
Acts of No Return

Gwyn stood poised at the entrance of the magnificent Reinhart Estate, a soft smile gracing her lips as the last of Lorrena's friends bid their farewells. On her left, Lorrena stood radiant and proud, while Roslyn, Adrienne, Ilyana, and Aleanora gathered around, forming a supportive group just off to the side.

Lorrena's tea party had been a resounding success, and as the guests departed, one high elf girl who Gwyn knew was a commoner, her face alight with gratitude, approached them. "Thank you for having me to this tea party, Your Highness. I am honored to have been able to attend. It was my first one. My brothers and sisters won't believe me when I tell them."

Gwyn's smile widened as she gracefully gestured towards Lorrena. "Oh, this was all Lore. She is one of my close friends and I'm happy to support her."

Lorrena's face lit up, her joy infectious.

The girls who were friends with Lorrena let out a collective "Awww," showering praises upon the young lady, causing her to blush. Salla leaned over and whispered something to Lore, prompting an even deeper shade of red to paint her face.

As the last of the guests left, Salla and Daria stayed behind, planning to spend the night with Lorrena. Lorrena stepped forward, enveloping Gwyn in a warm hug. "Thank you for letting me have this tea party and making it such a great success."

And it was. The gardens had been set up with a long table, beautiful porcelain, and all sorts of tea and pastries provided by the staff. The conversation had been pleasant, and all-in-all, Gwyn had very much enjoyed herself. Roslyn even seemed like she was having fun as she conversed with everyone around her. Unsurprisingly, it was Roslyn's presence that was the most exciting thing for many of the commoner girls. Having someone they knew was an important noble within the kingdom was something Gwyn was sure they would talk about for a long time.

Gwyn was just the strange, magic wielding terran princess. A foreigner.

Not one of them.

But that was okay, because Gwyn really did enjoy herself. Lorrena had done amazingly, and Gwyn couldn't help but heap praise on her youngest lady-in-waiting.

Gwyn returned the hug with equal warmth. “You did all this. I’m proud of you. You guys have fun tonight.”

Soon, they’ll all be leaving my side.

I’ll need to get a single attendant.

Lorrena’s smile faltered slightly as she looked up at Gwyn, concern etched on her face. “You’ll be careful?”

Gwyn nodded reassuringly. “Of course.”

Roslyn chimed in with a gentle smile, “We’re going to have a fun night tonight, Lorrena. A true girls’ night. And we’ll all be here waiting for Gwyn to return.”

Lorrena seemed to draw comfort from Roslyn’s words, nodding in agreement.

As Lorrena, Salla, and Daria excitedly headed off to Lorrena’s room, Gwyn turned to the remaining group. “You guys good?”

Ilyana was the first to speak, her tone confident. “I am going to be training with Captain Rhion this afternoon. We’ll be prepared for anything tonight.”

Aleanora chimed in with a smile, “I have some studying to do for class, so I’ll be in the library. Mister Branigan is going to be coming by to assist me.”

Adrienne turned to Gwyn and Roz. “Can I talk to you two? Privately?”

Gwyn frowned as she shared a glance with Roslyn.

“Of course, Adrienne. You’re our dear friend,” Roz said with a smile. She nudged Gwyn. “Let’s head up to your room?”

“Sure.”

As Gwyn, Adrienne, and Roslyn entered Gwyn’s luxurious room, one of the staff members gently closed the door behind them, ensuring their privacy. The room was spacious and adorned with elegant furnishings, reflecting the royal status of its occupant.

Roslyn let out a deep sigh and made her way to Gwyn’s plush bed, settling herself comfortably. Gwyn, on the other hand, chose to sit on the small couch situated under the window, allowing her a view of the entire room.

She immediately noticed that Adrienne appeared to be almost stuck in the center of the room, her eyes filled with unshed tears. Gwyn’s heart clenched at the sight, and without a second thought, she rushed to her friend’s side, enveloping her in a warm and comforting hug. “What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Roslyn promptly stood up, her eyes locked onto Adrienne, waiting for an answer.

Adrienne sniffed, trying to hold back her tears as she spoke, "I'm really going to miss you two."

The room fell silent as the gravity of Adrienne's words sank in. Gwyn felt a knot forming in her stomach, realizing that the war was not just a distant concept anymore; it was affecting them directly, taking away their friend. She tightened her grip on Adrienne, not ready to let go, not ready to accept that this was happening.

"We're going to miss you too, Adrienne!" Roz said as she joined the two in a hug.

With a gentle push from Gwyn, the three girls eventually found themselves sitting together on Gwyn's luxurious bed, forming a small circle of camaraderie. Adrienne, now surrounded by her two friends, seemed to have found a bit of solace, her tears drying and a small smile playing on her lips.

"Adrienne, I've been meaning to ask you something for a while," Gwyn said, her voice tentative.

Adrienne looked up, curiosity lighting up her eyes. "Yes?"

"Do you know of a Lady Ismeld d'Argin?"

The moment the name left Gwyn's lips, Adrienne's eyes widened in shock, and Roslyn turned her head sharply towards Adrienne, her expression one of surprise and interest.

"Yes? How do you know her? She's the king's granddaughter," Adrienne exclaimed, her voice filled with disbelief.

Gwyn tilted her head to the side, her own surprise mirrored in her expression.

Really? Mom knows a princess?

"Like I said, I have been wanting to ask you for a while. Apparently my mom knows her and some other knights from your kingdom," Gwyn explained, her voice filled with curiosity.

Adrienne gasped, her eyes lighting up with excitement. "Your mom knows Lady Ismeld?! Does that mean she knows my cousin Gisele?"

Gwyn glanced at Roslyn, who gave a slight shrug, just as unsure as Gwyn was. "I don't know, Adrienne. If she was one of the knights with Ismeld, then probably."

Adrienne shook her head slowly, still processing the information. "I can't believe your mother knows my cousin. I haven't seen Gisele in a long time. She had to leave before I even left to come here."

Gwyn's smile was warm as she responded, "Well, your cousin is supposedly on the way back home."

Adrienne's eyes widened in shock and joy. "R-Really? But she left in exile... This means..." She gasped, realization dawning on her. "She regained her Honor! Oh, this is such good news, Gwyn! I'm going to see her!"

“I’m happy for you,” Gwyn said sincerely, feeling a sense of joy for her friend.

“I’ll ask her all about your mother. Then I’ll tell her all about you!” Adrienne declared excitedly.

“Thanks, Adrienne! You’ll have to check out the temple there too. They should be setting up the Ceremony of Paths there,” Gwyn suggested, remembering her deal with the Church.

“Oh, Gwyn. While I’m going to miss you two, you’ve given me such happy news. Thank you so much. Truly.” Adrienne’s eyes shimmered with gratitude.

Gwyn noticed a cute, affectionate smile on Roslyn’s face as she moved forward to embrace Adrienne. “Of course, you’re one of my two best friends. Now, let’s chat. I’m glad you’re staying the night. Sansa’s family may need your healing when we get back.”

They all settled in, the atmosphere lightened by the good news and the comfort of friendship, ready to enjoy the rest of their afternoon together.



“Tell me again what your part of the plan is,” Taenya instructed quietly.

Gwyn fought down the urge to roll her eyes.

It was a near thing. Instead, she maintained a composed exterior. *This is important. I need to stay focused.*

“I stay behind you and Amari, providing magical support. Is there a specific reason why I can’t wield Raafe’s Legacy for this?”

“Because you are there as the head of your House, not a combatant,” Amari said patiently.

Gwyn let out a resigned sigh. “Alright, fine.”

The two seasoned warriors exchanged a knowing glance before nodding in unison, ready to move forward with the plan.

The group found themselves in the confines of one of the House carriages, making their way to the Breland estate as the day began to wane. Upon arrival at the gates, Taenya was the first to step out, her eyes quickly taking in the surroundings before gesturing for Gwyn to emerge with Amari.

As Gwyn stepped out, staff in hand, she looked at the closed gate with a frown before checking over her people.

Two additional carriages and a wagon were present. Of those, the rear carriage was unoccupied, prepared for Sansa’s family, while the wagon was designated for their belongings.

Oxylus

House Reinhart guards swiftly dispersed across the area, establishing a protective perimeter. Niles, the House esquire, positioned himself beside Amari, ready to assist as needed.

Gwyn's gaze fell upon a quartet of Breland guards stationed in front of the gates, their weapons drawn and armor securely in place.

"State your business," one of the guards demanded.

Taking the lead, Taenya stepped forward, her posture exuding authority. "I am Ser Taenya of House Reinhart. We have an appointment."

"There is no appointment. Leave immediately."

Gwyn's eyes narrowed, frustration instantly bubbling within her. *This is ridiculous. I personally confirmed the appointment with Ashryn just yesterday!*

Before she could voice her thoughts, Amari's hand landed on her shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"You are mistaken. The appointment was confirmed by Lady Ashryn just yesterday. Kindly let us through," Taenya stated firmly.

"Lady Ashryn was wrong. Leave now, or we will force you to."

Gwyn simply watched as Taenya's gaze swept over the twenty Reinhart guards, then returned to the four Breland guards. "I believe you're overestimating your chances, my friend."

"We don't care for your opinions, knight. Leave. Now."

A frown etched itself onto Gwyn's face as she stepped forward, shaking off Amari's hand. "You will let us pass. Immediately."

The guard's gaze shifted to Gwyn, and after a moment of tense silence, the four men lowered their halberds.

Without hesitation, Gwyn tapped into her staff and mana core, allowing the energy to flow through each other and her conduits as she used her [**Telekinesis**]. In a swift motion, she pointed the staff toward them, grasping hold of the four guards and effortlessly tossing them aside like rag dolls. They collided in a heap, momentarily stunned.

Taenya wasted no time, barking out orders.

The Reinhart guards sprang into action, rushing forward to subdue the downed men before they had a chance to recover.

With the immediate threat neutralized, Gwyn turned her attention to the gate. She drew upon her [**Draco-pyromancy**], feeling the familiar warmth of the flames as she channeled significant

amounts of mana into her hands. The flames danced along her fingertips as she focused on the gate's hinges.

Scarlet flames tinged with golden lines flared into existence. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, the steel began to glow, the intense heat causing it to slowly start melting. Gwyn maintained her concentration, pouring more mana into the magic, determined to break through.

After a few tense minutes, she released the spell, the flames extinguishing as she thrust her hand forward. Her [**Telekinesis**] surged forth, shoving against the weakened gate. With a groan of protest, the hinges snapped, sending the gate flying.

“Let’s go,” Gwyn stated, her voice firm.

Taenya nodded, taking the lead as she and Amari moved forward. The paladin glanced over her shoulder, her gaze locking onto Gwyn. “Stay close.” She looked behind the princess. “Rollo, you’re with Niles.”

The other Reinhart paladin gave a nod of acknowledgment before positioning himself beside Niles, ready to protect the esquire as the group stepped through the melted and broken gate to venture deeper into the Breland estate.

Ten of the guards stayed back with the carriages and the subdued men that tried to stop them. As the group continued along the cobblestone path, the grandeur of the Breland manor came into full view. Trees lined the edges of the road, with an orchard spreading out on one side and meticulously tended gardens on the other. The sight was almost enough to take Gwyn's breath away, but she quickly composed herself, reminding herself of the task at hand.

When they neared the front of the manor, she immediately noticed an assembled crowd of armed men and women. They stood in formation, an imposing barrier between Gwyn's group and the house. At the forefront of this assembly was a man of noble bearing, clad in fine clothing that spoke of wealth and status.

Gwyn's group advanced steadily until the nobleman raised a hand, signaling for them to stop. “That’s far enough,” he called out, his voice echoing across the distance.

Taenya, unfazed, responded loudly enough for her words to carry. “You know why we are here.”

“The guards at the gate?” the nobleman inquired, a slight edge to his voice.

“Alive,” Taenya confirmed. “We are not here looking for violence, but we will conduct our business this night. One way or another.”

The nobleman's expression hardened as he took a moment to assess the situation. "And if we refuse? I am responsible for my liege's House in the capital. House Breland will not bow to any except the Crown of Avira."

Gwyn, unable to contain her frustration, scoffed loudly. "Then I will force you aside."

Immediately, she felt Taenya's piercing gaze upon her, causing her to tense up and grind her teeth in irritation. She knew she had overstepped, but the injustice of the situation was too much to bear silently.

Taenya, maintaining her composure, turned back to address the older elven man. "We are here to fulfill a debt of honor between my liege, Princess Gwyneth of House Reinhart, and her first knight, who gave his life protecting her. We have brought sufficient coin to cover the Sarkas family's debt. Lady Ashryn had intended to resolve this matter over dinner, but we do not require such formalities. We are prepared to simply hand over the coin, secure Miss Sansa's family and their belongings, and then take our leave."

The nobleman's gaze shifted from one member of Gwyn's party to another, his expression taut as he weighed his options. After a tense moment, he let out a deep sigh, his shoulders slumping slightly as he conceded, "Very well. We agree to your terms. We do not have a dinner prepared, but we can conduct our business over some wine and cheeses. But know this: none of your guards are permitted within our walls."

Amari stepped forward, her tone firm as she declared, "Ser Taenya, my fellow paladin and myself, along with our House esquire will accompany her inside."

Gwyn couldn't help but let a triumphant smile play on her lips, sensing the tide turning in their favor.

The nobleman's eyes narrowed, clearly unhappy with the stipulation, and it looked as though he might protest. However, Taenya was quick to interject, her voice leaving no room for argument. "This is non-negotiable. I will not permit my princess to enter unprotected."

There was a moment of silence as the nobleman's eyes locked with Taenya's, a silent battle of wills playing out between them. Finally, with a curt nod, he acquiesced, "Very well. But they are to remain with you at all times. Any deviation from this agreement will be considered a breach of our hospitality."

"Like we care..." Gwyn mumbled under her breath, trying to push down the anger that threatened to burst.

With the terms set, the group made their way toward the manor, the atmosphere tense as they prepared to face whatever awaited them inside.

Gwyn's group walked in silence through the grand halls of the Breland estate, following closely behind the nobleman and his two guards adorned in yellow and green—the colors of House Breland. The architecture was impressive, with high ceilings and intricate designs gracing the walls, though Gwyn hardly paid it any mind, her focus solely on the task at hand.

As they approached a set of imposing double doors, the nobleman paused to throw them open, revealing a vast dining hall that dwarfed even the impressive one back at the Reinhart estate. The room was lavishly decorated, with golden chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and fine tapestries adorning the walls. At the far end of the room, a long dining table was set, and seated at one end was Lady Ashryn with Sansa standing behind her, awaiting their arrival.

Lady Ashryn's expression was one of displeasure, her eyes narrowed and lips set in a thin line as she assessed the situation. Sansa, on the other hand, appeared frightened, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. However, the moment her eyes met Gwyn's, a glimmer of hope sparked in her gaze, bringing a subtle softness to her demeanor.

Gwyn offered a reassuring nod to Sansa, steeling herself as she prepared to face whatever challenges lay ahead. She knew that this was a pivotal moment, and she was ready to fight for Sansa and her family's freedom, no matter the cost. The air was thick with tension as the group made their way to the table, and Gwyn could feel the weight of the situation bearing down on her, ready to unfold.

I just have to keep it together. No matter what happens, I can't let my emotions get the better of me.

Channel Roz.

The nobleman, with a wave of his hand and a rigid smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, gestured for Gwyn and her entourage to take their seats at the long dining table. Gwyn could feel the undercurrents of power and politics at play as she was directed to a seat significantly far from the head of the table, a clear display of House Breland's attempt to assert dominance and minimize her status.

Behind her, she heard a soft hiss of disapproval from Taenya, but Gwyn chose to let it slide off her back. She was here for Sansa, not to engage in petty power plays. With grace and poise, she took her seat, gesturing for esquire Niles to sit beside her, all the while maintaining a calm and composed demeanor.

Taenya, Amari, and Rollo took up positions behind her, standing tall and vigilant, their protective presence a silent statement of their unwavering support. The nobleman, meanwhile, made his way to the head of the table, taking his seat with an air of authority as he placed himself next to Lady Ashryn.

The House Breland guards positioned themselves strategically around the room, their eyes keen and watchful as they kept a close eye on the proceedings.

Almost at once, servants gracefully glided into the room, their arms laden with platters of assorted cheeses and freshly baked bread. Once they set up the snack onto the table, the nobleman took it upon himself to introduce his rank and title to those gathered at the table. Yet, Gwyn found herself paying little attention to his name.

She was channeling magic through her body, letting ice fill her veins as she **[Focused]**. She needed to be cool and collected, to be ready for anything.

The elegant, silver goblets placed before each guest were soon filled with a deep, rich wine, its aroma wafting through the air. Gwyn, however, remained vigilant. Her eyes subtly scanned the room, taking in the positions of the House Breland guards and noting the fine details of the dining hall.

The nobleman's voice continued to fill the space, a steady drone of formalities and subtle insults that did little to ease the tension in the room. Gwyn's focus, however, was not on his words, but on the task at hand, her determination unwavering as she prepared to navigate the treacherous waters of noble politics and secure freedom for Raafe's family.

The nobleman grandly raised his goblet, poised to initiate a toast, when Niles, following suit, reached for his own. Yet, before the liquid could meet his lips, Gwyn, her senses sharp, placed a firm hand on his arm, halting him in his tracks. Her gaze shifted, piercing through the tense atmosphere as she addressed Sansa directly. "Is your family prepared to leave?"

The nobleman scoffed in disdain. "You are here to negotiate with us, not—"

However, Gwyn, feeling a surge of fire welling within her, swiftly quenched it with a calming frost, though not before a mist began to seep out, revealing her agitation. "I was speaking to her," she stated firmly. "Do not speak again." She turned back to Sansa, her expression softening. "Are they ready?"

Sansa shook her head, a mixture of fear and disappointment in her eyes. "They would not let us."

Gwyn's frown deepened as she turned to Ashryn. "I thought we had an understanding, Ashryn."

The high elf girl's eyes widened in panic. "I..."

The nobleman sighed, his patience evidently wearing thin. "You are a troublesome girl. End your magic and let us negotiate."

Gwyn, feeling a sense of unease but unable to pinpoint its source, withdrew her magic, the mist retracting back into her. The nobleman, seemingly satisfied, lifted his goblet once more. "Instead of a toast, let us drink to a deal that will satisfy us both."

She narrowed her eyes, feeling her skepticism lingering, but she reluctantly reached for her goblet. Just as she began to lift it, Amari's voice, sharp and commanding, echoed from behind her. "Gwyn, stop. Now."

The goblet froze mid air.

Gwyn spun around, her eyes meeting Amari's, which glowed with a fierce, yellow intensity as the paladin's head swiveled toward the man sitting at the head of the table.

"You have one chance," Amari addressed the nobleman, her voice unwavering. "Did you poison the wine?"

He stood, indignant, as the guards in the room collectively brandished their weapons. "How dare you? Why would I—"

"Lie." Amari's voice cut through the air, her authority as an Evocati of the Paladins of Alos unquestionable. "You have been judged. May Relena have mercy upon your soul."

In the blink of an eye, Amari *blurred* into motion, a sword almost materializing in her hand, and in a single, swift movement, it sliced through the nobleman's neck before his heart had a chance to beat again.

Gwyn froze for a moment.

Holy crap.

But then the room erupted into chaos as Ashryn and Sansa screamed, and Taenya, reacting instantly, summoned a shield in her hand, while beside her, a red ethereal bear, composed entirely of mana, roared fiercely into existence.

Rollo drew his own warhammer and shield and settled next to the knight.

Gwyn rose to her feet, her magic flowing freely as she pulled mana through her core, channeling it into a [**Ice Wall**] that split the room in two, effectively trapping half of the guards on one side. Meanwhile, Taenya, Rollo, and Amari stood ready, poised to face down the remaining guards.

She spun around just as several of the guards, fueled by panic and rage, surged forward with weapons drawn, intent on avenging their fallen lord. Gwyn, reacting with a speed honed through countless hours of training, drew upon her [**Cryomancy**], sending tendrils of frost snaking across the floor. In moments, the guards' feet were encased in thick ice, sending them sprawling to the ground, weapons clattering away.

With a fluid motion, Gwyn lifted her staff, her eyes ablaze with determination, and cast [**Pillar of Flame**]. A towering inferno erupted between her group and the remaining guards, effectively halting their advance. The heat was intense, the light blinding, and for a moment, the entire room seemed to hold its breath.

“We will not harm you if you stand down,” Gwyn declared, her voice carrying over the roar of the flames. Lifting her staff and drawing through its drakyyd core, she summoned six [Fireballs], each one hovering around her in a deadly dance of fire and light, a clear and present threat to anyone who dared challenge her further.

The remaining guards, faced with the undeniable power before them, hesitated, their resolve wavering. The room was filled with the crackling of flames, the chill of ice, the heavy breathing of those caught in the confrontation, and the underlying tension that threatened to explode at any moment.

Turning her attention away from the immediate threat, Gwyn addressed Ashryn, keeping her voice firm and resolute. She had to maintain control of the situation or people could get hurt. “Send your servants to fetch Sansa’s family. If a single hair on their heads is harmed, I swear, I will reduce this entire estate to ashes with every last one of you inside. They are to be allowed to take all of their belongings, no questions asked.” She then gestured to Niles, instructing him, “Hand her the letter for the Banking Guild.”

With shaky hands, Niles stood and complied, presenting the young lady with the letter, sealed with the unmistakable Reinhart insignia.

Gwyn’s gaze bore into Ashryn, searching, probing. “Did you know about his plan, Ashryn?” she demanded.

Quickly, almost frantically, Ashryn shook her head. “N-no. I told them, but they wouldn’t l-listen to me. I d-don’t have the authority in my f-family to overrule him.”

Seeking confirmation, Gwyn glanced at Amari, who gave a curt nod. “Truth,” she affirmed.

Gwyn’s eyes flitted back to the crumpled form of the once-noble man, her expression one of pure disgust. “He tried to poison me. His death is on his own hands. I do not blame you, Ashryn, but Sansa and her family are leaving tonight.”

“U-Understood,” Ashryn stuttered out, her voice barely audible as she turned to instruct one of the servants. Immediately, several of them dashed out of the room.

With a stern voice, Gwyn addressed the remaining guards. “Tell your comrades to stand down and drop their weapons, or they will meet the same fate.”

“D-do as she says,” Ashryn instructed, her voice soft yet laced with an underlying command.

The guards exchanged wary glances, their eyes flicking between the lifeless body of their lord, the formidable paladins, the ethereal bear, and the determined princess before ultimately complying, laying down their weapons. Satisfied, Gwyn released her hold on the magic, and the [Ice Wall] crumbled away, leaving the room in a tense, precarious peace.

As the tension in the room settled into an uneasy calm, Gwyn focused inward, quelling the flames of her **[Fireballs]** and allowing the lingering ice from her magic to dissipate. The atmosphere was thick with unspoken words and held breaths as everyone awaited the arrival of the Sarkas family.

Gently, Gwyn motioned for Sansa to come closer. The sun elf girl, slightly older than Gwyn, hesitantly made her way over, her eyes wide and filled with a mix of relief and uncertainty.

“Are you okay?” Gwyn asked softly.

She wanted Sansa to understand that she was truly concerned and would keep her safe.

Sansa gave a quick, almost imperceptible nod. “Yes, thank you.”

The room fell into silence once more, save for the occasional shuffle of feet and the soft clink of armor. Rollo and Amari took the opportunity to move around the room, collecting the discarded weapons of the guards and depositing them into a pile. They then directed the guards to move to one side of the room, near Ashryn.

Time seemed to stretch on, the minutes dragging by as everyone waited. Gwyn lost track of how long they stood there, but it felt like an eternity before the door finally opened, revealing a family of three. An older man and woman, both carrying the weight of worry and hardship in their eyes, entered the room, followed by a boy who couldn't have been more than a few years younger than Sansa. Each member of the family carried bags, their belongings clutched tightly in their hands.

Gwyn's heart ached as she took in the sight of them, the father bearing a striking resemblance to Raafe. It was a painful reminder of what had been lost, and for a moment, she had to fight back the tears that threatened to spill.

The moment the Sarkas family laid eyes on Sansa, their expressions transformed from weariness to overwhelming joy. “Sansa!” they cried out in unison, rushing towards her with open arms.

Their reunion was momentarily disrupted as they caught sight of the nobleman's lifeless body on the floor, their steps faltering as surprise and confusion washed over their faces. But the sight of their daughter, safe and unharmed, quickly pulled their attention back to her, and they enveloped her in a tight embrace.

Tears flowed freely as Sansa clung to her family, her sobs of relief mingling with their own. They held each other tightly, as if afraid to let go, their bodies shaking with the intensity of their emotions.

After a few precious moments, Sansa gently pulled away, her eyes still glistening with tears as she turned to Gwyn. “This is Princess Gwyneth,” she introduced, her voice catching in her throat. “She... she knew Raafe,” she managed to choke out before her emotions overwhelmed her once again.

Gwyn stepped forward gracefully, her heart heavy with empathy as she bowed her head respectfully. “It is an honor to meet each of you,” she said softly, her voice filled with sincerity. “Your son, your brother... he was my first true friend in your world. He protected me, taught me how to wield a sword, and served as my first knight. I am forever grateful for the time we spent together and the lessons he taught me. Please, allow us to help you leave this place and start anew, to put your lives back in your own hands.”

Gwyn’s words were heartfelt, her tribute to Raafe genuine and filled with the deep respect and admiration she had held for him. She hoped that in helping Sansa and her family, she could honor Raafe’s memory and provide some measure of comfort to those he had left behind.

Gwyn addressed the Sarkas family with a steady voice, her gaze lingering on each member as she asked, “Did you grab all of your belongings? Is there anything else remaining that is yours?”

Sansa’s father, his face etched with weariness and relief, shook his head slowly. “Everything we once owned was sold off before our debt fell into the hands of House Breland. What we carry now is all that remains to us.”

Gwyn nodded, her heart aching for the family and the injustices they had endured. She turned her attention to Ashryn, her voice firm as she spoke, “You have the letter from us that will allow your House to retrieve the funds to cover their debt. Are we finished here?”

Ashryn, her eyes briefly flickering to the fallen nobleman, nodded slowly in response.

“Very well,” Gwyn said, turning back to her group, her voice filled with determination. “Let’s leave this place. Sansa, I would like you to walk with me, and the rest of your family is welcome to join us in my carriage.”

With that, Gwyn led the way, her protectors and the House esquire following closely as they escorted the Sarkas family out of the Breland manor. The Reinhart guards outside gathered around them, forming a protective barrier as they made their way to the carriages. Gwyn didn’t spare a single glance back at the manor, her focus solely on ensuring the safety and well-being of the Sarkas family as they left the Breland estate behind.

They had done it.

She had done it.

Gwyn settled into the plush carriage seat, her body finally allowing itself to relax as the door swung closed, enclosing her and the Sarkas family in a quiet sanctuary away from the chaos they had just left behind. Sansa sat beside her, the weight of everything that had transpired evident in her eyes. Across from them, Raafe’s parents and younger brother sat in solemn silence, as if the reality of their sudden change in circumstances was just beginning to sink in.

Gwyn's gaze swept over each of their faces, taking in their worn expressions and the heavy atmosphere that filled the carriage. "Let's head to my estate and get a proper meal in all of you," she began, her voice gentle but carrying a strength that seemed to fill the space around them. "And if it's alright with you, I'd really like to learn more about you during dinner. I didn't have the chance to know Raafe for very long, but I would love to get to know his family better. Afterward, we can sit down with Taenya and figure out where you'd like to go next. Perhaps Strathmore? Or, if you'd prefer, my House's majordomo, Count Siveril Norric, has land in the southern part of Tiloral, in a town called Galehaven. I can arrange for a home for you there. The choice is yours."

The carriage rumbled into motion, but the inside seemed to hold its breath for a moment before Sansa's mother broke down into tears, her husband wrapping an arm around her to offer his support.

After giving his wife a moment, Sansa's father met Gwyn's gaze, his eyes searching as he said, "We... we cannot thank you enough. We will find a way to repay—"

Gwyn's frown was swift, her voice sharp as she interrupted, "You owe me nothing."

Everyone jolted at her tone, and Sansa's father's eyes widened in shock.

Gwyn took a deep breath, her hand coming up to rub at her temple as she calmed herself. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have snapped at you. No, I will not accept anything from any of you. This is my debt to you. I owe Raafe everything, and I will honor his memory by helping you. It is the very least I can do." Her gaze flicked to Sansa, and then back to her father. "Is Sansa's tuition covered?"

He shook his head slowly. "House Breland paid per semester, just in case... in case she was removed."

Gwyn exhaled softly. "From now on, House Reinhart will sponsor her tuition."

"Y-Your Highness..." Sansa began, but Gwyn lifted a hand to stop her.

"Please. Call me 'Gwyn'. Your brother did. None of you will ever owe me anything. Please."

Slowly, one by one, they each nodded, a silent agreement passing between them.

Gwyn managed a smile, but her mind was elsewhere, replaying the moment Amari had decapitated the nobleman. She couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the beginning, and that things were only going to get more complicated from here.

Roslyn was right. We need to figure this out.

"Now," she said, her voice steady as she brought herself back to the present. "Let's get back to the estate. We can discuss everything over dinner and get you all settled into rooms. Sansa, you'll need a place to stay when you're not at the Academy, so we'll make sure that's taken care of as well."



Sabina glided through the inn, cloaked in shadows as she navigated the dimly lit hallways with practiced ease. Her **[Shadowmancy]** was at its peak, manipulating the darkness around her to blend into them seamlessly, nevermind her **[Alter Perception]** spell that caught anyone who was a bit too curious. With each silent step, she drew closer to her target, her senses heightened and her focus unwavering.

Pausing just outside the door she sought, Sabina extended her senses, tapping into her **[Detect Emotions]**. The immediate rush of <<*Fear*>> that greeted her only served to widen her smile, a dark satisfaction settling in her chest.

She was on the right track. This woman was one of the last she had been searching for.

Sabina had to be careful though, the woman could use shield magic, and she wasn't sure if it would block her magic somehow.

With a delicate touch, she placed her hand against the door, allowing her mana to flow freely through her black core. She deftly employed her **[Alter Perception]** around the door, ensuring that its movement would remain undetected. Then, with a subtle use of **[Telekinesis]**, she slid the bolt, unlocking the door and easing it open.

Stepping inside, dagger in hand, Sabina's eyes quickly found the woman on the bed, her body curled up as she rested her head on her knees, her sobs filling the room.

Sabina moved closer, her steps silent as she cast **[Calm Emotions]**, watching as the woman's cries ceased, her body relaxing as the magic took hold.

She prepared to delve deeper, readying her **[Hear Thoughts]**, when the woman suddenly looked up. Her head tilted slightly, eyes flashing with mana—a bright, piercing green.

Sabina froze, her plans momentarily halted.

The woman opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Instead, Sabina heard her voice directly in her mind, clear and resonating.

'Hello little skulker in the night. You've been quite naughty, trying to stick your fingers in heads they don't belong. We will be seeing you and your little princess soon.'

Sabina's eyes widened in shock, her mana surging as she prepared to slam her magic into the woman's mind, but before she could act, the woman's eyes, nose, and mouth began to bleed profusely.

In an instant, she collapsed, lifeless.

Sabina, momentarily paralyzed by the shocking turn of events, watched as the woman on the bed crumbled, her life force seemingly extinguished in an instant. The ominous message delivered telepathically still echoed in Sabina's mind, sending chills down her spine.

Who was 'we'? And what did they want with Gwyn? A thousand questions raced through her mind as she tried to make sense of the situation.

Shaking off her shock, Sabina quickly regained her composure. She needed to get out of there, and fast. The shadows once again clung to her as she activated her [Shadowmancy], rendering herself nearly invisible as she slipped out of the room and back into the hallway.

Lucian's mental voice filled her mind. *'City Guard is coming. Large numbers. This has to be a trap.'*

Sabina frowned.

'This wasn't a trap. It was a warning, and the guards are meant to scare us away from investigating.'

As she exited the inn, blending seamlessly with the night, Sabina knew she needed to report back to Gwyn immediately. They were dealing with something far bigger and more dangerous than they had anticipated, and they needed to be prepared.

The shadows whispered around her as she rejoined her Shadow Guards as her squad of Wynvers were now called with their new spells and abilities, along with the monk and disappeared into the night. Together, they were all determined to protect their princess at all costs.