
Painful Secrets

“Miss Tiloral, can you please explain the basis of intuitive casting and why it’s important?”

Gwyn’s head snapped away from the instructor, her eyes darting around before settling on her best friend, Roslyn. The heiress stood tall, well all one-hundred sixty-five centimeters of her, on the other side of the circle, formed by a group of evocation students. Sunlight caught the golden hues of Roslyn’s hair, making her stand out even more. The weight of dozens of curious gazes pressed on her, but she bore it with the grace typical of House Tiloral.

Autumn and winter had been packed with theoretical discussions about magic, and now, as spring of their second year finally began, Magical Studies had taken a more predominant spot in their schedules. The arrival of the season heralded not only the blossoming of flowers but also a shift in their studies. The chance to move lessons outdoors was a welcome change from the boring lecture environment of the classrooms.

Gwyn’s **[Mana Sense]** helped her to feel the hum of magic in the air, the field around them alive with it. On the far end of the vast training grounds, two other classes were deeply engrossed in their respective sessions. She caught sight of Adrienne showing off in the abjuration class.

Taking a deep breath, Roslyn began to articulate her response, weaving together the nuances of intuitive casting with the confidence of someone well-versed in the topic. *Of course, she knows this*, Gwyn mused, watching with a mixture of pride and amusement.

“The various ‘mancy’ traits,” Roz started. “Allow us to manipulate specific types of elements or magic. The manifestation of said magic is based on one’s conceptual understanding of the attuned color of mana. Gaining the trait requires you to connect with a type of magic and force your mana to weave and wield it without a spell.”

The instructor, a high elven man who was also an evocation mage smiled. “Well said, why is that important?” He looked around and settled on her. “Miss Reinhart?”

Gwyn’s eyes lingered for a moment on Roz who gave her an encouraging smile and a wink. She was so silly.

She turned to the instructor. “It’s important because we can use our intuitive traits to manipulate the magic types of the spells we do have or help us to create better spells. The ones that are etched into our minds, that is.”

“Imprinted, Miss Reinhart.”

“Tomato, tomahto,” she replied with a shrug to which the instructor sighed. He was used to her antics at this point and she continued, unabated, “Anyways, the main benefit of something like my **[Cryomancy]** or **[Pyromancy]**.” She emphasized each trait by weaving a bit above each hand and playing with the ice and flame as if it were something malleable. “...is that it’s *quick*. While it’s highly inefficient due to how much mental stamina it takes to sustain or even manipulate large quantities, its speed and ability to interweave with *imprinted* spells is key.”

The instructor nodded. “Well said. Thank you, Miss Tilorai and Miss Reinhart.”

Gwyn winked back at her bestie whose lip curled upward.

“Now, with that in mind, would anyone like to attempt to create a new trait today? If anyone is sure they can do it, the Church has stated that they will allow the class to attend a special session of the Ceremony of Paths so each student can verify.”

“I’d like to try, instructor,” one of her classmates offered. A teen boy, from a small nearby town. A third son of a barony or something. She could never remember like Roz could.

The teen stepped forward, another mage with red based mana and a couple of fire spells. He’d been trying for ages to achieve what Gwyn had made seem almost effortless: **[Pyromancy]**. He took a deep breath, his intent gaze fixated on his hand. Soon, the air seemed to heat up slightly as he started concentrating.

She used her **[Mana Sight]** and watched as he drew mana through his core, straining himself in the process. Each passing second she knew would feel like an eternity to him.

Gwyn began counting silently in her head as she observed the boy’s attempt. *One, two, three...* After what felt like an agonizing, and frankly awkward, wait of thirty-two, the boy let out a heavy sigh and slumped his shoulders in defeat.

No flame.

No **[Pyromancy]**.

A scoff echoed through the quiet scene, and Gwyn’s eyes darted to its source: Aran. She felt her temper flare as she saw the look of disdain on his face. Their eyes locked for a brief moment, and the smugness in his expression made her want to set him aflame. He quickly averted his gaze, but not before she shot him a fierce glare.

You better look away.

Drawing her focus back to the instructor, she realized he was offering other students an opportunity to try. From the corner of her eye, Gwyn noticed Roslyn subtly shift. She knew her best friend was reserved about using her magic in public. Unlike Gwyn, Roslyn preferred the safety and intimacy of their rented training grounds for her magical endeavors.

Well, the Tiloral training grounds. But we only use it together. So ours. Yeah.

The instructor focused on her best friend. *Crap.*

“Miss Tiloral, would you like to—”

“I’ll do it!” Gwyn interrupted, her voice sharp with determination. She immediately regretted her outburst, adding, “Sorry, I just... felt inspired all of a sudden.”

Roslyn offered a grateful smile. Gwyn had to fight hard to not wink at her.

The instructor studied her with a discerning gaze. “Miss Reinhart, while your enthusiasm is... commendable, you don’t always need to overshadow your peers.”

Gwyn winced.

She detected a mixture of exasperation, disapproval, and maybe even a hint of amusement from her fellow students. There were a few scowls in the crowd as well.

It wasn’t a new sentiment.

Many thought her too showy, too eager to outshine, but it was never her intention. She was just passionate about magic. She loved it. It was one of the few things that brought her true joy.

Gwyn bit her lip, hesitating for a moment. “Look, I genuinely believe I’m onto something. I’ve been thinking of a new ‘mancy’ trait. I would’ve volunteered sooner, but I was still piecing the idea together.”

His skeptical look didn’t waver, but after a pause, he gave a reluctant nod. “Very well. Show us what you have.”

With a bright smile, Gwyn took a deep breath.

This would be something new, something different than almost any other magic she had. The only comparable things were **[Blink]** and **[Telekinesis]** with how they came from white mana.

She felt her heart start to race as the idea of using a new type of magic flitted through her mind but she shook it off quickly.

She **[Focused]**.

Gwyn took a calming breath, her mind racing with the complexities of the new trait she aimed to master. Drawing white mana through her core, she felt its familiar pull. Where her other white mana-based trait and spell were focused on *space*, what she wanted was different, more based on *magic*. She sensed the raw energy beneath, the underpinning magic that served as the bedrock of all other magic.

She held out a hand.

Manabound - Resilience

Her intent focused on the raw fabric of magic and the area around her hand began to waver. The environment seemed to distort, like a mirage, shimmering and bending. Emerging from these distortions was a chaotic cloud, brimming with raw, untamed arcane energy. It pulsed with a harmonious, yet potent tune—a melody that was vibrant, rich, and resonated with the very essence of magic.

Determined, Gwyn steered her willpower towards this violet maelstrom that reminded her of Roslyn's eyes.

With steely intent, she began to weave the chaotic essence, drawing it closer, molding it, refining it. It fought her, resisting her every move, but her resolve was unwavering. Gradually, the tumultuous cloud acquiesced to her demands, coalescing into a pulsating orb hovering above her palm. Its purple hue illuminated her face, with tendrils of arcane energy crackling from its surface.

Suddenly, she felt a surge of knowledge, a spell trying to etch—or *imprint*—itself into her mind. But she resisted, blocking it out. Her goal wasn't a new spell. She wanted mastery over the arcane itself. As the energy settled, and stabilized, she smiled letting the orb hover over her palm.

A rush surged through her, starting with her core and then spreading throughout her body. She'd done it, and she knew sleepy time would become fun time.

I hope Roz is ready for me to squeal.

The instructor who had been watching her, had an expression of genuine admiration. "Impressive, Miss Reinhart. A remarkable achievement."

As Gwyn absorbed the compliment, her gaze instinctively searched for Roslyn.

Finding her bestie amidst the students, she caught Roz's eyes, which were alight with pride. *She always has my back.* Without much thought, Gwyn cheekily winked at her. The normally composed Roz seemed taken aback, a faint blush blossoming on her cheeks. The sight made Gwyn's smile deepen. *Got her.*

Gwyn then turned her attention across the field, locating Amari who was observing from a distance. Raising her hand, she confidently shot her a thumbs up. Amari, with her ever-present aura of stoic professionalism, couldn't help but release a soft chuckle, her eyes conveying her shared pride in Gwyn's success.



Emerging from the classroom, Adrienne hastily closed the gap between herself and Gwyn and Roz, her cheeks flushed with post-class excitement. “Okay, I’ve got to admit, that session wasn’t half-bad,” she said, catching her breath a little.

Gwyn, wearing a triumphant grin, nudged her shoulder against Adrienne’s. “Yeah? Well, I unlocked a new trait and step. Can’t wait to hear about it tonight.”

Roz playfully rolled her eyes, her delicate brows furrowing in faux jealousy. “I swear, Gwyn, no one else has this ‘Mana whisperer’ thing you’ve got going on. Seriously, it’s not fair.”

Gwyn chuckled, flipping her hair with a dramatic flourish. “Honestly, it’s all about self-awareness. Deep down, in every fiber of my being, I *know* that I’m a mage. Magic isn’t just what I do; it defines me.”

Her orkun friend let out a snort of laughter. “Geez, Gwyn, don’t hold back or anything.” She looked around seeing everyone heading toward their next classes. “So, what are we doing after class?”

Gwyn shared a glance with Roz and shrugged. “Honestly? Haven’t decided yet. What are you in the mood for?”

Adrienne’s eyes seemed to shimmer. “Can we hang out in your room tonight? I want to play with Calista!”

As they made their way along the lush Academy gardens towards their next class, Gwyn took in the scents of the blooming spring flowers, their vibrant colors brought a lot of life to the immaculate stone pathways and statues. But the sight that caught her attention the most was that of Lady Ashryn, haughtily striding forward, with the sun elf Gwyn remembered from before trailing behind.

Roslyn discreetly nudged Gwyn, subtly tilting her head towards the pair. Her voice was low, ensuring that only their group heard. “Have you found anything else out?”

Gwyn looked at them a moment longer, observing the sun elf girl’s eyes, which seemed to constantly remain lowered. “No,” she sighed, “I rarely see them, and you know we’re not allowed into their dorms without cause. Did you?”

Roslyn hesitated. “No. Admittedly, I’ve been preoccupied with other matters. I should’ve looked deeper, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find a way to uncover what’s going on.”

Adrienne, who had been quietly listening, suddenly interjected with a frown. “Do you mean Sansa? The sun elf?”

Gwyn snapped her gaze towards Adrienne, surprise evident. “Wait, you know her?”

Adrienne waved her hand dismissively. “I don’t know her, but I’ve definitely seen her around the campus and heard some rumors. Hard to miss, with Lady Ashryn always hovering.”

“And what have you heard?”

“That she’s nothing short of brilliant. Rumor has it she’s here as Lady Ashryn’s personal maid and was sponsored by the Breland family. They managed some Academy politics to ensure the two shared quarters every year. Reminds me of how you and Lorrena roomed together last year.”

Roz chimed in, “That’s actually not too odd. The Academy often pairs those of the same House for those with higher status like the duchies or royalty. Makes it easier for them.”

Adrienne shot a glance at Roslyn. “I wouldn’t really know all the details. I’m not from Avira. But from what I’ve observed, Sansa stands out academically. However, it’s clear she’s tethered to Ashryn’s whims, always assisting with her assignments, probably keeping Ashryn’s rank up. I’ve heard that she would have been in class one for year three if she wasn’t stuck to her mistress.”

Ashryn’s sharp voice cut through the ambient noise of the courtyard. Gwyn watched as Ashryn snapped something sharply at Sansa. The sun elf visibly winced, her shoulders hunching slightly as if she was trying to make herself smaller, to disappear into the background.

“Can you not do anything right? Why must I always clean up after you?” Ashryn’s tone was dripping with disdain.

Each harsh word seemed like a dagger being thrown at Sansa, the palpable weight of it pressing the sun elf further down. The rest of the world faded to the background for Gwyn, her focus locked onto the unfolding scene. A surge of anger began to boil within her, an emotional upheaval fueled by a rising tide of red mana.

Every instinct she had screamed at her to intervene, to put Ashryn in her place.

The raw energy threatened to spill over, the very air around her growing heated.

But then, with a mental command and an exertion of willpower, Gwyn activated [**Frozen Heart**]. The world around her seemed to crystallize; her anger, which had been a roaring flame, was suddenly quenched, replaced by a chilling void. All of Gwyn’s turbulent emotions were instantly stilled, leaving her with a cold, detached clarity.

Through this icy veneer, Gwyn observed Ashryn’s continued berating of Sansa. The sun elf’s eyes looked defeated, and there was a quiver in her posture that spoke volumes.

Gwyn’s voice, when she finally spoke, held a frosty edge. “Sansa...” she murmured, embedding the name deep within her memory, marking it as significant. There would come a time for action, and when it did, she would be ready.

Amari, who had been trailing the group, chimed in from behind, her voice dripping with concern, “Gwyn... What exactly are you plotting now?”

“Nothing.”

“Gwyn, every time you say ‘nothing’ in that tone, it means you’re planning something.”

“Amari, I’m fine.”

She could feel the paladin’s eyes bore into her.

Roslyn chuckled, the twinkle in her amethyst eyes giving way to a fleeting but intense flicker of concern. “You really are a terrible liar. But, honestly, why are you so intrigued by Sansa and Lady Ashryn?”

Gwyn’s gaze darkened slightly. “It’s just not right, Roz. I can’t help but feel that Ashryn is treating Sansa really badly. It makes me so mad.”

Adrienne nodded in agreement. “I’ve heard a few stories about how Lady Ashryn treats her. Apparently, Sansa bears it all with uncanny patience. But I’ve seen glimpses of sadness in her eyes when she thinks no one is watching.”

The group approached the grand double doors of the ‘Responsibilities of the High Noble’ classroom, its ornate woodwork depicting the crests of various noble families.

Roslyn spoke softly, “Be careful, Gwyn. This is the world of nobility, and it’s full of complex relationships, politics, and power plays. Make sure you’re not biting off more than you can chew.”

“Don’t worry. I just want to get a sense of what’s going on. I won’t dive in recklessly.”

Roslyn couldn’t help but shake her head, her soft chuckle tinged with a note of worry. “Knowing you, that’s exactly what you’ll end up doing. Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

Adrienne piped in, “Yeah, and make sure to keep us in the loop. We’re in this together.”

Gwyn just nodded.

She took one more look at Ashryn and Sansa before turning away.



The rest of the day went relatively well. Gwyn was in a poor mood for the rest of the day and it didn’t help that the classes were boring, as usual. She hung out with Roz, Adrienne, Lore, and Salla for dinner, but she found that her appetite was gone. Roslyn kept giving her looks, and she knew she’d get a talking-to in the room. She was happy to remind Adrienne that she was coming to the room.

So, while Lore and Salla went off to Salla’s room to study, Adrienne joined Roz and Gwyn. The trio *probably* should have been studying, but none of them were really in the mood for it.

Gwyn placed the tray with a teapot and three cups on the table between the two chairs for her and Roz. She set the little pouches with tea into the cups and poured the water into them.

Gwyn looked over at where Calista, now the size of a medium-sized dog, was on the couch with Adrienne. Her orkun friend *loved* her little dragon sister.

<<*Snuggle!*>>

And Calista loved Adrienne. The emotions coming from the dragon were more like thoughts and communication now, but it wasn't quite *words*. Gwyn just *understood* what Calista's feelings meant.

A small smile found its way on her face as she walked over and set Adrienne's tea on the small end table next to her. The orkun girl looked up from the little fiction book she was reading and thanked her.

As Gwyn sat down in her chair, Roslyn whispered, "We need to talk."

Just like that, Gwyn's smile went away.

"Why?" she asked without looking at her friend.

She knew why.

"I thought you weren't going to use that spell?"

"I never said that."

"Gwyn."

"I'm *fine*, Roz. Please. I'm good. I just used it so that I didn't do anything rash."

Her friend's silence went on long enough that Gwyn grew curious and she glanced over.

It was a mistake.

How can her amethyst eyes look so simultaneously pretty and angry?

She sighed. "Roz. I'm fine."

"No, you're not. Have you been talking to Sabina? You said you would on the weekends, but instead every time I see you, she's not around."

"She's busy."

"Doing what?"

Gwyn narrowed her eyes. "She's finding the people that tried to kidnap me."

Roslyn sucked in a breath and fell silent.

The two of them watched Adrienne lightly scritch behind one of Calista's horns while she used her other hand to read a book. The two must have sensed Gwyn and Roslyn's eyes on them, because Adrienne turned and furrowed her brow while Calista's long neck lifted from the Blighter's lap as she turned to focus on Gwyn.

Adrienne tilted her head. “What are you two looking at?”

Gwyn waved a dismissive hand. “Just... discussing some things.”

Calista's bright sapphire eyes seemed to search Gwyn's face for a moment, her unique way of communicating allowing her to pick up on the myriad of emotions swirling around. <<*Sister. Worried?*>>

“I’m alright, Calista. Just watching you two.”

Adrienne frowned but nodded slowly and returned to her book. Gwyn caught her glancing her way every so often as Gwyn and Roslyn fell into silence.

She glanced at her bestie who seemed to be having some sort of internal debate with herself. Gwyn sighed and gestured to her friend’s tea. “It’s ready.”

Roslyn’s eyes narrowed but she grabbed her tea and drank it.

Gwyn wasn’t sure how she felt about that. How could someone so much shorter than her be so intimidating?

The sudden opening of the door momentarily broke the tension in the room. As Amari and Khalan entered, their somber expressions were evident—even to Calista, who immediately sensed the shift in mood.

“Amari,” Gwyn greeted, catching the concern in her eyes. “What happened?”

Roslyn seemed to feel it too, her posture going rigid as she braced herself for whatever news was coming.

Khalan leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, allowing Amari to relay the news. The gravity in her voice was unmistakable. “The Turest Order. They’ve officially declared war on Avira.”

Roslyn gasped, shock evident on her face. “War? But why? There hasn’t been any indication of hostilities between our nations.”

Gwyn’s brow furrowed deeply while her thoughts raced. Turest, a nation with no ties to the Church, declaring war on Avira was concerning on multiple fronts. Not only were they geographically close, but the absence of Church relations meant a potential political and religious powder keg. “Any idea what their reasons are? Or is this out of the blue?”

Amari sighed and looked at Khalan. The sun elf man pushed off of the doorway. “They’re pointing fingers at Avira,” he began, “claiming we’ve been planting saboteurs in their towns near the border. They’re saying they’ve got some who ‘confessed.’ Based on that, they’ve declared a defensive war, claiming the Aviran troops stationed at the border as an imminent threat. They’ve made the first move and attacked the Aviran border outposts.”

Gwyn exhaled, rubbing her temples. A war was the last thing Avira needed, and with everything else going on, it felt like the pressure was mounting from all sides. First the prince and his people, then the nobles, now a war?

This is just perfect.

As Gwyn collected her thoughts, Roslyn's voice brought her back to the present. "What does that mean for the Church?"

Amari hesitated, weighing her words. "It's complicated. The Archpriestess will ultimately decide our stance. If the Turest Order is deemed the aggressor, the Inquisition would defend Avira. But if the evidence points to Avira being the root cause, then the Church remains neutral."

"So, you both... you won't be going to the frontlines?" Gwyn asked.

Amari and Khalan both shook their heads. "No," Khalan said while looking at Roz. "We're part of your Houses. If *you* go to war, then yes. But I doubt a pair of thirteen-year-olds will be going to war."

Gwyn and Roslyn both let out relieved exhales.

Roslyn's eyes flashed yellow before going wide. "*Wait*. What about the Vlaredia Empire? They have a defensive alliance with the Turest Order. I remember this."

Amari frowned. "That depends on the Empire's perspective. If they side with the Turest's narrative, their treaties would obligate them to assist."

"But I thought they are already at war with the Sovereign Cities?" Gwyn asked, her mind going to her mom who had to go through that.

Amari shrugged, but Khalan seemed like he had an opinion on that. Roslyn picked up on it and nudged him to share.

He sighed. "There's chatter that the Sovereign Cities might capitalize on this situation. They might negotiate with the Empire for certain benefits in exchange for a ceasefire. And rumors are swirling that the City-states might be moving towards unification."

"Any word on Blightwych?" Adrienne asked.

Regret was evident in both the paladins' expressions. "None. Sorry."

Adrienne nodded.

"So, how does this affect us?" Gwyn asked.

The two paladins shared a look. "We do not *think* it will. It is strange that Turest would declare war unless they knew that the Empire would join in. Avira's army is larger. There is no way they push

this far, and that would go beyond defense. So, it shouldn't do anything for either of you. Even the Duchy of Tilorai shouldn't be affected."

Roslyn's gaze was insistent, her face betraying the swirl of emotions within her. "Promise us you'll keep us in the loop. Everything moves so fast, and we can't be caught off guard."

Khalan nodded reassuringly. "Of course, Lady Tilorai. We owe you both that much."

Gwyn looked at Amari. "Do Taenya and the rest know about this?"

Amari looked thoughtful. "It's unlikely, given how rapidly events are unfolding. But I'll relay the news through Rollo."

"Thank you, Mari."

As the weight of the situation settled, the room's atmosphere grew heavy with unsaid thoughts. Sensing it was time to leave, Amari and Khalan bid the girls good night. Adrienne, taking her cue from the paladins, stood up, ready to head to her own quarters.

"I'll walk you back," Khalan offered.

The departing ritual began. Adrienne bent down, enveloping Calista in a tight embrace. The little dragon's voice resonated in Gwyn's mind, <<*Friend, Bye!*>>

"Calista says bye, friend."

"Aww! You are too cute, Calista Nyx Reinhart. Adorable. Bestest friend ever."

Calista preened.

Adrienne then turned to Roz and Gwyn, hugging them both with genuine warmth. "You two don't need to fight. You both care about each other."

Gwyn nodded mutely. Roz sighed.

The door clicked shut, sealing the outside world away. But the night was far from over for the two remaining inside. Roz, her demeanor shifting, locked her gaze onto Gwyn. "Alright, we've put this off long enough. We *really* need to talk, Gwyn."

Gwyn visibly winced, a knot forming in her stomach.

Calista obviously realized something was up and rushed off into Gwyn's room, her tail shutting the door behind her.

Coward!

Roslyn's eyes were pools of concern, brows furrowed as she searched Gwyn's face. "I'm worried about you, Gwyn. More and more, you've been shutting down. You're locking away your emotions one moment and erupting in anger the next. What's going on?"

Gwyn narrowed her eyes, feeling the tempest within her rise. “You know exactly what's going on, Roz! I keep getting attacked, my life's in constant danger, and Sabina's out there alone trying to find some answers. And then there are people like Ashryn... Where does it stop?”

Roz shook her head, her own gaze clouding with frustration and concern. “You can't change the entire system overnight, Gwyn. Nobles and royals in Avira have always been complicated.”

Gwyn snapped back, “You're not like them! Why must they—”

“That's because I was raised differently, guided by my grandfather's wisdom. You can't just—”

“Can't just what, Roz? Declare that I won't be a victim? That someone has to pay for what's been done to me and my people? If I have to burn it all down, I will!”

“And if the culprits turn out to be as high up as the Crown Prince?” Roz challenged, “Would you slay him, too? The king? Would you watch this whole kingdom crumble? Would you sit on a throne amongst ash and ruins?”

Gwyn's voice was sharp as a dagger. “If that's what it takes, then yes!”

Roslyn took a daring step closer, her hand gently caressing Gwyn's cheek. “Is that the world you dream of? Or are you just desperately seeking a haven for your mother? We can carve that out, Gwyn. We can make Strathmore that sanctuary.”

Gwyn's voice cracked, “They came after me there too.”

“And in retaliation, Taenya killed Angwin's son. Isn't that enough?”

Gwyn clenched her fists. “No, it's not. Because it keeps happening. I want it to stop, Roz. I want it all to stop.”

Roslyn sighed, her hand still on Gwyn's cheek, offering a tactile comfort that words couldn't fully convey. “That's how Avira is, Gwyn. It's how it's always been.”

Gwyn took a steadying breath, her voice quieter but more intense. “Not when Tiloral was its own kingdom.”

Roslyn inhaled sharply, the weight of the implication hanging heavy between them. “No, we were at war against Avira for *years*. Do you even realize what you're suggesting?”

Gwyn looked into Roslyn's amethyst eyes, unflinching. “A Tiloral never forgets, right? Your family has to have been considering it ever since you lost your independence. We need a sanctuary, Roz. If the world won't provide one, why can't we build it ourselves?”

She felt a lump in her throat, a weight that seemed to pull her deeper into a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. She sniffled, her eyes blurred as she looked at Roslyn, who was practically

shimmering in the low light. *What are you so afraid of? You've already spilled your guts; might as well empty the whole bucket.*

"You don't realize what you're asking for. That's *war*, Gwyn," Roslyn's voice trembled, laced with a hesitancy that Gwyn had rarely heard from her. "Thousands of people would die."

"I'd burn armies for you, Roz," Gwyn whispered.

Tears streaked down Roslyn's face. "I know," she said softly. "But where does it end? And will you still be the person I know after all that?"

Gwyn locked her eyes on Roslyn's, her heart pounding. "If you're by my side? Yes. A hundred times, yes. I'm done playing defense. Tomorrow, I'm going to Sansa. Are you with me?"

"Always," Roslyn nodded, her voice imbued with a gravity that struck Gwyn to her core.

As if propelled by some magnetic force, Roslyn moved forward and enveloped Gwyn in a fierce hug. "We'll make a safe space for you and your mother, Gwyn. I promise you, nothing will happen to you."

Her heart in her throat, Gwyn sniffled again. "But what about you, Roz? What if they target you when I'm not around? What if something happens to you?"

The dam burst. All her pent-up fears, anxieties, and doubts erupted like an untamed river breaking through its banks. "Roz, it hurts. I'm scared out of my mind. I can't do this. I'll get everyone killed. It hurts so much."

"Gwyn? No, no. Come with me."

Before she knew it, Roslyn had taken her hand and was pulling her into her own room. The lamps were blown out, plunging the room into a welcoming darkness. Roslyn pulled Gwyn into bed and wrapped her arms around her, providing a cocoon of warmth and emotional safety.

"You're surrounded by people who love and care for you, Gwyn. Strong people. Like me."

"Roz."

"Okay, bad joke," Roslyn chuckled softly, the sound a gentle balm on Gwyn's raw nerves. "Listen to me. You're not going to get everyone killed. You've saved people. You told me about the attack; you saved Amari's life, Gwyn. She's a freaking paladin. People know who you are; they know what the First Mage is capable of. They're terrified of you."

Gwyn felt a shiver run down her spine. "It won't always be enough, Roz. They were so close to taking me. They'll prepare even more next time. All of this, it's happening because..." She inhaled sharply, a lump forming in her throat once again. *All because I lied. Could Roz even understand that?*

"All because of what?"

Gwyn swallowed hard, her heart pounding as she wavered on the edge of confession. *Do I tell her? Do I let her in on the secret that could change everything between us?*

“All because...” She hesitated, then exhaled, realizing that trust—true trust—meant no more lies. “All because of a secret I’ve been keeping, Roz. A secret that’s finally catching up to me.”

“What secret, Gwyn?”

Gwyn hesitated, her fingers picking at the sheets, her heartbeat echoing loudly in her ears. “If I hadn’t been a princess... Would you still have been my friend?”

She sensed more than saw Roslyn sit up beside her, the mattress shifting slightly under her weight. “What kind of question is that? Why are you asking this now?”

Gwyn’s voice was tremulous, a raw whisper betraying the weight of the confession she was about to make. “I need to know, Roz.”

A pregnant pause filled the room, and then Roslyn replied, her voice thick with emotion, “I don’t know, Gwyn. Maybe. But why? Why does it even matter now?”

Gwyn closed her eyes tightly.

Just before the silence went on too long, she took a shuddering breath. Then, with a significant amount of hope that she wouldn’t lose her best friend, Gwyn let the truth spill from her lips. “Because I lied. I’m not... I was never a princess.”

The silence that stretched between them was deafening, thick with unsaid emotions, accusations, and realizations. Gwyn’s chest felt constricted as she waited for her friend to process this revelation.

Through the quiet, Gwyn could hear Roslyn’s muffled sobbing. “Who made you do it? Was it Baron Iemes? Taenya? Did they manipulate you into doing this? For what? Power? Money?”

Gwyn’s heart clenched even further. *Oh Roz, to think so nobly of me.* “No, it was all me. On the day I arrived on Eona, I lied to Onas and Taenya. They... they believed me more than I ever expected. And everything... all the chaos, all the threats, it spiraled from that lie. You, your grandfather... everyone became targets because of me.”

Her friend’s question was so quiet. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you lie about something like that? What else have you lied to me about? You just asked me to go to *war* Gwyn. To convince my grandfather to claim independence. Do you know how many people would die? All because of a lie that you can’t confess to? No, of course not. Because there’s no way to confess at this point.”

The raw hurt in Roslyn's voice was like a blade to Gwyn's heart. "I... I don't know. I was joking that day. And they believed me, and I thought it would help me find my mom... Then it spiraled out of control. But, Roz, I—"

"No! What the *fuck* are you going to do when your mother gets here and she isn't a fucking queen, Gwyneth? Everything falls apart. My grandfather has to..." Roz grabbed a pillow, shoved her face into it, and screamed. "...No. He can't because of how that will make us look. Do you realize what you've done?"

Gwyn started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry... sorry. Roz, don't be mad. Please. Don't hate me."

Roslyn's voice cracked, anguish clear in her tone. "Hate you? How could I ever..." Roz let out a cry of frustration. "Our whole friendship began on a lie. And you've woven my family so deeply into this web... Gods, Gwyn!"

In her despair, Gwyn reached out to touch Roslyn's hand, seeking comfort, but Roslyn recoiled. Gwyn's pleas became frantic, "Roz, please, I need you. Don't hate me. Pleasepleaseplease."

The tears came and wouldn't stop. She was sobbing incoherently, begging. Pleading for her best friend to not hate her. It hurt. It hurt so bad.

The pain in her chest intensified, a feeling akin to being impaled. Like it was being crushed and smashed by a hammer. It was overwhelming, drowning her in a sea of guilt and sorrow. She could barely breathe. In her turmoil, she instinctively sought solace in mana, pulling it into herself desperately. She wanted the pain to end.

Had to make it stop...

To freeze it all out.

With a single thought, she used [**Frozen Heart**].

Suddenly, there was cold.

Calm.

Silence.

Emotion drained from her, replaced by an icy detachment. She stood up, devoid of the tears and heartbreak that had consumed her moments before.

Gwyn was almost jolted from her cold detachment as she felt hands fiercely gripping her arms. There was so much fierceness in that grip, but it felt like nothing to her. She could fight adults and win. *Why does her grip feel so different?*

“*NO!* Don’t you dare. You think you can just escape from everything with that spell?” Roslyn’s voice was a desperate plea, tinged with anger. “You can’t just shut everything out and hide away, Gwyneth. Drop that spell. *Now.*”

Gwyn narrowed her eyes. “Why shouldn’t I, Roslyn? Why shouldn’t I use something that gives me relief? It... it takes away the hurt.”

Roslyn’s voice was choked with emotion, her gaze searching Gwyn’s face, trying to find the friend she knew beneath the icy veneer. “Every time you use that spell, you change. I see the toll it’s taking. It’s tearing you apart, bit by bit.”

To Gwyn, the words landed with a dull thud. “Better this, than to feel my heart shatter into pieces every single day,” she whispered, her voice filled with anguish. “I already hide. I hide my pain, my *hate*, my anger. I could do so much more if I wasn’t just a weak little girl.”

Rage and desperation mingled in Roslyn’s features. “You are the furthest thing from *weak*. The trail of dead bodies that follows you can attest to that.” She took a deep breath, her next words uttered with a venomous clarity. “If you don’t release that spell this very instant, Gwyn, our friendship is over. Do you hear me? I will *never* speak to you again.”

Gwyn felt a sharp pang, cutting through the frost. It was as if Roslyn’s words were a blade, slicing through the cold barrier. The spell wavered and then, under the weight of her emotions and Roslyn’s threat, it shattered. The dam burst. A flood of emotions, all the sorrow, regret, and pain rushed back, hitting Gwyn like a sledgehammer.

Her vision blurred with tears as she felt her knees buckle beneath her, the room spinning. A heart-wrenching cry of pain and despair escaped her lips. Just as her world tilted, strong arms wrapped around her, preventing her from collapsing. Gwyn felt herself being gently guided back onto the bed.

Between racking sobs, she managed to gasp out, “I don’t want to lose you too, Roz. I can’t bear it.”

The steady rise and fall of Roslyn’s chest against Gwyn’s back was a calming rhythm, anchoring her in the present. Gwyn’s turbulent emotions had momentarily abated, replaced by the raw, vulnerable aftermath. Roslyn’s fingers glided through Gwyn’s tousled hair, each gentle stroke seemingly working to mend the fragile threads of their bond.

Tears streaked Roslyn’s face, and she whispered in a voice thick with emotion, “Whether you were a princess on Earth doesn’t matter to me. Here, you are royalty. You are my confidante, my partner in mischief, and most importantly, my dearest friend. Thank you for being honest with me.”

The weight of Roslyn’s words settled heavily on Gwyn, her chest heaving with silent sobs. She managed a weak nod, unable to summon words in response.

Oxylus

Time seemed to stand still as they lay together, tangled in sheets and emotions, letting the gravity of their conversation envelop them. It was Roslyn who broke the silence again. “Can we talk more about this tomorrow?”

Wiping her face with the back of her hand, Gwyn rasped, “You don’t hate me?”

Roslyn’s grip on Gwyn tightened. “No. I don’t hate you. I’m mad that you lied to me. It scares me, Gwyn, thinking about what’s to come. I fear the path you’re heading down, and what it means for both of us. About where this all goes. Where *we* go.”

Gwyn tried to turn, but Roslyn’s embrace was firm. “What do you mean by that?”

A momentary silence stretched between them. Gwyn felt Roslyn take a deep breath, her exhale warm against Gwyn’s neck. “Let’s focus on one thing at a time. We address whatever Sabina finds, prepare for your mother’s arrival, and only then tackle any other challenges. Together.”

“So, you’re still with me?”

“Side by side, Gwyn.”

“...Against the world,” Gwyn finished.

Roslyn’s nod was felt more than seen, her forehead resting against Gwyn’s back. “Now, get some rest, bestie.”

As Gwyn started to drift off, tears still falling as she mumbled, “Goodnight, Roz.”

Roslyn’s voice, tinged with a hint of playfulness despite the heaviness of the evening, replied, “Sleep well, firebug.”

Gwyn’s mind was too foggy to retort to the nickname, and she succumbed to the soothing call of sleep, wrapped safely in Roslyn’s embrace.

Mana spoke to her again, just like she knew it would.

But she didn’t have the heart to get excited. All she felt was ache.

[Conditions Met: Trait – Arcanomancy obtained!]

[Elementalist – Step 60 attained!]