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## Fraying at the Seams

The red sun shone brightly overhead in the clear sky, casting the Academy's grounds in a warm hue. The air was filled with the familiar and comforting sounds of student chatter, books shuffling, and the distant laughter of friends as Gwyn walked with her bestie outside along the lower school's many stone brick paths.

Next to her, Roslyn was still a bit distant, but today was better than the day prior. Like she had said the night before, she was frustrated, but not *mad* at Gwyn. Small blessings. Classes had gone smoothly, and as they left their last morning lecture and lunch with their friends behind, Rollo met up with the two of them with Calista.

The dragon bounded around, ignoring the wary and fearful expressions of the students around them. Gwyn was sure at least some were running off to report it.

Too bad nothing would come from that.

<<Play time!>>

Gwyn chuckled. "Don't forget, best behavior! This is my class, so I have to focus and learn how to ride."

"You've been doing well, Gwyn," Roslyn said from next to her as the dragon settled in between them. "I can't wait to see how you do when we start playing *orba* this summer."

Orba was a Loreni sport that was almost exactly like polo back on Earth. The mallets were slightly different, but it still amused Gwyn how similar things were sometimes. Mister Branigan loved to write down and come up with exciting theories regarding those similarities whenever she saw him. He was writing a book on terrans too. She always giggled at that.

Nowadays, with her in school and doing well, he was busy working with his wife Maya to research opportunities to introduce more magic into their House. They had even found someone like the royal enchanters to help them come up with new things.

They had ideas.

Gwyn couldn't wait to try them.

Still, while she loved sports, and loved the horse that Sabina got her, she had ulterior motives for choosing Equestrian Studies other than it being something expected for royals.

"Yeah, I'm excited, although that's not why I'm learning to ride."

“Why’s that then?”

Gwyn looked down at Calista and smiled. She sent a bunch of love through their bond. The dragon preened.

“Because when Calista gets big enough, we’re going to fly together. We’ve already been talking about it.”

<<*Yes! Ride when big!*>>

“You’re... going to ride Calista?”

“Yup! I love Layla, but Nyx and I have a bond. We’re going to take to the skies.”

The look on Roz’s face was priceless. But there was a hint of something there as her friend’s eyes darted to the blue expanse above them.

It looked a bit like longing.

Gwyn knew at that moment she would take her friend with them.

Upon reaching the lower school’s Equestrian grounds, Roslyn made her way to the growing group of students while Gwyn and Calista made their way directly to the stables. Since Gwyn’s horse was special, she got to go see her and make sure everything was sorted before class unlike the others who would come to the stables when allowed. The main thing she enjoyed about this was that Sabina was usually the one who got to bring Layla to the grounds a bit early. This let Gwyn come in and chat a bit before class and the weekend.

It also allowed her to vent a bit.

Sabina was usually the best to vent with.

As she entered the arched gateway of the stables, the soft crunch of gravel under her boots echoed lightly in the quiet. Overhead, wooden beams crisscrossed, showing signs of age but still sturdy. The air inside was rich with the scent of fresh hay, leather, and the warm, earthy musk unique to stables. Rows of well-tended stalls flanked both sides of the corridor, each housing an equine inhabitant either enjoying a meal, napping, or curiously peeking out to investigate the newcomer.

The distant sound of horses whinnying and the soft murmurs of stable hands attending to their charges filled the space.

Making her way further in, Gwyn’s gaze flitted from one horse to the next, admiring the myriad of breeds and colors, each animal more magnificent than the last. But it wasn’t until she caught sight of a familiar deep-blue roan coat shimmering in a ray of sunlight that her heart leaped with joy.

Next to the stall stood Taenya, the woman gently brushing the horse’s mane. She wore a rich dark blue tunic, adorned with delicate silver embroidery, which went beautifully with her sleek black

pants and calf-high boots. Notably absent were her signature sword and armor, a stipulation of her current ability to escort the horse, yet Taenya's demeanor lacked any hint of worry.

*Probably because she has backup,* Gwyn mused.

Taenya wasn't the type to be caught unprepared. Beneath the façade of casual clothing, Gwyn was willing to bet there were at least a few hidden knives tucked away, ready to be deployed at a moment's notice.

And then there was the magic. With a flick of her wrist, Taenya could armor up and brandish a weapon faster than most could blink. Not to mention the ethereal bear she could summon.

Silly Academy Guard.

*Honestly, they don't know who they're dealing with. She's every bit as scary as my paladins.*

Spotting her, Taenya looked up and their eyes met, resulting in a shared, bright smile. Gwyn's heart skipped a beat, not just at the sight of her cherished horse, but at Taenya's daring new haircut.

<<Layla!>>

Beside her, Calista leaped with an agile grace onto the top of the stall, her eyes alight with the familiar gleam of playful affection. Layla, her magnificent Jarincian horse, responded with an elegant neigh as she moved closer to nuzzle the little dragon.

The interaction between the two brought a smile to both Taenya and Gwyn's faces.

Gwyn turned to the primary maternal figure in her life with enthusiasm and exclaimed, "Taenya! You went and got a haircut!"

"Sure did. What do you think?" she asked while lifting a hand to her head and posing.

The sight of her badass magical knight-captain posing like a model forced a giggle from Gwyn.

The right side of Taenya's head was shaved, leaving the left of her blonde shoulder length hair to part and cascade down the opposite side. It beautifully showcased the telv's short, pointed ear which glittered with a series of ornate piercings. The hairstyle was both edgy and regal, making Gwyn yearn for her own new style and set of piercings. But she was resolved to wait before making any crazy alterations.

She wanted her mamma to recognize her, after all.

Still.

"I absolutely love it," she replied sincerely. "Though, I'm surprised to see you instead of Sabina. How have you been this week?"

Taenya smirked, casting a teasing glance in Gwyn's direction. "Oh, I'm fantastic. That's actually why I'm here! My day's been made more interesting after finding out my princess might be dragging us into some squabble with a ducal house. Just the usual."

Gwyn winced, moving to stroke Layla who greeted her with a soft, affectionate nicker. She had suspected Amari would brief Taenya about last night's events but hadn't realized how swiftly the news had traveled. "Did Amari fill you in on the details?"

Taenya's playful demeanor shifted, her expression turning gravely serious. "She did. And you should know, I stand by your choice. It's for Raafe, and you know my thoughts on that. It's too bad that Keston isn't here. We're already preparing the necessary coins."

"It might escalate to a fight."

"I'm well aware. But rest assured, we'll be ready. Rhion and Friedrich are already on standby at the estate, prepared for any backlash."

"And Sabina?"

"Still busy with the... search you gave her. She believes she's getting closer."

Gwyn took a deep breath. Almost two seasons ago, she had sent Sabina after the kidnappers and who hired them. If she was finally getting closer... there would likely be even more confrontations in the future. Gwyn had to settle this situation with Raafe's family quickly.

"So, what else has happened at the House while I've been gone? Any news from Siveril?"

"Well, not much. Ilyana got her hair cut when I did. You should see it. She shaved all the sides. It's cute. She's really leaning into the warrior lady persona she has going on. She's got the son of a count all smitten with her, but between you and I, I think she enjoys beating him up rather than plying for his heart."

Gwyn giggled.

"Aleanora is doing well in the upper school. Of your three ladies-in-waiting, I believe Nora is going to be the one that stays closest to you. Ilyana will need to go back to her demesne while Lorrena will probably return to her family as well. Nora is... she's intense. She will be a good candidate for representing your interests in court."

"Hmm. I'm glad she's doing well. I never see her anymore. Heck, I rarely see Lore anymore. She's been hanging out with Salla so much."

Taenya smiled. "I think she's smitten."

Gwyn's eyes widened. "Whaa?"

“You know they walk through our gardens whenever they’re at the estate, right? I saw Lore give her some flowers.”

The princess was speechless. “No! That’s... *awww*. How did I miss it?”

Taenya just shook her head. “As for Siveril? He’s up to something.” Before Gwyn could ask, the blonde telv chuckled. “Nothing bad. I believe they’re moving to expand your bannermen’s holdings down near the southern border. There’s a new guild, and they’ve started branches in their towns. ‘The Adventurer’s Guild’ or something. Galehaven is growing nicely.”

*Oh?! Just like the fantasy shows! Awesome.*

“We need more land for ourselves, too. That’s something I’ve thought about lately.”

“Yes, you do. But you have some time. Having your bannermen with significant holdings is enough for now. I have some ideas on that, and if this alliance with Rhion’s people pans out, we may need to look into lands outside of Tiloral.”

“That makes sense. Any ideas?”

“I sent a reply to Siveril asking him to look into some land near Drakensburg. There’re some good vineyards around there. Maybe we can hide something behind that. We’ll see.”

“Smart.”

Gwyn set the brush aside, the bristles still holding traces of the roan’s gleaming coat. She leaned against the worn wood of the stall door, her gaze fixed on Taenya. A hint of a smile tugged at her lips; they were almost eye to eye now.

The memories of looking up at Taenya, of her towering over a younger Gwyn, flooded back. When she first saw her after arriving, with her ethereal, elf-like grace, combined with the raw power of a warrior, Gwyn was mesmerized. That was before she knew the difference between elves and telv, to her they were all the same. In most ways, they still were. Just don’t tell them that.

To Gwyn, they were her stories and fantasies come to life. It was an image Gwyn had once gazed upon with awe. The thought that she too could be a knight or a princess... it was the entire reason for her lie. She grew up around fantasy with her mom. Magic, dragons, knights... they were always so cool. And now, in some strange twist of fate, those dreams had begun to entwine with her reality. Taenya was the first person she had seen in this world.

Gwyn’s mom always said to never meet your heroes, but that wasn’t true.

Taenya was a hero to her and she’d never let her down. She was the ideal knight and such a...

*She’s a... bad ass.*

Her strength was unwavering, and her magic grew in depth and precision daily. It wasn't just her combat skills or her magic that Gwyn admired; it was her unyielding confidence, the serene assurance with which she moved through life.

She had always been Gwyn's role model, and standing beside her now, the admiration hadn't waned a bit. Instead, it had evolved, mingled with gratitude and an ever-deepening bond.

"Taenya?"

The older woman's posture shifted ever so slightly, and she turned, her hazel eyes settling on Gwyn with a warmth that belied the toughness she usually projected. "Hmm?"

A lump formed in Gwyn's throat, making her voice waver just a bit. "I just... thank you. For everything."

A small smile played at the corners of Taenya's lips. In two easy strides, she closed the distance between them. As Gwyn leaned into the embrace, she found herself leaning against the side of Taenya's head, drawing comfort from the simple act. *Every battle, every challenge... you were there.*

The soft rumble of Taenya's chuckle vibrated through them. "You've given as much as you've gotten, kid."

They stood that way for a bit, enjoying the shared comfort. When Gwyn eventually pulled away, she turned just in time to see Calista showing off for Layla.

"Oh gods..."

Calista, chest puffed up, let out an enthusiastic <<FIRE!>>, resulting in just a harmless puff of smoke from her nostrils. Layla, perhaps feeling cheeky, huffed a gust of air, blowing the smoke right back into Calista's face.

<<Rude!>>

Taenya's brows drew together in a mixture of amusement and concern. "She... she can breathe fire?"

A grimace formed on Gwyn's face. "Not... yet, but I think she will soon. Hopefully, later rather than sooner."

"Gwyn... the school is *not* gonna let her stay if she burns anything."

"Yeah, I know," Gwyn said, running a hand through her hair. "If it comes down to it, I'll take the blame."

Taenya let out an exasperated sigh, and her fingers grazed the close-cropped side of her head, seemingly a nervous tick. The gesture momentarily drew attention to the stark contrast between her shaved side and the flowing locks on the other. Pushing her concerns aside, she forced a smile, the

corners of her eyes crinkling with affection. “Speaking of fire... So, how was your week, little firestarter?”

Gwyn smiled. “You’ll never guess Roz’s new nickname for me... Let’s get Layla ready and I’ll tell you.”

So, as Taenya helped Gwyn get Layla ready for the class, the two talked. Gwyn told her about her week and all that had happened with their classes. Everything about Sansa that Amari didn’t know. The conversation about Raafé. The fight with Roslyn. The confession to Roslyn. That went about as well as expected.

“You told her?”

Gwyn nodded. “I had to. She’s my best friend. I can’t... I shouldn’t keep secrets from her.”

Taenya sighed. “You’re not wrong. I just... I wish you had warned us.”

“I felt really bad about the Sansa situation. But Roz isn’t going to tell anyone.”

“No, I don’t believe she will. But she’s right, you know? You should communicate with her more. Our Houses are allied...”

Gwyn groaned.

Taenya lifted a hand and continued, “Like I was saying, we’ve built a strong relationship with the Tilorals. Things you do affect them. With this, you’ve basically forced them to alienate themselves even further from other factions within the kingdom. But at the same time, you were also right. You doing this for Raafé’s family will send a powerful message to the people of our House and to our rivals.”

“So, what should I do?”

“You care about her right?”

“More than anything...”

Taenya’s face took on a soft expression, a small smile forming at the corners of her lips. She put a hand on Gwyn’s shoulder. “I know it’s probably confusing but...” She shook her head. “Nevermind. What I mean is talk to her. Realize that she has obligations that aren’t directly connected to you. Roslyn has been doing this for a lot longer than you. It’s her entire life.”

Gwyn frowned. “What’s confusing about that? I understand she’s going to be a duchess one day. I do act before I think *sometimes*...”

Taenya coughed.

“A lot of times. But still. I don’t see what’s confusing about that.”

The delicate lines on Taenya's face deepened as she let out a small sigh, and with a playful, almost maternal gesture, she reached up to ruffle Gwyn's hair. "Gwyn, don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes you're a bit dense."

Gwyn's mouth fell open. "W-What?! I am *not*."

Taenya's lips curled up into a smirk. "One day, firebug, you'll get it. And when you do, please come talk to me. We'll have a good chat. Mature and open. Woman to woman. Well, after you first tell the obvious person."

Gwyn huffed, her face a mask of confusion. "I genuinely have no idea what you're hinting at."

With another chuckle, Taenya gave Gwyn's hair another tousle. The younger girl squirmed, feigning annoyance. It was all part of their dance, the familiarity and intimacy that had built up over the years. The maternal figure in her life since she was just ten just shook her head, the glint in her eyes betraying her amusement.

As Taenya adjusted the last of the saddle straps, Gwyn climbed onto Layla with a combination of grace and nerves. Calista, meanwhile, pranced alongside Taenya, mimicking the older woman's confident stride with an exaggerated dragon version of her own.

Taenya kept a firm grip on the reins as Layla stepped out of the stables with Gwyn in the saddle. It was always nerve-racking for Gwyn. All of the other nobles had been riding since they were young, and this was the epitome of 'fake it til you make it' for her. Only Roslyn and those of her House knew how much she'd been practicing since returning from her little forest jaunt with Neira.

Surprisingly, Ilyana was an absolute treat to ride with on the weekends when they were back on the estate. Her oldest lady-in-waiting and young baroness was becoming a fierce woman who loved to fight and ride. Gwyn couldn't wait until little Nyx was big enough to ride. She expected they had a year to go.

Catching the glances of fellow students fetching their horses, Gwyn gracefully maneuvered Layla aside. The sight of her atop Layla—a creature of elegance and power—never failed to draw attention. *Especially from those two.*

The twins, Elora and Aran, were no exception. Elora's gaze burned with familiar contempt as she passed, while Aran's eyes held a more complex look of envy and dislike. Yet true to their agreement, he bit back any comments.

Roz approached with Khalan and Amari following behind her, her hand instinctively reaching out to pat Layla's velvety nose. "Hello, Layla. You are looking gorgeous today. Yes, you are."

The horse's response was a soft, contented nicker, leaning into Roz's touch.



“Fancy a ride this weekend?” Roz cooed, directing her question to the horse, decidedly ignoring Gwyn atop her.

Layla nudged Roz.

The only other person Layla let ride her was Roz.

Feeling an odd pang of jealousy, Gwyn couldn't help but notice how Layla adored Roz. While it was heartwarming to see her best friend loved by everyone in her house and her companions like Layla or her dragon sister, Gwyn sometimes felt a twinge of... possessiveness.

But, sometimes it felt like... she wanted that attention.

From Roz.

It was silly.

Attempting to mask her feelings with feigned irritation, Gwyn quipped, “Can't *we* ride together this weekend, Roz?”

Roz lifted her gaze, meeting Gwyn's. “Of course.”

Transitioning her attention to Taenya, Roz greeted, “Hello Taenya. How is the day treating you?”

“Been well, thanks to a certain chat with our dear princess here. Remember, go easy on her, okay?”

Attempting to dispel the thickening tension, Gwyn offered Roz a half-smile. But her friend's reply was a simple nod as she caught Gwyn's attention, but there was a storm of emotions turning in those pretty amethyst eyes. “Yeah... we're going to talk some more tonight. I need to go get Glimmerhoof.”

Amari stepped up as Khalan followed Roslyn inside. “You two have a good chat?”

Taenya smiled. “We did. Thanks.”

“Of course. Heading back now?”

Taenya looked up at Gwyn. “Yeah, I suppose I should. Have to get things ready for our weekend jaunt that I am *so* looking forward to.”

Gwyn winced as Amari chuckled. “It will be fine. Just a little show of force. Everything's above board.”

“Exactly!”

Both older women turned their heads and looked up at the princess sitting atop the horse. “Gwyn, you really should let us take the lead on this, even with you there,” Taenya implored her.

“Ugh. Fine. You’re probably right.”

She clamped down on the emotions that tried to rise inside of her. Her protectors were right. Gwyn wasn’t in the right state of mind to take the lead.

With the subtle sounds of hooves crunching gravel and the occasional snort, students continued to emerge from the shadows of the stables, until finally, Roz herself came into view astride her striking steed, Glimmerhoof. The horse, true to its name, shimmered in the sunlight, looking radiant with its glimmering brown coat.

With just a slight nudge of her heels, Roz easily maneuvered Glimmerhoof to fall in step next to Layla. She met Gwyn’s eyes, acknowledging her with a casual yet confident head nod, before tilting her chin ever so slightly towards the open field where their instructor awaited.

“All set?” Roz asked with a smirk, excitement evident in her voice, ready for the day’s lesson to begin. When Gwyn nodded, she nudged her horse to start moving forward.

Gwyn leaned slightly towards Taenya and Amari, her voice filled with excitement, “Catch you both after class, okay?” Without waiting for a response, she gently urged Layla forward, following Roz’s path.

From the corner of her eye, Gwyn spotted Calista. The young dragon seemed caught up in her own world of excitement, racing alongside Amari. Every now and then, she’d spread her wings wide, catching the wind beneath them, lifting herself momentarily before gravity pulled her back. The playful display warmed Gwyn’s heart. *She’s growing so fast.*

Gwyn’s smile broadened as she trailed Roz, the anticipation of the day’s lesson lifting her spirits.

The open field stretched before them, its vastness contained by a perimeter of tall, ancient trees, their leaves dancing to the tunes of a gentle breeze. The Royal Academy’s riding arena was no ordinary space. Multiple tracks crisscrossed the field, each with varying difficulty levels. A few obstacles and painted wooden cones were spread out, hinting at a lesson that was likely to be more engaging than the standard canter around the arena. And that was only one half of the whole thing. Beyond that was the grassy stadium where the sports were played.

Gwyn was already nervous.

As the students settled into a line, each awaiting their turn in what was obviously a day for an obstacle course, the soft pawing of horses echoed their riders’ mounting anticipation. Gwyn could feel Layla’s powerful muscles tense beneath her, eager and ready.

From the sidelines, the high elf instructor observed his students, his piercing eyes missing nothing. Age had silvered his hair, and though wrinkles etched stories of wars and skirmishes on his

face, his posture was upright, displaying the undeniable elven grace she'd come to know combined with the rugged strength of a seasoned cavalryman.

"All right, students!" he began, his voice authoritative, yet not harsh. "Today, we focus on agility and control. It's not always about speed; it's about maneuvering accurately and efficiently. We'll go down the line. Mister Moreth, you're the closest to me, so you're up."

Gwyn watched as Aran maneuvered his horse forward to the starting line, and at the instructor's signal, he was off.

Not really caring, Gwyn turned to watch Calista work with Taenya across the field. Her dragon sister was playing with her fill-in mom and having a great time. It made Gwyn happy that everyone had come to accept Calista Nyx so readily.

One by one, riders guided their mounts through the obstacle course. They weaved through wooden cones, jumped low hurdles, and trotted through zigzag patterns. Every movement, every turn demanded precision. Gwyn watched intently, analyzing each student's performance, making mental notes for her turn.

When her name was finally called, Gwyn urged her horse forward.

As Layla approached the starting point, Gwyn took a deep breath, pressing her heels down and sitting deep in the saddle. *Here we go, Layla. Just like we practiced.* She could feel the mare's eagerness vibrating through the reins.

"Ready? Go!" the instructor called out.

Layla burst into motion.

It passed by too quickly, and everything else fell away. The joy of riding urged the two through the course. Then, as Gwyn guided Layla through the final stretch of the course, she felt a rush of elation. Every movement and every decision had melded seamlessly with the mare's natural grace. They had moved as one. The smooth landing from the last jump elicited a few claps from her classmates.

"Well done, Miss Reinhart!" The instructor's praise rang out clear, causing a few heads to turn. His nod of approval was something all students sought, but few received. "Excellent control and cohesion with your mount."

Gwyn beamed, giving Layla a gentle pat. The mare responded with a pleased snort, clearly proud of their joint achievement.

"Thank you, instructor," Gwyn responded, her cheeks flushed with a mix of exertion and pride.

When they rejoined the group, she could feel the warmth of Roz's smile and nodded to a couple of classmates who gave her a thumbs up. Settling back into the line, Gwyn took a moment to appreciate the feeling.

It was freeing.

The instructor had just started explaining the next student's path when Gwyn heard Calista's exclamation.

<<*Sister!!! LOOK!*>>

Whipping her head around, Gwyn's eyes widened in delight. Above them, Calista, who had just been trying to catch wind beneath her wings, was now truly flying. Sunlight glistened on her black scales, making her seem almost ethereal as she soared.

A gleeful squeal escaped Gwyn, an unrestrained show of her joy, prompting the rest of the class to follow her gaze. A cacophony of voices rang out—astonishment, apprehension, and pure excitement mingling together.

Taenya's hearty laugh resonated clearly above the chatter, her eyes shining with pride, while Amari shook her head, a fond smile gracing her lips.

Behind Gwyn, Roz shouted, "Good job, Cali!"

As Calista made a graceful loop over the group, it was clear she was basking in the attention. The pure joy and excitement poured through their bond and Gwyn couldn't help but feel it too.

It was a sight that gave her such hope for the future.

*One day, Nyx. I'll join you up there.*



In the muted light of the stables, Gwyn stood, surrounded by the scent of fresh hay and the comforting sounds of horses shuffling about. Taenya stood in front of her as she held Layla's reins.

"So, I'll see you tomorrow after class?" Gwyn asked.

"Definitely. I'll be waiting right here, then we'll make our way to the estate instead of the townhouse. There, you can get some rest and we'll strategize, but I have the House prepared as much as possible. We'll just figure out how to make everything as smooth as possible."

Gwyn hesitated for a split second, then closed the distance between them, wrapping her arms around the knight. Their height was basically identical now, and the familiar feeling of Taenya's

shoulder against her cheek was grounding. *I'm catching up to mamma's height.* The realization brought a small smile to her face.

Feeling the comforting squeeze of Taenya's arms around her, Gwyn heard her murmur, "It was good seeing you today, kiddo. Everything's going to work out." Her knight leaned back slightly, glancing toward Calista who sat nearby, her stature showing the clear signs of rapid growth. "She's growing so fast. I suspect by summer's end, the Academy might find it hard to accommodate her. She'll probably need to move to the estate."

Gwyn met Taenya's gaze, her resolve unwavering. "We'll handle it. Like we always do."

A rare playful smirk crossed Taenya's face as she ruffled Gwyn's hair. "Love ya, kid."

The unexpected display of affection sent warmth flooding through Gwyn. Her eyes moistened, but she pulled Taenya into another tight embrace, voice muffled against her shoulder. "I love you too, Taenya."

After what felt like mere moments, Gwyn watched as Layla and Taenya started their departure from the stables. Lost in the emotional whirlwind, she almost missed the gentle approach of footsteps. Spinning around, she found Roz there, a knowing smile playing on her lips.

Seeing her friend, Gwyn quickly dabbed at her eyes, willing away any lingering tears. "Yeah, I'm good. Ready to go?"

Roz's gaze held understanding. "In a moment. First, wanted to check in. Meet you outside?"

Gwyn offered a quick nod, appreciating the effort to break the lingering heaviness of the moment. She chuckled at Calista's eager chirp.

<<Help Roz!>>

"Calista wants to help you."

Roz's eyes sparkled with amusement. "She's just too cute to resist. Come on, Cali, help me get Glimmerhoof settled."

As Gwyn made her way to the stable exit, the sound of hooves and playful dragon noises faded behind her. The transition from the dim interior of the stable to the outside brightness made her blink a few times, allowing her eyes to adjust.

She was immediately met with the poised and confident figure of someone she didn't want to see. Elara's posture spoke of royalty and power, but it was her eyes, glinting with a mischievous gleam, and the upward curve of her lips that caught Gwyn's attention.

"Well, well, if it isn't Gwyneth," Elara remarked, her tone dripping with smugness. Gwyn raised an eyebrow, preparing herself for whatever banter or challenge the fellow princess might throw her way.

“What do you want, Elara?”

A cascade of emotions whirled within Gwyn, anger prominent among them. Every word from Elara’s mouth was a calculated sting, an acid that sought to corrode her self-control.

“So, I hear you’ve angered the Brelands. You have a knack for burning every bridge it seems,” Elara said with a malevolent gleam in her eyes. Gwyn’s jaw clenched, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. “Not that I mind, because it’s only a matter of time until you are completely alone. Well, you and your little girlfriend. If only she had a bit of sense, she would have dropped you as well. Now her House is set to crumble all because of you.”

“Shut up, Elara.” Gwyn’s voice was a low growl, the volcanic heat of her anger simmering beneath her skin.

But Elara wasn’t done, oh no, her words were like serpents, twisting and turning with venomous glee. “Oh? Not the usual unflappable self? Feeling a little frayed around the edges? After that delightful spectacle in the library? Really, assaulting Lady Ashryn was a new low, even for you. Threatening a ducal House over a *servant*? It’s laughable. Every day you just prove my family right.”

Gwyn took a menacing step closer to Elara, the fire within her blazing, seeking an outlet.

Elara’s grin widened. “Going to attack me now too?” She leaned in, her voice a sinister whisper, the coldness of her gaze clashing against the fire in Gwyn’s. “Please do. I would love to see what my father would do to you. But threats and magic are all you have, aren’t they? You have no class, no etiquette to speak of, and no true power. You rely on your magic too much, Gwyneth. Really, it’s quite pathetic. But I wouldn’t expect anything else. Every day it makes me wonder what your life was really like in your world. Perhaps that’s why your mother isn’t here. Did she abandon you because you were just too much of a... *disappointment*?”

That was the strike of a match, igniting the fuse. Gwyn’s vision went red, and her body lunged forward, propelled by an unrestrained fury. Yet, just as the flames of her anger sought to consume, a firm hand planted itself against her chest, halting her advance. Blonde hair swayed into view as Roslyn stepped in front of her.

“Elara, leave. Now,” Roz’s voice was the eye of the storm, calm amidst the raging tumult.

Yet, Elara’s smirk only widened, clearly relishing the reaction she’d drawn. “Perhaps you should keep your feral mutt in check, Roslyn. Wouldn’t want to see it get put down like the *bitch* it is.”

*How dare she?* Gwyn’s eyes widened, a volatile mix of emotions thrashing within her. The urge to rush at Elara, to unleash the storm of rage boiling inside her was overpowering.

Yet, Roz’s second hand joined the first, a barrier against the onslaught of Gwyn’s fury. The pressure of her friend’s palms, steady and unmoving, was grounding amidst the chaos of the moment.

“Gwyn, no. She’s not worth it. Calm down,” Roz urged, her voice a tether pulling Gwyn back from the precipice of regrettable actions.

Every muscle in Gwyn’s body was taut, the tempest within her seeking escape. Elara’s mocking laughter echoed as she stepped away, a haunting refrain that sought to ignite the powder keg of her wrath. Yet, within the storm, Roz’s presence was unyielding, an anchor amidst the tumultuous sea of emotions.

Breathing heavily, the hot rush of adrenaline still burning in her veins, she met Roslyn’s eyes. There was no judgment there, only concern. Roz’s palms, still planted firmly against Gwyn’s chest, could feel the wild rhythm of her friend’s heart. The cooling breeze that typically played through the fields seemed to pause, the world holding its breath, waiting for Gwyn’s response.

Roz’s voice, soft and hesitant, broke the silence. “Are you okay?”

Gwyn took a shaky breath and nodded slowly.

Her eyes flickered downwards, suddenly acutely aware of where Roz’s hands were positioned. “Uhm, Roz?”

Her friend’s hand didn’t move. Gwyn felt her cheeks heat up.

“Roz?”

Roz’s gaze finally followed Gwyn’s, and her eyes widened in mortified realization. A blush radiated from her neck to her cheeks, turning them a deep shade of crimson. “Oh my gods!” she stammered, her hands retracting like she’d been burned.

Gwyn couldn’t help but giggle at the situation, the previous tension diffusing instantly. “Smooth move, Roz.”

Clearly flustered, Roz wrung her hands together, struggling for words. “I was just trying to stop you! I wasn’t thinking—”

Gwyn couldn’t help but burst into laughter. “Just copping a feel?”

Roz couldn’t have flushed more if she tried.

Pulling her best friend into a side hug, Gwyn grinned. “It’s okay. I won’t tell anyone.” But then she sighed. “Thank you, by the way.”

Roz peeked up from her shoes, a small, bashful smile curling her lips. “Just trying to keep you out of trouble.”

The smirk returned, playful as ever. “And, apparently, trying to cop a feel.”

Roz feigned shock, her eyes wide. “I did not! It was unintentional boob grabbing!”

Both of them laughed, the weight of the earlier confrontation lifted. Gwyn nudged Roz playfully. “Sneaky.”

Roz wagged a playful finger. “Just you wait...”

As the playful banter continued, a mischievous glint sparked in Gwyn's eyes as she pulled away and let Roz move ahead of her. Before her friend could react, she seized the moment, and darted her fingers to Roz's sides, giving a quick tickle.

Roz yelped in surprise, her laughter bubbling up like a fresh spring. Jumping back, she put her hands up defensively. “Hey! No fair!” She fixed Gwyn with a mock glare, her eyes still dancing with amusement. “Don't you dare! We are in public. That is not appropriate.”

Gwyn, still wearing her impish smile, leaned in closer, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Oh, I see. Tickling is where we draw the line in public decorum? Not the grabbing?”

Roz playfully shoved Gwyn's shoulder, a soft blush painting her cheeks again. “I didn't mean to!”

Gwyn laughed, looping her arm around Roz's as they continued their walk back to the dorms. “Alright, alright. I'll remember: tickling in private, accidental foddling in public.”

Roz groaned, nudging Gwyn. “You're never going to let me live that down, are you?”

Gwyn winked. “Not in this lifetime.”

Her best friend rolled her eyes and sighed. “I just didn't want you to fight, you know.”

“Well, you stopped it. And now I'm not angry. I'm happy again. So... thank you.”

“Oh, you're happy? Is it because I grabbed your boobs?”

Gwyn's cheeks flushed. “N-N-No, that's... that's not what I meant!”

Roz smirked up at her, her amethyst eyes glinting with mischief. “There, now you're just as embarrassed as I was.”

Gwyn nudged her friend with her shoulder. “I've always known you were trouble.”

“Yeah, you love me.”

Gwyn smiled. “I do. You're my bestie.”

Roz leaned in conspiratorially. “As your trusted bestie, whom you love dearly, I have some important information.”

Gwyn raised an eyebrow, playing along. “Oh? Do tell.”

Roz inhaled deeply, her nose wrinkling in feigned disgust. “You absolutely reek of horse manure. Seriously, you need a bath.”



Gwyn gasped dramatically, placing a hand over her heart. “The audacity! I’ll have you know this is the authentic scent of equestrian royalty!” She took a quick, exaggerated sniff of herself. “Mmm, delightful.”

Roz burst into another fit of giggles. “Oh, of course! How could I forget? Maybe we should bottle it up and sell it. Make a fortune!”

Their laughter filled the air, the day’s tension long forgotten. Gwyn pulled away and twirled dramatically, holding her wrist up as if presenting a perfume ad. “Wear it, and you too can smell like... a hard day’s work at the Royal Academy’s riding arena!”

Roz wrinkled her nose playfully, pretending to inspect herself. “You might be onto something. Though, between the two of us, I think I might just be carrying the perfume’s more... robust notes.”

<<*Smelly.*>>

Gwyn looked back at the dragon who was following them and sighed.

“What did she say?” Roz asked.

“She said we’re smelly.”

Roz giggled. “Yeah, bath time is definitely in order.”



The soft glow of the room’s ambient lights cast warm hues, throwing shadows that danced around the four corners. As Gwyn entered, squeezing excess water from her hair into the towel, she noticed Roz seated on the couch, her own tresses slightly damp, loose waves cascading over her shoulders, reflecting the shimmer of the lights as she read.

She looked a bit sad.

*I hope she’s not reading one of the stories that makes her cry again.*

Calista was curled up in front of the fire, sleeping soundly. The dragon was probably exhausted from her first time flying. Gwyn was so proud of her.

Her footsteps ceased when she reached the seating area. Her attention was drawn to a steaming mug on the table, the familiar fragrance drifting to her nostrils. “Sorry it took me a bit,” she said, giving a half-apologetic smile. “I was really relaxing.”

Roz waved her off, pointing to a teacup on the table. “It’s quite alright. Made you some tea. Thought you might like it.”

With a grateful nod, Gwyn settled into a chair, wrapping her fingers around the comforting warmth of the tea mug. Taking a sip, she felt the tension start to melt away. *Just the way I like it. She knows me too well.* “You always know how to make things better, Roz.”

“Can we talk?”

Gwyn hesitated. Nothing good ever came from those words, but she knew it had been coming. “Of course.”

Roz bit her lip, her violet eyes searching Gwyn's for a moment. “I've had some time to think since yesterday, especially after today's events,” she began hesitantly, drawing a concerned glance from Gwyn. A sinking feeling settled into her chest.

“About?”

“Us. And some things Elara said. Even if it was meant to hurt, there might be some truth in her words.”

When Elara's name fell from Roz's lips, the knot fell to Gwyn's stomach. “Go on.”

Roz took a moment, gathering her words, the weight of what she was about to say pressing heavily on her shoulders. “Gwyn, we've grown so close. We've shared laughs, tears, secrets. I trust you with my life, Gwyn. You're the closest friend I have. Our bond... it's something most people search for their entire lives.”

Gwyn's throat tightened, her voice barely above a whisper. “But?”

Roz hesitated, her eyes darting away for a moment. She took a deep breath and continued, “We're at a critical point in our lives, Gwyn. We're not kids anymore. We've got roles that go beyond just us. Every step we take, every alliance we make, affects hundreds, thousands of lives. Every action you take affects me because of how people see us. See our Houses. I don't want to lose what we have, but we have to set boundaries. We need to figure out where House Tiloral ends and House Reinhart begins. You know I have responsibilities. I will be taking over my duchy, and in these times...”

She sighed. “There's a war starting in the north. You don't know much of what's going on, but if war is happening in the north, my duchy and the others will need to fortify the borders. Especially Edimiss. The republic always likes to start things.”

Gwyn looked up in alarm. “But... what about my people? Will they be okay?”

“Yes, Gwyn. Everyone's going to be fine. I'm just saying... we need to figure this out.”

Gwyn felt a pressure in her chest, making it hard to breathe. She had always known about the responsibilities that Roz bore, but she had hoped that their friendship would be untouched by the burdens of nobility. “I get it,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “I never wanted to be a burden, to make things harder for you.”

“You aren’t,” Roz insisted, her voice breaking. “You never were. This... this isn’t about casting blame. It’s just...” She sighed deeply, looking lost. “I’ve been struggling, Gwyn. Especially lately. I need to reconcile my friendship with you, a princess, with my duties as an heiress and the expectations everyone has of me. And it terrifies me that I might be pulling you into a mess because of my own uncertainties. I’m by your side Gwyn, but we need to figure out exactly *what* that means. We can’t take on the world alone, Gwyn. No matter how strong you are. We need to find a balance.”

Gwyn looked at her, the hurt evident in her eyes. *She’s my anchor, my safe haven. But maybe I’ve been a storm in her life.* “Roz, if this is what you need, I’ll respect it. I just... I want you to be happy. And if that means giving you space, then I’ll do it. I’m sorry all of my stuff is causing issues for you.”

The two sat there, a distance between them that felt far vaster than the physical gap. It was a chasm of emotions, responsibilities, and unsaid feelings.

Roz took a shaky breath. “Thank you for understanding. It doesn’t mean you’re not my best friend or that I don’t want to spend *any* time with you. You know that, right?”

Gwyn nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I know. We just need to figure this out. Right?”

“Yeah...”

Roslyn took a moment to compose herself, brushing away the few stray tears that had managed to escape. She cast a final, lingering glance towards Gwyn before she began clearing away the remnants of their drinks, each movement deliberate, as if she were trying to distract herself. The sound of ceramic clinking lightly against the tray punctuated the thick silence that had settled between them.

Gwyn watched her, every fiber of her being wanting to reach out, to bridge that painful gap. But she remained rooted to her spot, a weight in her chest holding her back. She felt paralyzed, trapped by the maelstrom of emotions swirling within.

Finally, with everything in its place, Roslyn walked to the door of her room. She hesitated for just a heartbeat at the threshold, her fingers lightly touching the doorframe, as if seeking support. Without turning back, she whispered, “Goodnight, Firebug,” her voice barely audible.

And then she was gone, the soft click of her door sealing off the divide.

As much as she wanted to, as hard and painful as it was, she kept her promise and didn’t freeze her heart and emotions.

The room felt colder, emptier. Gwyn pulled her knees up to her chest, her arms wrapping around herself as though she could hold together the fragments of her breaking heart. Tears, unchecked, streamed down her face, wetting her clothes.

*Why is everything falling apart?*