
Expanding Ambitions

Early Summer

Count Siveril Norric exuded an air of calculated composure as he entered the dining hall of the Reinhart Manor. He had returned to the ducal capital due to needing to attend the first court of the season at the Duke's invitation.

Strathmore's Ducal Court was one of the most influential political bodies in the realm, and being summoned to it was an expected duty for a count. Siveril was a seasoned player in this game of politics and had long learned to hide his unease behind a facade of calm certainty.

However, he was sure this last-minute meeting called by Onas Fenren was sure to make him feel uneasy. He'd thought they were prepared for their meeting that was to occur in a bell, so this request had him wary.

Upon entering, his gaze fell upon the gathered company. He immediately recognized Onas Fenren and the man's daughter Kerala Fenren, who would soon be leaving for Maireharbora to run the family's expanding shipping company. Guardsman Keston stood alongside them, a figure he knew to be one of Princess Gwyn's trusted confidantes. An esquire from Fenren's merchant business completed the ensemble.

Upon his arrival, the group collectively turned, offering the customary respect owed to his station. "Please, be seated," he gestured dismissively, his voice resonating in the hall. They all took their seats as servants promptly entered, bringing cups of tea for everyone.

With everyone comfortably seated, Siveril wasted no time. "The Guildmasters of both the Banking and Merchant Guilds will be joining us soon. Even the duke himself will make an appearance, which I am happy to have rare notice of," he started. "The signing of this trade contract is of paramount importance to both our House and the Duchy. So, tell me, why the urgency of this early meeting?"

Kerala exchanged a look with Keston before turning back to Siveril. The high elf man, who had once been a merchant guard, straightened up and spoke, "We didn't meet her, but we have determined where Gwyn's mother *was*." He produced a silver ring, its band inset with a gem and adorned by several glowing magical runes. He indicated an etching inside the band before passing it to Siveril. As the count scrutinized the maker's mark, Keston continued, "This mark matches the one on Gwyn's ring. But we've learned that it is the mark for 'Farum Siblings and Reinhart'."

Manabound - Equilibrium

For a moment, Siveril was taken aback. Then, realization dawned on him, and his brows knitted in confusion. “Gwyn’s mother helped craft these rings? And she was in Westaren? But why? And when? Her...”

His words were cut short by Keston, who interjected, “She was accompanied by Blightwych Knights. Reanny Farum mentioned a Ser Ismeld. Kerala helped figure out who this Ser Ismeld is. She is Ismeld d’Argin, and her grandfather is...”

Siveril’s eyes widened, and he completed the sentence, “The king of Blightwych. That explains her baroness title and the importance of her position to the Banking Guild.” The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fit together, painting a bigger picture than Siveril had initially imagined. “Did these Farum siblings mention where she went?”

Keston nodded. “She headed to Thirdghyll and ensured the safety of numerous citizens before the city was overrun by monsters.” Siveril’s eyes widened, yet Keston wasn’t finished. “From there, she passed along both messages and fresh designs, and mentioned she was bound for Marketbol next, and then Swanbrook. However, due to the breakout of war in the region, she ceased communicating with Reanny—I’ll brief you on that later. We did visit Swanbrook, but unfortunately, it was long after Gwyn’s mother might have passed through—if she had managed to evade the war. We only narrowly escaped the blockade instituted shortly after our departure. We were hopeful to find her on our return journey, and we inquired in the places we stopped for anyone matching the description given to us by the dwarf siblings, but to no avail. Although, we did only stop in Swanbrook and Parholm.”

Regret etched Keston’s face, as though he had failed in his mission. Siveril knew he would have dedicated his utmost effort to the task. “You did well,” he reassured the man. “I cannot believe we had been searching in the wrong places all this while. You suggested she was headed somewhere—did Reanny indicate a final destination?”

“She did,” Keston affirmed, a faint smile returning to his face.

“The Kingdom of Blightwych, perhaps? With the knights?” Siveril queried, hoping that perhaps the agents they’d sent there would be able to make contact.

Keston shook his head, chuckling lightly. “No, she’s heading elsewhere. Her destination is where our princess is located as we speak,” he said as his eyes brightened. “In fact, she could already be within the duchy or somewhere within the kingdom.”

Siveril’s eyes widened before he regained composure. They had her projected route, but not her precise location. He would need to position agents strategically and discreetly, likely requiring the duke’s support.

She would have already been here, had she not been delayed... No...

“While you two were gone, we received word of Queen Reinhart’s status from the Banking Guild. We incorrectly believed she was in Blightwych due to what we learned. Based on this, she *did* indeed pass through Marketbol, however...” He paused, recalling what he learned from the Guildmistress of the Banking Guild. “Yes, you would have *just* missed her. You said there was a blockade after you left?” Keston nodded. “She may have been delayed within the city due to that. We need to figure out the status of the war and the blockade. We will also need to deploy agents in Maireharbora,” Siveril decided.

Onas exchanged a glance with his daughter. “My daughter will already be there, expanding our business. She could assist with this.”

“I’d be honored to, milord,” Kerala promptly responded.

Siveril smiled approvingly. “An excellent arrangement, although, I recommend assigning a knight to assist you.” He turned to Keston. “Are you prepared to serve your liege, Keston?”

Keston looked surprised, but he placed a fist over his heart and bowed his head. “I am.”

“Excellent. We will ready you, and I will personally grant your knighthood on behalf of Her Highness. Subsequently, you will journey to Maireharbora, where you will welcome Gwyn’s mother and accompany her back here. This will enable us to guarantee her security during her trip to the capital,” Siveril declared.

Keston straightened, a sense of resolve etched on his face.

“I will not fail,” he pledged with confidence.

I know you won’t, my boy.



Mid Summer

One could say that attacking a prince of a nation in his own capital would be a poorly considered action. It had been four weeks since the incident at the magic class, and rumors had spread abundantly and there was sure to be more than one noble thinking similar thoughts. Luckily, the person who had completely embarrassed the boy was also a royal. The only issue was that the royal was a girl from no nation on Eona.

Taenya, however, tried not to think due to the constant migraines she was having.

She looked at the paladin that was next to her and glanced back at the other three paladins that stood in full armor, their faces hidden beneath their helmets, their white plumes matching their spotless tabards of the same color. Just behind her was Sabina, her fellow knight from House Reinhart.

'Everything is going to be fine,' Sabina sent from behind her. 'If anything serious was going to happen, it would have happened long before now. The duel is just a pretext for something else.'

Taenya knew everything was going to be fine, that in itself was a nigh certainty, but that didn't mean she had to enjoy being summoned to meet with the Crown Prince at the Royal Residences. This was not something the former merchant guard had ever even considered before, that there were possible ulterior motives made it even worse.

While they were here, a full squad of the Holy Order was with Gwyn at the Tiloral Estate along with Sir Friedrich, as they awaited them to return.

No one is gonna harm her there while we're gone.

And despite her friend's outward confidence, Taenya didn't need mind magic to know that Sabina was just as nervous as she was.

The opulence of the royal residences was something to behold. A labyrinth of marbled halls, grand archways, and ornate tapestries, each step within its confines was steeped in history. It was an environment that, in another life, Taenya would have relished the opportunity to explore. Now, however, her mind was clouded with apprehension, each echoing footfall against the marble a stark reminder of the gravity of their impending audience with the Crown Prince.

As they followed a pair of royal knights, Taenya couldn't help but feel comfort in knowing Amari had brought additional paladins with her to this meeting. Yet, despite the steel-clad reassurance their scarlet presence provided, it did little to quell the knot of unease that had taken residence in Taenya's stomach.

They eventually arrived at an ornate pair of double doors, their polished surface reflecting the soft natural light let in through the tall windows. Without word, the doors swung open and they were immediately gestured inside a chamber that was modest by royal standards, yet still held a grandeur that was undeniably regal.

The room was lined with royal knights, their armor gleaming and faces stern, while at the far end sat a man on a throne.

The sight of him brought a lump to Taenya's throat, a reminder of the delicate balance of power they were attempting to navigate, but it was Siveril's reassuring words that echoed in her mind.

I am the Knight Captain to a princess. She is my royal. Not him.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Taenya took the lead, striding forward with an assuredness she didn't entirely feel, but Amari was a reassuring presence half a step behind her and to her right. The imperious paladins were going to be the hammer that she could and would wield happily.

You did not want to meet an antagonistic royal without some protection.

As they approached the throne, she knew there was no turning back, and whatever transpired within these walls would likely have far-reaching consequences.

The group came to a halt at a respectful distance from the throne, Amari moving to stand parallel with Taenya. Despite the tension that hung in the air like a thick fog, the two women managed to maintain a dignified composure, inclining their heads respectfully towards the crown prince.

Crown Prince Kerrell surveyed them with an arched brow, his gaze sharp and assessing. "I understand the paladin not bowing, but are you not a citizen of our kingdom, knight?" His voice held undertones of both annoyance and amusement as if he relished the possibility of pointing out a breach in decorum.

Taenya couldn't help the small internal smile that flickered within her.

The irony was not lost on her; she had just been thinking about their relative positions.

Still, she met the prince's gaze evenly as she replied, "I will give you the respect you are due, Your Royal Highness. But my allegiance belongs to another royal, and thus my response is entirely within custom."

Prince Kerrell seemed to size her up then, his gaze lingering a moment longer before he gave a dismissive shrug. "At least this young princess chose a Knight-Captain with a spine. Now, I summoned you here for this meeting without her because she is a child. I will meet her tonight at my children's ball."

"As you say, Your Highness," Taenya replied, her voice calm and even.

One thing that Gwyn and Roslyn were doing now, in fact, was getting ready for the ball that they would attend tonight. The royal siblings' thirteenth birthday was bound to be a grand affair, and despite the tension between the two groups, the heiress of a duchy and terran princess were obligated to attend.

Taenya already had several servants working on preparations for Gwyn's own celebration next season, and she was sure that was bound to be filled with backroom politics that she wasn't looking forward to.

Crown Prince Kerrell abruptly switched the topic of conversation, his voice carrying an unmistakable edge. "We need to discuss the attempt on my son's life by Princess Gwyn," he declared,

his gaze flickering between Taenya and Amari. The statement hung heavy in the air, leaving a distinct chill in its wake.

At the prince's words, an air of surprise quickly gave way to amusement, a half-hidden smile on her face as her previous nervousness dissolved in an instant. The suggestion that Princess Gwyn had made an attempt on the prince's life was absurd.

She knew Gwyn; if the girl had truly wanted the prince dead, he wouldn't have left the dueling grounds of the school.

Still, she masked her amusement and forced a serious expression on her face, raising a single brow in mock surprise as she responded.

"Her Highness did not attempt to kill your son, sir," she countered, shaking her head in disbelief. "If she wanted him dead, he would be dead. There is nothing anyone could have done to stop her. And mind you, from what witnesses claim, he is the one that continued to attack after the duel. He struck her with his magic, and she replied in kind."

The crown prince narrowed his eyes, unwilling to back down. "She overstepped," he insisted. "Prince Aran could have been killed. She's clearly not responsible with the magic she holds. She will have minders assigned to ensure her magic use is held accountable."

It was yet another attempt by the crown to exert some influence over Gwyn, and Taenya couldn't understand it.

Why were they so focused on her?

However, before she could respond, Amari did.

The paladin's reaction was far less restrained than Taenya's as she burst into laughter and shook her head. "No, she will not," she stated firmly. "The Church has already submitted her exception to the Royal Decree. Her control is *why* the prince isn't dead. I was there, I saw how she turned after the duel was announced finished. I also watched how your son pierced her shoulder with a spike of ice.

"I guided her out of the grounds with her blood on my hands because of the wound he gave her. She targeted his shoulder with her own response before... removing him from the dueling field. That speaks to her control. There will be no... minders."

The crown prince shook his head, a cold warning in his voice. "Remember whose kingdom you reside in, paladin."

Amari didn't miss a beat. "Recall whose organization can call down inquisitions on those who overstep," she retorted, The royal knights to either side of them bristled at the tone from the paladin. "The Honored One will not be subject to your reach for power, Crown Prince. This is not up for debate, and Her Eminence has decreed such. Perhaps remind your children to avoid Princess Gwyn's

ire and all will be fine. Your little games in this kingdom never fail to amuse me. Leave the girl out of your games, and all will be fine.”

“Likewise, the arrogance of the paladins never ceases,” the prince snapped back, visibly irked by Amari’s blunt words.

“We at least have a reason for our confidence. You should focus on your own external issues before driving a spike through the heart of your own nation,” Amari countered, her tone undeniably smug.

The prince, his patience clearly wearing thin, turned back to Taenya. “It appears that we will not agree on a reasonable response to the duel,” he said, his voice strained.

Taenya fought back the urge to shrug. “The duel was witnessed and completed honorably until your son escalated. My princess simply replied in kind, and he was healed after. He has no permanent scars or damage other than to his ego. It seems to me that there need not be any further action.”

The prince paused for a moment, a thoughtful expression crossing his face as he sought a way to come out of the situation with *something*. “I would be willing to look past this,” he suggested. “If a suitable gift was provided as a... peace offering from your charge to my son tonight.”

Taenya considered his proposal for a moment, the tension in the room palpable. Eventually, she nodded, it wasn’t an unreasonable request and she offered a small smile of agreement. “I agree. A peace offering would be acceptable. I am sure Her Highness would be happy to let bygones be bygones, especially if you inform your son that continuing the animosity between them is *not* acceptable.”

The crown prince nodded in response. “I agree,” he declared, his gaze locking with Taenya’s. “Ser Taenya, would you join me for a drink in private? I believe the immediate concerns have been alleviated.”

Crown Prince Kerrell’s words were laced with cordiality, yet his intent was clear.

Taenya glanced toward Amari, her eyes searching for any sign of disapproval. The paladin merely shrugged, her stoic facade offering no discernible guidance. Taenya felt a flicker of warmth in her mind, a familiar presence reaching out. *‘We’ll be fine. Just send if you need help,’* Sabina transmitted telepathically, her reassurance echoing through Taenya’s thoughts.

A small smile tugged at Taenya’s lips. *‘Of course. Ride along my thoughts so you can hear what he says,’* she responded mentally, a silent agreement between them.

‘Happily. I’ll send it to Amari as well,’ Sabina conveyed, her mental smirk painting a vivid image in Taenya’s mind.

“Indeed, Your Highness. I would be honored,” Taenya responded aloud, turning back toward the prince. The crown prince’s offer of a private audience was not one she could refuse, no matter how much she would prefer to remain with the others and leave.

“Good, the paladins and your fellow knight can remain here. I have a private chamber just here,” Crown Prince Kerrell said as he stood and gestured toward an ornate set of doors at the side of the chamber. There was a hint of satisfaction in his voice, a clear indication that he was accustomed to having his orders followed without question.

Taenya kept her expression neutral, following the prince as they moved toward the door. Internally, she braced herself for whatever discussions were to come, taking comfort in the fact that her friends were close by—physically and mentally.

Upon entering the room, Taenya was greeted by the sight of an elegant sitting area. It was clear from the pristine condition of the velvet upholstery and the impeccably polished mahogany surfaces that the space was reserved for special occasions—and now was one such occasion. The lavishness was a stark reminder of the royal status of her host, and it elicited a quiet sigh from the former merchant guard.

A servant stood to the side, waiting for their entrance, a polished silver tray in hand bearing two crystal glasses and an amber liquid—most likely some high-quality whiskey, knowing royal preferences. As they crossed the threshold, the servant dutifully used some tongs to add some *ice* to the glasses before he poured the drinks, the rich golden liquid filling the crystal with three fingers worth.

Gwyn’s made the glasses of our drinks cold from time to time, but I wonder if she’d be willing to make some actual ice for us.

Prince Kerrell led the way to a pair of ornate, high-backed chairs, draped in luxurious fabrics and cushioned for comfort. Taenya maintained a respectful distance, pausing as he took his seat before sinking into the chair opposite him, and she felt Sabina send a mental nudge of reassurance and the telltale sign of the woman using her magic to observe through Taenya’s mind.

The servant immediately proffered their drinks with a bow, and Prince Kerrell accepted his drink with a nod of gratitude, his hand cradling the glass with an air of casual familiarity. His eyes seemed to sparkle as they fixed on the liquid, and he brought the glass to his nose, inhaling deeply. A satisfied smile curved his lips as he took in the aroma. “This,” he said, swirling the liquid gently in his glass, the ice clinking together as he did. “Is a forty-year-old bottle from Zhaoloka, a prized rarity that is gifted only between sovereigns.”

He took a small sip, a content sigh slipping past his lips as he savored the flavor. The prince then gestured towards her, indicating she should do the same.

Taenya, following his cue, swirled her own glass and lifted it to her nose. The scent was enticing and the prince explained, “The aroma that you’re getting is rich and layered with traces of dried fruits, dark chocolate, roasted coffee, and ripe black cherries. Beneath it all, you should be able to even detect a hint of wood smoke, polished leather, and cloves.”

She nodded as she let the complexity of the smells fill her.

Then, taking a cautious sip, Taenya was immediately struck by the silky smoothness of the liquor that was chilled by the ice. Notes of dried fruits and rich fruitcake mingled with dates, raisins, and stewed apples. With time, she could taste dry oak notes appearing, dancing on her tongue along with a hint of something bitter and alluring. The faintest trace of peat was there too, adding depth to the drink's luxurious profile.

It was unlike anything she had tasted before—a delightful symphony of flavors that left a lasting impression.

It's too bad he ruined it with ice. I knew my intuition about him was right...

Gwyn could have just chilled the glass.

The prince's smile broadened as he gestured to the servant, who brought forward a small box. “These are for your princess,” he said, pushing the box toward Taenya. “But please, try one. That's the bitter taste you found hints of. It's called chocolate, and you can only find it on Loren, or carefully cultivated in Zhaoloka.”

Taenya had heard whispers about chocolate from Onas Fenren, who had managed to import a small batch for the Duke. She had never tasted it herself, though, and the prospect of trying such a rarity made her curious.

She picked up a piece, taking a small bite.

The rich, bitter taste exploded in her mouth, the amazing flavor instantly capturing her attention, so unlike anything she had ever tasted.

‘You really enjoyed that, didn’t you?’ Sabina sent a mental picture of amusement. ***‘It was almost like I got to taste it myself. That was an odd experience.’***

‘It was amazing, we need to figure out a way to obtain some,’ she sent, before adding, ***‘For Gwyn, of course.’***

A mental laugh filled her mind. ***‘I’m sure Onas would enjoy the difficulty.’***

Taenya smiled as she thought about having a steady supply of the delectable treat.

The prince chuckled at her reaction. “I’ve found that chocolate seems to elicit a similar response from all women. I take it that you enjoy it?”

Caught off guard by the subtle meaning of his jab, Taenya swiftly composed her face. She remembered where she was, who she was with—a man who was far from an ally to her princess. “It is an interesting flavor, Your Highness,” she managed, her tone carefully neutral.

‘Amari says he is trying to show you just how well-connected and influential he is. His interest in the alcohol was real, but only in that it gives an excuse to flaunt his wealth,’ Sabina sent, to which Taenya sent a mental thank you to the mind mage.

At her measured response, the prince’s smirk widened, a gleam of amusement appearing in his eyes as he set his glass down. “Now, let us discuss this House of yours. Your princess is causing waves amongst the various factions,” he said, his tone abruptly shifting back to business. “However, I see this as an ideal time within the kingdom. I would be happy to speak to my father about acknowledging her status officially.”

His gaze settled on Taenya, scrutinizing her for a moment. “And of course,” he continued, “I will have a word with my children about their school quarrel. But that is contingent on the agreements we can reach here today.”

His implication was clear—his assistance came with conditions.

Taenya’s mind whirled as she pondered what Gwyn could safely accept and what she should ignore. Whatever they were, she would have to tread carefully. The prince’s amiability could be just as dangerous as his anger.

The prince leaned back in his chair, his gaze piercing as he put forth his conditions. “You see, Ser Taenya, House Tiloral is a circumstance of the princess’s arrival, not a natural ally. Aligning with them might prove more detrimental than beneficial for her in the long run. She is a royal, and an alliance with the crown would undoubtedly serve her and her House much better.”

Taenya listened attentively, her mind calculating each word as he continued, “Now, my children have just turned thirteen and if I’m not mistaken, your princess will soon be the same age. They will reach the age of majority in three years, and I’m sure you have been inundated with marriage proposals between various heirs and her hand already.”

He raised an eyebrow at her and Taenya nodded, confirming his suspicions. It was an easy thing for him to figure out, she needed to give him a semblance of a back-and-forth.

“Are you proposing the same?” Taenya inquired, knowing the answer before she even finished asking.

The prince chuckled, grabbing and raising his glass in a half salute before taking a sip. “Oh, most assuredly not. While she may be a royal, your princess currently lacks political power and any

significant amount of land. Besides, she is a terran. My heir will marry another Loreni. What I do want is to utilize her unique status in a way that benefits both our parties.”

Taenya tilted her head slightly, interested in seeing where he was going with this line. The noble faction had only sought to ‘warn’ and intimidate her. Now, there was no way that she would agree to anything substantial, not when their alliance with the Tilorals was so important.

‘And Amari wants to point out that the Seeings clearly show Gwyn and Roslyn together in the future and should be kept in mind. So, whatever he’s about to offer, we either decline or...’ Sabina added.

‘We involve the Tilorals somehow,’ Taenya finished for her while taking another sip of her drink, intent on finishing it before leaving.

She nodded and returned her focus to the prince. “In what way would that be?”

“The ongoing conflict between the Empire and the Sovereigns has presented several opportunities,” Kerrell explained. “Our kingdom has found itself in a position to expand, an opportunity the Duchy of Lis seized.”

The prince set his glass down, his expression becoming serious. “Recently, I had to suppress a small rebellion of terrans who attempted to overthrow a barony under my rule, hoping to establish a kingdom of their own. This is clearly unacceptable.”

He paused for a moment, his gaze thoughtful. “However, it did make me consider a possibility. These terrans could prove useful if guided correctly. With my support, your princess could rule over a swath of land that she and her fellow terrans could call home. It would be a vassal state, subject to Aviran.. guidance, but she would still rule it.”

A mental gasp filled her mind and Sabina quickly sent, *‘Amari says this is a very bad idea. The only expansion he could be referring to with the Duchy of Lis is the city of Rallan. It is unfortunately located in a way that prevents any Sovereign response for the duration of the war since both the Empire and Avira control all other routes to it. However, it has the potential to draw the kingdom into the war. Amari says to press for more information.’*

“And which duchy would provide land for this... queendom,” Taenya asked.

“It would not be any land within Avira,” the crown prince instantly corrected. “Meris is already a vassal state of the Lymtoria Republic, and Lehelia is frustratingly guaranteed by the Sovereigns. Due to this, the Tilorals hold a monopoly on access to the sea and thus its valuable trade routes. A new nation forming west of Lehelia from the Sovereign Cities there would be very beneficial, and the fact that it would be ruled by a princess who would be a queen... well, that would naturally help relations with Lehelia. It would also give the kingdom even more access to the sea.”

“And how would our House take control of this land?” Taenya asked. “Our House Guard is not formidable enough to establish a queendom on its own, at least not within the next three years.”

The prince leaned back, creating an air of casual authority. “The royal army, along with elements from the Duchy of Lis, would provide the necessary muscle,” he answered her question, his tone suggesting that the matter was obvious.

Taenya felt a mental jolt from Sabina. *‘Amari wants me to highly stress that this would have Gwyn become a target for a very angry Sovereign Cities if this were to happen,’* Sabina said, her voice ringing clear and sharp. *‘The Sovereigns were caught off guard, but they’re quickly rallying. And I don’t believe the kingdom would hesitate to leave us high and dry, perhaps even using any dissension to fully invade and annex the territories for themselves, leaving Gwyn at their mercy.’*

Taenya transmitted her own thoughts. *‘Gwyn could handle that, but I agree, her becoming a conqueror isn’t a good idea.’*

Sabina, ever the pragmatist, countered, *‘Maybe not there... but don’t completely dismiss the notion. A princess should have her own land, that isn’t within the lands of another nation.’*

Taenya brushed off the thought. *‘That’s a discussion for another time, not while we’re knee-deep in this,’ she sent in return.*

With an internal agreement between them, Taenya turned her attention back to the prince. “How could you expect this queendom to maintain ties with Avira?” she asked.

The prince shrugged, seemingly unperturbed by her inquiry. “Whichever of my children doesn’t ascend to the throne could marry into the crown of this new nation. Only the heir must maintain the sanctity of the royal bloodline.”

There it is, the offer of a political marriage. Never fails.

“Even if that child is your daughter?” Taenya queried, her brow raised in question. It was far too early to even know Gwyn’s own desires, much less decide to force a marriage on her. The nobility frustrated her to no end.

She knew that many noble Houses would not allow such marriages due to the need for heirs, as it was considered one’s duty to ensure the future of the House. That did not preclude any noble from holding relationships with extramarital paramours on the side, as was often the case in such circumstances.

“Of course,” he replied smoothly. “We don't look down on such relationships. We can agree upon which of them would bear the heir and find a suitable donor for the... task. But, we have plenty of time before that becomes a matter of concern.”

Sabina's voice filled her mind again with Amari's recommendation, *'Don't outright decline. Offer to consider it because it's beyond your purview to agree.'* Sabina then added her own opinion, *'If you want to punch him for already considering heirs, I'm ready to fight any knights.'*

A ghost of a smile crossed Taenya's face, but she quickly quelled it, mentally assuring Sabina, *'It won't come to that.'*

In a respectful tone, she addressed the prince, “Your Highness, I would need to discuss this proposal with the princess. The decision lies beyond my station.”

He smiled, nodding his understanding. “Of course, Ser Taenya. I look forward to meeting Princess Gwyn later this evening.”

With that, the crown prince stood, signaling the meeting to a close. Taenya rose from her seat and offered another respectful incline of her head. “Thank you for the discussion, Your Highness. I'll convey your proposal to the princess,” she offered diplomatically.

His smile widened, and he extended his hand in farewell. “Please do, Ser Taenya. Until this evening.”

Exiting the room, Taenya quickly made her way back to her companions, her thoughts swimming with the heavy implications of their conversation. As she approached, she noticed Amari's understanding nod and felt Sabina's mental nudging. *'Let's get back to Gwyn and ensure she's ready for tonight,'* the mind mage urged.

'Yes, we have much to discuss, and I'll need your help,' She thought while returning the paladin's nod.

'Amari says we should include the Tilorals,' Sabina sent and Taenya couldn't help but sigh.

The prospect of relaying the prince's ambitious plans to Gwyn was not something she relished. Taenya couldn't help but think about how much she wished Gwyn's mother was with them. She could then let that woman handle such issues and her presence alone would surely lighten the weight on Taenya's shoulders.

That is after she realizes she's been made a queen by her young daughter.

That moment was not something she wanted to be present for, despite knowing she would have to. Taenya could only relate the situation to what her own mother would do, and that... was not a pretty sight.

Manabound - Equilibrium

Gwyn's going to get an earful, for sure.