

One

Crucible

The Lymtorian Republic's fleeting engagement in the Many Parties War left an enduring legacy. One that transformed the strategic landscape of the region in ways still felt today.

Mana and War: The Many Parties War. 179 SA

Gwyneth Reinhart's journey on Eona was nothing short of a tale pulled from the pages of a storybook, only far more perilous and enchanting than she could have ever imagined in her prior life. Becoming a princess in a world that once existed only in her dreams, Gwyn had woven a rich tapestry of experiences that melded magic and reality in ways that her past self could never have fathomed. From mastering spells that once danced only in the realm of fantasy in her mind to facing the grim reality of combat and its dire consequences, her life had transformed dramatically.

Her time at the academy had been a chapter filled with friendship and growth, a period that, despite its abrupt end, remained close to her heart.

But it was that first kiss that lingered in her dreams.

Yet, for all the wonders and trials, for all the magic wielded and battles fought, a singular absence had shadowed her steps—that of her mother. The void left by her mom's absence had been momentarily filled when she'd been able to speak with her briefly during her core refinement. And even now her mom was on the way. All Gwyn had to do was make everything safe.

Luckily she had her found family to help her. Gwyn knew she got lucky that Taenya was the one to find her and she would love her forever for it. People like her, Sabina, and Amari had filled some of that space caused by her mom's absence with love and guidance, offering a foundation on which Gwyn could stand amidst the chaos of her new world.

Things truly had come to a critical point in her life. She was fourteen and in some ways felt much older. The past year had been a crucible, testing her resilience, bending her to the brink of shattering. But it was Roslyn, her bestest of friends, who had tethered her to sanity, pulling her back from the edge. And that was even before she'd confessed her feelings.

That same friend who had been kidnapped. Hurt. Gwyn had gone on a rampage to find and save her friend, and she had her back now. She never wanted to let her go again.

That same friend she'd do anything for.

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Even if things had become a bit awkward since that kiss after Gwyn had rescued her.

At least until Roslyn had met her new best friend in the entire world. A friend who could help her tease Gwyn to no end. And a friend who wouldn't stop trying to get them to kiss again.

“*Rozzz*, just look at her pouty face! You know you want to.” Neira’s voice was a teasing lilt that danced through the air, eliciting a sigh from Gwyn.

Finding Neira with the drak’valan detachment had been a wonderful surprise. Even if Gwyn hadn’t known her for long when they’d first met a year ago, they’d formed an easy bond. Neira falling from a tree and getting a concussion probably had a lot to do with that. Plus, Gwyn liked Neira’s older brother, Rhion, who had left the Aerinval Forest with House Reinhart.

“We’re almost to the entrance, guys...” She narrowed her eyes at the beaming drak’valan girl who sat next to Roslyn. “Aren’t you supposed to be outside dueling with Ilyana? We should go back to that.”

Gwyn’s plea was met with amused smiles, her protestations falling on deaf ears as Roslyn positioned herself directly before her, her hands coming up to gently squeeze Gwyn’s cheeks.

“Be nice to Neira, Firebug,” Roslyn’s voice was a soft chide, filled with affection and a hint of teasing. “She’s allowed to love *love*.”

“She loved fighting when I last saw her!”

Behind Roslyn, she saw Neira stick her tongue out. Gwyn rolled her eyes.

Yet, despite the jest, Gwyn couldn't deny the seamless way Neira had woven herself into the fabric of their circle. With her stories of their initial encounter and an infectious enthusiasm, Neira had endeared herself to everyone, bridging gaps with laughter and shared tales of adventure. Even Calista, Gwyn's dragon sister seemed taken with the vibrant drak’valan girl—whose surprise at Calista's size had been a source of amusement.

Neira's presence was a beacon of light amidst the tumult of recent events. The chaos of their departure from the Aviran capital, spurred by Roslyn's harrowing kidnapping had left little room for solace. They hadn't had time to really *relax* in almost two seasons. Time that had been... tough with House Racine's attacks against both Roslyn and Gwyn.

The purple scaled half-dragon half-telv girl's grin broadened, revealing her sharp incisors, as she shifted her wings to get more comfortable. “I *do* love fighting! But I can't do that while the caravan is traveling, can I? Plus, I need to think about how I am going to beat Ilyana in our next spar. It's the tie breaker. It's important.”

“She's gonna kick your butt,” Gwyn said with a smirk.

The addition of the drak'valan contingent had infused their evenings with excitement and a hint of rivalry, spurring spars and jovial competition. Neira and Ilyana's bouts had become a focal point of these nights within Gwyn's inner circle of friends, their friendly rivalry a spectacle that drew everyone's attention. Neira's victory in their first encounter had been a topic of much celebration, only for Ilyana to return the favor with a resounding win in their subsequent match, setting the stage for a tiebreaker filled with anticipation.

But that would be later.

Her banter with Neira ended before the girl could respond as the carriage slowed to a gentle halt. Shortly later, the doors swung open and Khalan's voice permeated the space within. "We've arrived," he announced.

The trio stepped out, their eyes immediately drawn to the majestic vista that unfolded before them. The air was crisp, carrying the chill of the snow-covered mountains that stood as silent guardians over the land. The sight of Dirn Loduhr's grand entrance, carved into the very heart of the mountain, left Gwyn momentarily breathless.

She'd never seen *anything* like this, even back on Earth.

Roslyn couldn't contain her excitement. She *loved* architecture. She grasped Gwyn's hand, intertwining their fingers, and pulled her close until their sides touched. Neira, her height nearly matching Gwyn's, positioned herself on the other side, completing their trio. Together, they stood in awe of the spectacle before them.

"The dwarven city of Dirn Loduhr," Roslyn whispered, her voice filled with reverence. "Isn't it magnificent? The way the gate is seamlessly integrated into the mountain, and those towers..." She gestured towards the squat looking structures flanking the road, marveling at their design. "They're like nothing you'd see anywhere else, built from the inside out. It's as if the mountain itself decided to embrace the city. Which, is of course how all dwarven cities are... but still."

Gwyn, seeing the dwarven city for the first time, felt a surge of wonder. The craftsmanship, the sheer scale of the gate, and the intricate details that hinted at centuries of history and culture left her in awe.

Neira gazed at the scene with wide eyes. "I've heard tales of the dwarven cities, but to see one in person..." She trailed off, unable to find the words to express the mix of excitement and curiosity that bubbled within her.

As they began their approach towards the gate, Roslyn took the lead, her hand still firmly clasped with Gwyn's. With each step, she shared snippets of her previous visits, pointing out the subtle details and the architectural marvels that made Dirn Loduhr a testament to dwarven ingenuity and artistry.

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They hadn't ventured far when a dragon landed beside them who was quickly followed by the rest of Gwyn's close-knit group joining them. Gwyn looked around at all the friends and found family she had made since her ten-year-old self had arrived in a burst of mana and light.

The warmth in her chest made her smile.

Now, she just needed to get back to help keep the rest of her people safe.



Gwyn and her companions found themselves gathered in a vast, hall-like abode, nestled deep within the heart of the dwarven city carved into the very bones of a mountain. The space they occupied was bigger than she imagined a house underground would be, rivaling the size of the townhouse back in the capital, yet it bore the unmistakable mark of dwarven architecture: sturdy stone walls that seemed to pulse with the life of the mountain, arched ceilings high above that were adorned with intricate carvings.

The city's leader, Speaker Hevat, had extended this place to them, a gesture of hospitality typically reserved for visiting representatives from House Tiloral. Roslyn had mentioned this, implying that their stay here was both an honor and a tradition.

Dirn Loduhr itself was a marvel to Gwyn. As they had entered the city, she had been awe-struck by the harmonious blend of natural cave formations and meticulous craftsmanship. The streets were lit by glowing crystals that cast a warm light over the stone pathways, shops, and homes carved directly into the mountain's heart. Water from hidden springs flowed through the city in a network of narrow canals, filling the air with the soothing sound of moving water.

Meeting Speaker Hevat and the city's other leaders had been an experience. While they had initially been more taken with Roslyn, their interest had piqued upon learning that Gwyn was both a terran and a princess. Questions had flowed freely, their curiosity about her world and its customs seemingly insatiable. Gwyn had done her best to answer, though she often found herself stumbling over explanations, mainly because some stuff she just didn't remember.

Which made her feel bad, because she hadn't realized just how much she didn't *know* about her home. She'd left so young. And it hit her just how much she was starting to forget the little things.

It was sad.

Gwyn leaned forward, placing her elbows on the table she and her friends sat around. She swept her gaze over each of their faces. "I'll be leaving for Larton as soon as we have a clearer

understanding of what's ahead," she began. "We need to catch up with Theran and the others. It's going to be dangerous."

Her eyes then shifted to Neira. "I think I have some ideas of how to use your brother's detachment with Calista and me."

Neira's smirk was all the confirmation Gwyn needed. The girl would not be going out, herself, but she had come to act as the personal bodyguard of Gwyn—at least that's the excuse she used to convince her father that she should come. Gwyn liked her. Plus, the drak'valan girl's confidence was infectious.

Roslyn's declaration that she would accompany Gwyn drew concerned glances from Gwyn's former ladies-in-waiting. Yet, as Gwyn and Roslyn shared a look, an unspoken understanding passed between them.

Gwyn saw something in those eyes and knew that it was time.

In a move that seemed to surprise almost all of their friends, Roslyn stepped close to Gwyn, rose to her tiptoes, and planted a soft kiss on Gwyn's cheek.

Gwyn blushed so hard, touching the spot with the barest tip of her fingers. She turned and gave her Roz a soft smile. Roslyn *winked* at her and Gwyn melted.

The room fell silent for a heartbeat before erupting into gasps and squeals of delight from the girls while Neira's grin broadened into a beacon of knowing glee. There was a clear look of '*I freaking knew it*' on her face.

Roslyn intertwined their hands and raised them until she brushed Gwyn's knuckles with her lips. "We like each other," she announced as she nestled closer to Gwyn. The affirmation was met with cheers and a flurry of embraces that left Gwyn feeling like she was floating.

They found themselves separated, but they kept meeting each other's gazes as they were glomped on by their friends.

As they settled back down on the couches and chairs, tea cups in hand, the conversation turned to the other details of their plans. Aleanora would be joining Friedrich who had been tasked with staying in Strathmore to manage the manor, earned Gwyn's heartfelt gratitude. Siveril was too busy being a count and fighting a war. House Reinhart needed reliable and trustworthy people in the ducal capital.

Ilyana outlined her intention to go her demesne in her family's small hometown of Lesrin. She would also be taking two of the more senior trainers within the House Guard to train her own men-at-arms. She had a long term goal of turning her House into the elite warriors of the Reinhart faction.

Gwyn couldn't wait to see what she could do.

Lore would continue her education in Strathmore, which was also where she would be meeting her girlfriend. Something she had to tell after seeing Gwyn and Roz, only to be immediately confused when everyone already knew.

Sansa would stay with Gwyn, continuing her role as a princess's secretary and attendant.

"As you all know," Gwyn said, drawing everyone's attention, "Sabina will be staying with the Shadow Guard in Strathmore. They're going to be watching our backs and working against House Racine."

Roslyn, sitting beside Gwyn, nodded her agreement. "And with Ser Roderick and Vicori Rollo joining her. Along with whatever support I know my grandfather will provide. We're not going to be waiting to be attacked anymore."

Aleanora leaned forward. "It's smart," she observed. "I know my mother isn't as influential as some of our other allies, but I will see what she can do. At the very least we need to figure out the stance of the nobles in the duchy." She nodded to Roslyn. "I know you two are close, so we need to stay ahead of that. There will be families that may object to the heiress having a relationship with a... foreigner." She frowned at Gwyn. "No offense."

A relationship.

Gwyn took a deep steadying breath. She didn't know if they were in a relationship. They hadn't really talked about it. Gwyn was *nervous* around Roz. In a way she'd never felt before. She got goosebumps and it felt like her heart was pounding harder than it ever had.

She stole a glance at Roslyn, who of course, was staring at her with a warm smile. *Why is she always so confident about this?*

Then Gwyn realized... she needed Roz to be. Put Gwyn in front of an army and she'd charge alone if needed. But put her in front of the girl she wanted to hold and... kiss? She was a mess.

It was clearly in the talky-plotty responsibility of the friendship.

The conversation among the friends flowed effortlessly, touching on strategies and personal commitments, when a firm knock at the door interrupted them. All eyes turned as Ser Janine, Roslyn's personal knight, stepped into the room, her posture rigid and respectful.

"Lady Roslyn, you've been requested to meet with the Speaker," she announced, her voice carrying the weight of formality that the situation demanded.

Roslyn's expression shifted to one of surprise, but she quickly masked it with a nod of acknowledgment. "Thank you, Ser Janine. I'll be there shortly." She turned back to her friends, her gaze lingering on Gwyn for a moment longer than the rest.

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Gwyn felt a twinge of concern at the sudden summons, but she masked it with a smile, trusting Roslyn to handle whatever the Speaker needed. As Roslyn stood, preparing to depart, she moved closer to Gwyn, wrapping her in a warm, reassuring hug. "I'll be back soon," she whispered into Gwyn's ear, her breath warm against her skin.

Gwyn nodded. "Be careful," she whispered back, squeezing Roslyn's hand before letting go.

With a final smile, Roslyn followed Ser Janine out of the room, her stride confident. The door closed behind them, leaving Gwyn and the rest of the group in a momentary silence.

Gwyn's gaze lingered on the door long after Roslyn had exited, her thoughts trailing in the wake of her departure. The silence in the room was broken when Ilyana slid onto the couch beside Gwyn. The older girl's presence was a comforting one.

"So..." Ilyana began, her tone light but probing, drawing Gwyn's attention back to the present.

Gwyn turned to face her, a smile instinctively forming. Ilyana's beauty was undeniable, her high elf features delicate and refined. Gwyn had always admired her, even more so now as she noticed the differences in their heights, with Gwyn's recent growth spurt pushing her closer to her mother's stature.

"What?" Gwyn echoed, trying to mask the sudden flutter in her stomach.

"Tell us. I can tell you're in loooove," Ilyana teased, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Gwyn couldn't help but giggle, even as she playfully shoved Ilyana. "Stop. I am not," she protested, though her heart told a different story.

"When did you two kiss?" Ilyana pressed.

Gwyn's breath hitched, her chest tightening at the memory. "After... after I got her back," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ilyana's expression softened, her previous playfulness giving way to genuine concern. She glanced at the others, who were listening intently, hanging on every word. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"No, no. It's alright," Gwyn reassured her, even as Ilyana wrapped an arm around her, offering a comforting squeeze.

"You know we're all here for you, right? I know we don't all talk as much, but you have us. We've all come to love you," Ilyana said, her words heartfelt.

Aleanora quickly chimed in, nodding in agreement. "She's right. We may have started as your ladies-in-waiting, but at this point, I see you as another sister."

Gwyn felt a warmth spread through her at their words. The concept of sisterhood, especially in a world where stations often dictated relationships, was a poignant one. Despite the distance their schooling had put between them, Gwyn hoped their bond would strengthen in the time to come.

“I am sorry you guys had to leave school because of me,” Gwyn apologized, the weight of their sacrifices not lost on her.

The girls exchanged a look before Aleanora moved to sit on Gwyn's other side, effectively sandwiching her between them. “We don't blame that on you at all. It's because of you that we were even given that opportunity. We'll attend schooling in Strathmore. Or at least take on tutors to help us,” Aleanora explained, her tone reassuring.

Sansa chuckled softly. “While finishing the Academy would have been ideal, I am your personal attendant. And you're a princess...” she said as if it was the only answer that mattered. When Sansa noticed the confused expression on Gwyn's face, she explained, “Working with you is the greatest honor I could have ever been given. It is *important* for someone like me. I won't ever hold leaving school against you. Plus... I know my brother would have wanted it.”

Gwyn's heart swelled. “Thank you.” She looked around at the others. “When I finally find a new home... will you all come with me?”

Aleanora's smile was gentle, understanding. “Friedrich will be taking on the role Siveril originally did in Strathmore, I am really just there to help him. He doesn't really need it much anymore. I would be honored to join you wherever you go, Gwyn.”

Ilyana pulled back slightly, a mix of determination and regret in her gaze. “I want—no, I have to build up my family's domain. They neglected it for so long. But there is something I want to do. I want to employ some of Rhion's people to help build up a force of men and women you would be proud of. It will take time, but I want to lead and provide you with a personal honor guard. One befitting a princess.”

The conviction in their voices, the plans they laid out for their futures, it all reinforced the bond they shared. Gwyn felt a profound gratitude for their unwavering support, for the promise of a future where they stood together.

The evening had settled into a quiet lull, with the earlier excitement giving way to a tranquil atmosphere. Gwyn, nestled comfortably within the plush cushions of a large, overstuffed chair, was deeply engrossed in a book she had playfully filched from Roslyn's pack earlier in the day. She found herself surprisingly captivated by its contents. Even if it was a bit more heavy on the romance than Gwyn usually liked.

As the door creaked open, Gwyn looked up to find Roslyn entering the room. The soft, warm glow of the lanterns illuminated Roslyn's features, casting gentle shadows that danced across her face. A smile played at the corners of Roslyn's lips when her gaze landed on the book in Gwyn's hands.

"Stealing from my collection now, are we?" Roslyn teased, the fondness in her voice unmistakable.

Gwyn returned the smile, her heart fluttering at the sight of her. "It's better than I thought," she admitted.

Roslyn chuckled softly, the sound resonating warmly in the cozy room. She approached Gwyn, her steps confident and purposeful. Gwyn's pulse quickened as Roslyn leaned down, the space between them charged with an electric tension.

Then, in a moment that seemed to suspend time itself, Roslyn's lips met Gwyn's. Gwyn's initial surprise gave way to a deep, encompassing warmth. Her eyes widened for a fraction of a second before she surrendered to the kiss, allowing her eyes to flutter shut and her body to relax into the embrace.

As they pulled apart, Gwyn found herself gazing into Roslyn's eyes, seeing the reflection of her own emotions mirrored back at her.

Roslyn offered Gwyn a gentle smile, one that conveyed understanding, affection, and a hint of something deeper, something yet to be fully explored. Gwyn felt a warmth spread through her, a feeling of contentment and belonging that she had only ever found in Roslyn's presence.

For a moment, they simply looked at each other, the world around them fading into the background. It was a moment of connection, of silent communication that spoke of shared experiences, challenges overcome, and a future yet to be discovered together.

Roslyn finally broke the silence. "I've been wanting to do that for days," she confessed, her eyes shining.

Gwyn's heart swelled with emotion, a mix of happiness, relief, and an overwhelming sense of rightness. "Me too" she whispered back, her voice barely audible.

Gwyn gently tugged Roslyn down to the plush cushion beside her. "So, what happened with the speaker?" she asked.

Roslyn settled beside her. "I met with him but there was a representative from my grandfather there as well. We had a lengthy discussion, and now there's a trade agreement in place between Dirn Loduhr and the Duchy of Tiloral, focusing on arms and ore. It seems my grandfather is orchestrating something quite significant." She paused, her expression turning pensive. "The representative, a noble from one of our bannermen, convinced the speaker with the phrase 'A Tiloral never forgets.' The

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Speaker understood its significance immediately. All of my family understands what that *truly* means. But everyone else simply believes we hold grudges and will pay back any slight in kind.”

Gwyn furrowed her brows in confusion. “That’s what I thought... What does it mean exactly?”

Roslyn sighed deeply, the burden of history in her voice. “It signifies that we have never forgotten nor forgiven the Avirans for invading the Kingdom of Tilor. For killing and forcing my people to submit. It speaks to our long-standing grievance, how we’ve been marginalized, and the strength we’ve had to muster to avoid being torn asunder.”

“I thought...”

Roz shrugged. “You’ve been told the official history. What *actually* happened isn’t much different, but it’s significant because my ancestor made a deal with the king at the time to save more of our people. We were close to collapse. If the Avirans had pushed for even a year longer, we would have lost everything.”

Gwyn winced. “That sounds horrible. It sounds like he made a good deal then.”

“He did, but we have not forgotten that it was all still forced upon us. That we took the only deal that could keep more people alive. It took one hundred years for us to even be granted representation in the Hall of Lords.”

“How does this all relate to the deal with the speaker?”

Throwing her hands in the air in a gesture of frustration, Roslyn admitted, “I have no idea!”

Gwyn leaned in. “You must have some idea. Talk to me, Roz.”

Roslyn’s features softened, her eyes meeting Gwyn’s. “I think I do. He’s making moves that are not sanctioned by the Crown. We’ve been invaded, and yet he’s forging alliances without royal consent. It’s clear as day that none of this was approved.”

“So, what’s the play here, Roz? How can I help?”

Roslyn took a deep breath. “We need to wrap up this war quickly, Gwyn. My gut tells me my grandfather is setting the stage for something else, something potentially more volatile, and I can’t fathom his reasons. We have to return home and uncover the truth behind his actions.”

“We’ll leave tomorrow,” Gwyn declared without a hint of hesitation.

“Gwyn... we can’t just... You’ve wanted to see the city since—”

Gwyn placed her hand atop Roslyn’s, silencing her with a determined shake of her head. “We are leaving. You know I need to hurry anyway. Let’s figure out what’s happening, and then, together, we’ll come up with plans. Okay?”

Roz nodded slowly. “Alright.”



“Things are going to be tough starting from here,” Taenya said. “Where we’re going is not somewhere that anyone your age should be. I feel... I feel like I am failing by letting you go.”

Gwyn turned on her saddle, looking over at the woman who rode close to her and Layla. The blonde telv woman with her big hazel eyes looked... pensive. The woman had really tried everything to keep Gwyn away from all of the danger. Unfortunately, said danger had its way of coming after them regardless.

They’d been quiet since leaving the dwarven city, each breath materializing in puffs of frost as they rode on.

Intellectually, Gwyn knew that at fourteen, she shouldn’t have to go off and fight people. Even here there was something strong about forcing children into situations where they’d essentially be a soldier. But Gwyn was different. Not only was she as strong and tall as the adults around her, she had magic that made her not afraid of any adult. Eona had made her grow up in a way that she never would have back home.

“Taenya, you know as I do that it isn’t you who is making me go. We’ve had this talk a lot...” She tried to be nice about it, because she knew that Taenya only said these things because she cared. It wasn’t like Gwyn didn’t care about her as well.

Taenya brushed a hand through her hair and looked up at the cloudy sky. She seemed to be saying a prayer by the way her lips barely moved. Her horse let out a big puff of chilled air and shook his head that brought Taenya’s attention back downward.

“You’re right. It’s just, you’re only fourteen, Gwyn. I’ll always feel this way. I can’t bear to see you hurt. But I know there’s no stopping you. You’ll simply do what you did to get Roslyn back.”

Gwyn couldn’t help the satisfied smirk that grew on her face. “You’re right. So, let’s work together.”

As Gwyn guided Layla forward, the rhythmic clop of the mare's hooves melded with the caravan’s sounds. The looming mountains that had once cradled Dirn Loduhr in their stony embrace now lay behind them, giving way to a sprawling landscape that stretched under the overcast sky. The verdant hues of the plains were intermittently broken by the dark specks of roaming wildlife and the occasional glint of water from distant streams, reflecting the somber clouds above.

Taenya, glanced towards the sky, her brow furrowing at the gathering clouds. “More snow is on the way,” she remarked, a note of concern in her voice. “We need to make good time before it hits. This land can be unforgiving in winter.”

Gwyn followed Taenya's gaze, noting the darkening sky with a sense of determination. “We'll push through,” she responded, her voice laced with resolve. “I can keep us safe. I'm not afraid.”

Taenya rode closer, her own mount matching Layla's pace with an almost protective gait. “I know you aren't,” Taenya said, her expression softening. Gwyn's mamma would be proud, and she couldn't wait until the two women met. “But promise me, Gwyn, that you'll let Amari and me stay close. We're here to protect you, and if we're going to make this work, you need to let us do that. We'll be at your side, always”

Gwyn nodded solemnly. “I promise,” she replied, her voice steady. “I know I can be... headstrong, but I trust you. Both of you.”

Her eyes drifted to the carriage trundling right behind them, its curtains drawn tight to allow Roslyn and Neira their rest. The thought of them, safe and unaware of the world moving past their slumber, brought both a twinge of worry and a surge of determination.

The journey continued in silence, each lost in their thoughts as the land around them grew denser, the path more winding. The occasional bird call or rustle of swinging branches punctuated the quiet, a reminder of the life that thrived in these woods, oblivious to the people dramas unfolding within them.

“We're not just fighting for ourselves,” Gwyn murmured, more to herself than to Taenya. “We're fighting for everyone we love. For a future where we don't have to fear being torn apart by war or politics. For a safe place for family to be together.”

Taenya glanced at her, a look of fierce pride shining in her hazel eyes. “And we'll stand by you, every step of the way. You and Roslyn don't have to face the world alone. You both have people who love you. We'll face whatever comes, together.”

The road ahead seemed less daunting with Taenya's words echoing in her heart. Gwyn tightened her grip on Layla's reins, her gaze set firmly on the horizon. The challenges ahead were many, but she was not alone. Together, they would navigate the perils of their journey, bound by a shared resolve to protect their loved ones and secure a safer world.

As they rode on, the first flakes of the impending snow began to fall. Yet, within the quiet strength of their companionship, Gwyn found an unwavering beacon of hope. She reached a hand in the sky and used her **[Pyromancy]** to raise a barrier of heat that covered the entirety of the caravan. When she was satisfied, she lowered her hand and kept mana flowing into the magic, keeping it anchored on herself.

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Taenya looked over at her and raised a brow. Oh yes, Gwyn's mom would very much like her.

“Don't worry, *zia* Tay. I'll keep us safe. Even through this war. It's just another thing we have to weather.”