at her. ***‘Because I and Her Holiness, the Archpriestess, believe we can do great deeds and protect those from any who would use such magic for evil.’***

Taenya watched as Sabina couldn’t help but smile at his words. ***‘I look forward to working with you, Lucian.’***

But it was Taenya who reacted with surprise, her eyes wide. ***‘Did I just hear...?’***

Amari, ever the perceptive one, grinned knowingly. ***‘We all did.’***

Surprise flickered across Sabina’s face as she turned to look at Lucian, who was looking rather proud. ***‘My apologies for startling you and expanding your thought-speech to everyone. You see, my core is attuned to blue mana in addition to the black. However, my core understanding of my magic aligns more with the blue, which slightly alters the way my mind magic manifests compared to yours, Ser Sabina. I too possess [Telepathy], but my attunement enables me to act as a conduit of sorts, enhancing coordination among those I choose and enabling them to communicate telepathically via my spells.’***

Both Sabina and Taenya shared a glance. ***‘Just what we spoke of,’*** Sabina sent to Taenya, but keeping the others in the loop.

Taenya’s gaze was sharp, predatory. ***‘This will prove to be quite beneficial.’***

Lucian’s eyes widened. “Why is that?” he asked out loud, his voice carrying a note of curiosity.

Taenya glanced at Amari then responded as her focus returned to the moon elf, “Because Sabina needs to stay in the capital to keep our people safe, but if you join Amari and the paladins in the meeting we are leaving for tomorrow, you can use your magic for a great purpose.”

Lucian nodded in understanding. “I stand ready to assist Her Highness.”

“Vicori Rollo will be remaining here with you Ser Sabina,” Amari informed them. “He will assist you in ensuring the safety of the House. I will be requisitioning a squad of paladins for the

meeting, there was an incident that called many of my brothers and sisters away, and thus these men and women are all that are readily available.”

Taenya narrowed her eyes. “Is there anything we should be aware of?”

“No,” Amari said with a shake of her head but then sighed before amending, “Well, no in that it is nothing that is currently dangerous to the House. Just monster sightings becoming more frequent to the east.”

Taenya nodded, not entirely satisfied, but content that it wouldn’t cause any foreseeable issues. “Anything else?”

“When we return, I will be able to use my second domain to enable the House to establish a chamber for the Ceremony of Paths,” Lucian added.

Sabina nodded. “First, when you get back, you can teach us what you mean by *core understanding*. Then you and I can figure out how to incorporate you with my current Wynvers.”

The man smiled. “I’d be happy to.”

After ensuring no one else had anything to say, Taenya moved on.

“Alright,” she began, her tone assertive and commanding. “Now that we’ve been introduced, it’s time we strategize for tomorrow, the meeting, and in case anything happens to the House while we are gone. Let’s dissect each possible scenario we can come up with and prepare our responses. We can’t leave anything to chance.” Her gaze swept across each face in the room, seeking affirmation and readiness.

It was time to chart out their path, step by step, ensuring that each move would lead them closer to their goals and maintain Gwyn’s—as well as their own—safety.



It took them two days to finally reach the border of the Aerinval Forest and with it their destination. The carriage, with its solid wooden wheels, rocked back and forth along the stone-paved road, sending ripples of vibration through its occupants. The slow, rhythmic trot of the horses was the only sound that echoed in the quiet inside of the carriage as they journeyed toward Marglen Castle.

Ilyana was sitting next to Amari, sleeping, while Taenya seemed to be reviewing some papers next to her. Amari’s finger was absently tracing a line down the scar on her face as her orange eyes scanned their surroundings outside of the window as a paladin rode by on his horse.

Gwyn though, was bored.

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She craned her neck and peered through the window in the direction they were traveling and caught sight of a castle in the distance.

She turned to Taenya, who looked up from her work. “Tell me about the castle,” she urged, her eyes returning to the sprawling structure that loomed ahead of them.

Gwyn noticed Taenya shrug before a gesture to Amari had the woman who seemed more familiar with the region's history explain.

Amari cleared her throat, seeming to find the situation amusing. “The Marglen Castle is one of the oldest post-Diaspora castles in the kingdom,” she began. “It even predates the Kingdom of Avira, itself. The castle boasts four baileys and a sizable keep that stands watch over the surrounding area. Its primary purpose was to harbor troops as they battled the retreating Valeni, who were assaulting the Loreni residing in this area as they moved into their Great Forests.”

Amari paused to collect her thoughts, but Gwyn was hanging on to every word.

Intrigued, she urged her to continue.

“To this day,” the paladin continued. “The castle serves as a border fort, fending off any assaults from the Valeni that might be bold enough to make a run for the capital. However, those attacks are rare, especially with Aerival. The Valeni here remain in their mountain villages, towns, and their capital, Aerin, nestled in the heart of the region's mountains. Avira has made several attempts to invade this forest in the past, but those failed spectacularly. The Aerin Valeni are amongst the most potent and modern Valeni on the continent, largely due to their mountain mines.”

“That's fascinating,” Gwyn marveled, her eyes still wide with amazement. She turned toward Taenya. “Did you know all this?”

Taenya gave a shrug. “I was aware, but I'm more familiar with the Ayeval and Alevel Forests. They're the forests closer to Meris, where my family lives. I *do* also know that Mistval has been peaceful for years.”

Amari concurred. “Indeed. There have been several expeditions to investigate. It's believed that a disease or something wiped out many of their people. They still have formidable strongholds near the center, but it wouldn't surprise me if Avira attempts to conquer Mistval within the next decade.”

Gwyn absorbed this information with a thoughtful hum. “I know Roslyn's family wants to take over the Ayeval Forest. She'll even be given a title when she turns fifteen based on that.”

Amari chuckled at that. “The Tilorals have coveted that forest since they were a kingdom. That aspiration will persist unless they're willing to risk half their standing army.”

Gwyn turned her gaze back to the castle, a contemplative look in her eyes. “Or they could use magic.”

Amari's voice interrupted her reverie, her tone tinged with an amused cynicism. "If the Tilorals want to risk using magic to gain control over Ayeval, they're welcome to try. It won't be easy, nor without significant risk."

"We're here," Taenya announced, as the carriage moved through the gates of Marglen Castle.

It wasn't long before the carriage came to a halt with a dull thud, and the door was opened by a footman. The group disembarked, stepping onto the gravel pathway that led toward the entrance of the castle. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow on the stone facade of the fortress, and as they walked towards the arched entryway where a single man stood, Gwyn couldn't help but feel a sense of trepidation.

The stakes were high.

Taenya and the others had been preparing for this meeting for weeks, yet now, as they stepped into the heart of potential danger, Gwyn couldn't shake off the sense of unease that filled her.

She may have been young, but she was no stranger to adversity.

"Let's go," she muttered under her breath, her gaze meeting Taenya's as they were joined by the squad of four paladins that Amari brought, Lucian, and the two squads of Reinhart Guards.

The knight offered her a reassuring nod, and the two of them strode toward the man whose appearance made her knight scrunch up her face in a scowl.

When Gwyn came within a few steps of the high elf, he bowed smartly toward her before standing with an impeccable posture. Everything about him screamed that he was a man who held attention to detail in high esteem, from his perfectly tailored clothing to his ebony hair where not a single strand appeared out of place.

Still, she responded with an imperious dip of her head, meeting his warm brown eyes with her sapphire ones calmly. There was something there, and while she wasn't sure what it was...

She was already sure she wouldn't like him.

"Welcome, Your Highness Princess Gwyneth of House Reinhart to Marglen Castle," the man said coolly as he scrutinized her with a curious look.

Taenya, standing stoically at Gwyn's right, gave Lord Edele a nod. "Lord Edele," she answered for Gwyn since he hadn't introduced himself.

Lord Edele's smile widened, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth. "Always good to see you, Ser Taenya. And it is an honor to welcome Princess Gwyneth to our humble castle."

He then gestured toward the castle, his arm sweeping across the courtyard they stood within. "Please, Your Highness, Ser Taenya, follow me. We have arranged accommodations for you and your retinue during your stay here. I trust you'll find everything to your liking."

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Probably not. I'm likely going to hate my entire time here.



Gwyn was gently stirred from her sleep by a soft knock on her door before it opened. She yawned as she sat up and looked at the figure that entered, and, for a fleeting moment, she thought it was Emma.

But that thought was quickly swept away when she realized that it was just the new handmaiden for the House, a girl barely older than herself at sixteen followed by Ilyana.

Gwyn sighed, wincing as a dull ache radiated from her back, and she silently cursed the mattress while stretching. The bed was far from comfortable, its lumpiness having caused an uncomfortable night's sleep that made her long for returning to the townhouse or even the manor.

Once she was up, the young woman aided Gwyn with her morning routine, assisting her in dressing and fixing her hair in a practical manner since she would be walking around a lot today.

Just as the handmaiden was securing the final hairpin in place, the sound of the door opening and armored footsteps filled the room.

Looking up into the vanity mirror, Gwyn greeted the reflection of Taenya and Amari, both resplendently donned in their respective full sets of armor.

“Morning, you two. I’ll be ready shortly,” she said, smiling at her protectors.

“Take your time,” Taenya returned. “We have a few people we will need to meet today, apparently. The conclave itself will be tomorrow. Lucian will accompany us, but the rest of the Guard and the paladins will be checking over the castle and village. As much as I want to, we can’t have you constantly surrounded by a swarm of guards, it may give the wrong impression.”

Gwyn nodded, memories of her noble class flooding back. “You’re right. I don’t want to cause unnecessary tension with these people who already do not like what I represent. Should anything go wrong, please ensure our people have a safe place to retreat to, and an alternate plan.”

Amari beamed at her. “Well spoken, Gwyn. I had already considered this, and after coming up with suitable rally points, Senior Guardsman Oren and the Evocati in command of the paladins have been briefed and know the contingency plans.”

Satisfied with their arrangements, Gwyn rose from her seat.

She followed Taenya with Amari bringing the rear as they exited the room to find Lucian waiting.

The monk possessed an air of silent intensity as he leaned against the wall across the hall just outside Gwyn's chamber. Clad in a seamless black armor that looked as if it could literally meld with the shadows, his lithe form exuded a lethal grace in a way that was striking in its stark difference from the overwhelming might that Amari presented.

His piercing eyes were all that could be seen in his hood and above the mask that hid the rest of his features and shimmered with determination. His slender daggers glinted with deadly purpose at his side, but it was the two sheathes along his legs and slots in the front of his armor that made her double-take.

The man had almost twenty throwing knives on his body.

It surprised Gwyn that the local nobility permitted them to carry their own weapons within the castle so openly, but realized that they likely did not want to offend.

The presence of six members of the Church was likely a power statement that she couldn't do on her own.

I think Mama would approve.

"Your Highness," Lucian greeted with a respectful bow. "I trust you slept well?"

Gwyn nodded. "I did, thank you, Lucian."

As he moved to join them, she saw a crossbow slung tightly to his back along with a quiver of bolts.

She smiled and turned her attention to Amari and Taenya. "Ready?"

With their affirmation, the quartet made their way through the corridors of the keep, quickly finding their way through the centuries-old castle and at the door to the grand hall.

A telv servant bowed and greeted them, before gesturing to the guards to open the door.

As Gwyn and her trio of protectors entered the grand hall, a wave of chatter washed over them almost immediately. *Those must be some thick doors.*

The large room was bustling with people, many of them seemingly waiting in anticipation for just this moment.

She could feel Lucian's magic, an unseen ripple, as it reached out to envelope them, creating a silent telepathic connection between them.

'Ready when you are, Gwyn,' came Taenya's reassuring mental voice. ***'Let's meet our hosts, then we can grab something to eat.'***

Acknowledging her with a subtle nod, Gwyn led the way toward Lord Edele.

'Understood,' she responded to Taenya.

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Lord Edele was standing with a group of three other individuals, all high elves like himself.

The small entourage consisted of a woman and two men. His face lit up as Gwyn approached, a warm smile gracing his features, that she knew was something carefully practiced, after all, it was something Roslyn did.

“Welcome, Your Highness. I trust your night was restful?”

Gwyn nodded politely. “Yes, thank you for your kind hospitality, Lord Edele.”

“Wonderful! I would be remiss not to introduce you to the others,” Edele announced warmly. His hand extended in a grand gesture towards his companions.

The first was Lord Marle, their host, and master of Marglen Castle. An aged man, Lord Marle’s silvered hair framed a weathered face, adorned with a greyed beard, held an intense focus as he was introduced. The man exuded wisdom and authority with keen brown eyes, sharply mirroring years of wisdom and experience.

Next to him was the petite Countess Baelith from the Duchy of Calanfe. Despite a touch of age, she was quite pretty with her obsidian hair elegantly braided and her blue eyes that calmly assessed Gwyn and her entourage.

Finally, Lord Trysten of Levosa was introduced.

A sudden tension crept into their mental link, as Amari interjected. *‘That’s the heir to the Duchy of Levosa.’* Her telepathic tone was edged with caution, underlining the importance of this meeting.

The man was younger than the others, probably around Taenya’s age, with fair hair the color of golden wheat, which fell neatly below his ears. His silver eyes, intense and lively, were a striking contrast against his perfectly chiseled features that held a sure smile. Trysten stood almost a head taller than Gwyn, and there was raw, youthful energy around him, a fire that promised potential and ambition.

He reminded her of Aran.

He bowed and spoke first, “Your Highness. Allow me to speak for my companions in saying that it is an honor to have you here. I have met a few terrans since you and your people arrived, and I must say it has always been a pleasure to do so. I look forward to seeing to the strengthening of relationships between our two peoples.”

Gwyn dipped her head respectfully. “Thank you for your welcome, Lord Trysten. How was your trip here from Mossholde?”

A touch of surprise crossed his face but a blink and it was gone as his smile grew. “I don’t believe we’ve met, Your Highness, how did you recognize me?”

Gwyn tapped her nose. “A princess must have her secrets.”

He chuckled. "I can respect that."

The large double doors behind them opened, and Gwyn turned in time to see a woman entering the hall.

"I fear I may be a touch late," the woman stated with subtle mirth.

Gwyn immediately recognized the newcomer.

Beside her, Lord Edele's face tightened slightly, his courteous mask slipping momentarily as he bowed to the approaching woman. "Countess Racine, your arrival is most welcome. Please, accept my apologies for not greeting you as you arrived."

The countess, an older telv woman with strands of grey throughout her chestnut hair, stepped up to the group with an affable smile that completely ignored Lord Edele and instead focused on Trysten.

"Lord Trysten, always a delight to see you. Your father has finally let you leave the nest, I see," she teased. "Only took him until your thirtieth winter. How are your wife and children?"

Trysten bowed politely. "Countess," he greeted. "They are well and are already disliking the cold weather we've been having back home."

The countess hummed her acknowledgement, turning to Gwyn and curtsying gracefully. "Princess Gwyneth. It feels like a lifetime since we last crossed paths at that most splendid Ducal Court, and I must say, you have grown as lovely as you are tall. Thirteen and already as tall as the rest of us. Beautiful. Almost as much as your fiery display that day in Strathmore. It certainly left an impression on us all. I dare say it's the kind of fire we need as the Crown Prince continues to consolidate his power before ascension," she mused.

Lord Edele seemed to grind his teeth at her comment. "Countess, please, the political discussion is set for tomorrow. Today is for greetings."

The countess merely dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Oh, very well, my boy." She turned her attention back to Gwyn. "It's an absolute delight to see you again, dear. I've heard so much about you from my son who is at the Royal Academy with you."

Gwyn smiled politely. "Indeed? I don't believe we've had the pleasure of an official introduction."

Internally, she was amused at the mild understatement. *I only almost incinerated him while Amari threatened his life. Not a big deal.*

Unfazed, Countess Racine continued, "Yes, he is quite the handful, my dear. Boys will be boys, as they say. Ah, how I remember my days at the Academy. I bet you have to fend suitors off with a stick. Drawn to you like moths to a flame those young boys I imagine."

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Gwyn offered a wry smile. “I wouldn’t go that far, Countess. But it is a pleasure to see you again.”

The Countess took a moment to scrutinize Gwyn’s protectors, her eyes narrowing in a manner that was gone in what was surely the space of a single flap of a hummingbird’s wings. Instead, she smiled brightly at Gwyn, as if seemingly delighted by their conversation. “The pleasure is mine. Now, Lord Edele, I need to settle in. I believe the princess deserves to enjoy her meal.”

Lord Edele nodded in agreement. “Of course, Countess. Your Highness, I trust you’ll enjoy your breakfast. I’ll return momentarily.” As the man and the countess exited the hall, Lucian broke their mental silence.

‘Be wary. She possesses mental magic, extremely subtle in nature. I barely noticed it until it brushed past Taenya.’ He warned.

A lump formed in Gwyn’s throat as Lord Trysten glanced at Lord Marle. “I wasn’t aware the viper herself was joining us.”

The high elf appeared apologetic. “Nor was I. But let us proceed with our meal. Your Highness, your seat is prepared.”

Gwyn’s smile faltered as she followed the lord to a chair that had been set up at the head of the table for her. Meanwhile, her thoughts were a whirlwind of intrigue.

Just who is Countess Racine? I’m glad we brought Lucian, but I really wish Sabina was here.