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## Side by Side

Gwyn sat up abruptly, her eyes fluttering open as she tried to regain her bearings. She blinked rapidly to chase away the grogginess clouding her senses. A thin line of drool trailed from the corner of her mouth, which she hastily wiped away with the back of her hand.

The professor, lost in a world of his own, sat hunched over his desk, his eyes intently scrutinizing a pile of papers. The other students were engrossed in their texts as they created a cocoon of hushed whispers and the occasional rustle of pages turning.

“You alright?” a whisper tinged with concern floated to her from the left.

Gwyn groaned, her voice a sleepy mumble. “Mmmhmm?”

Her mind scrambled to piece together the fragments of her abrupt awakening. Roz’s face came into view with eyebrows knitted in a frown. “Not like you to sleep in class.”

“I’m so tired! You kept me up late last night,” Gwyn hissed, her voice a mix of irritation and fatigue.

A snort followed by a muffled giggle from her right caught Gwyn’s attention. She turned to find Salla attempting to stifle her laughter behind a slender hand. Gwyn couldn’t help but roll her eyes when Salla shot her a playful wink.

Salla’s vibrant presence had become a staple over the past few seasons, especially since her friendship with Lorrena had blossomed. Her shoulder-length green hair, always glossy and vibrant, fell gracefully to one side, artfully clipped to reveal a lively face. Her blue eyes sparkled with an irrepressible zest for life, highlighting her freckled, fair complexion. Gwyn couldn’t deny how cute Salla was. She could see why Lore was so smitten.

*It’s also super cute that she’s wearing the choker that Lore got for her birthday.*

As the class drew to a close, the professor stood, his voice resonating throughout the room. “I wish you all a relaxing break. And a special good luck to Misses Reinhart and Tiloral in their future endeavors.” His words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken implications.

The classroom erupted into a flurry of murmurs and curious glances, all converging on Gwyn and Roz. Gwyn felt a twinge of discomfort. They hadn’t wanted to announce it to everyone.

Roz let out a resigned sigh beside her.

## Manabound - Resilience

In the midst of the swirling chatter, Salla reached over and gently squeezed Gwyn's hand. Gwyn turned to see her eyes brimming with unshed tears. *Definitely because Lore's leaving, not me.*

"Hey, let's all hang out tonight in our room. Okay?" Gwyn suggested, eager to dispel the awkwardness.

Salla nodded, a flicker of gratitude in her eyes. "I'll get Lore?"

*"Perfetto."*

The rest of the day went quickly. Gwyn had her last magic class, and it was a bit emotional. However, she did take Taenya's suggestion and spoke privately with Lead Scholar Lirael, the head of the magical studies department.

That meeting had turned into a *very* productive conversation where Gwyn had offered Lirael a position in her House. One that would be very lucrative and come with benefits the Academy simply couldn't provide—like a close relationship with the Church.

Her teacher had promised to think it over, but Gwyn could tell... she'd see the woman again one day. Hopefully even soon.

Later, Gwyn and Roslyn sat together in their little sitting area waiting for their friends to arrive. Gwyn was doodling while her friend was smiling over whatever she was reading.

Amari sat with Khalan at the table going over a plan for the winter travel that was fast approaching.

Over the past week, the space had become a den of chaos as they prepared everything for their departure. Most of their belongings were already back at the estate, and what was left consisted of the things they'd need for the remainder of the week.

The familiar, cozy ambiance of the room was punctuated by the occasional bursts of laughter from Roz and snippets of conversation. They were able to enjoy just being in each other's presence without the need to fill the silence.

Then came what they'd been waiting for.

A sudden knock at the door sliced through the quietude, bringing a momentary flicker of excitement. Amari didn't even share a glance with Khalan before getting up to open it. The door swung open, revealing Lorrena and Salla hand-in-hand with the shorter Daria trying to peek over their shoulders from the back. All three's faces were a mix of smiles and unspoken emotions.

So, basically, a mirror to both Gwyn and Roslyn's own feelings.

They'd talked about it almost daily—they were going to miss their friends and even school.

## Oxylus

“Good evening,” Lorrena greeted, as she stepped into the room, joined at the hip by Salla, whose eyes danced with the usual glint. Daria hung back slightly, the raithe’s gaze sweeping over the room with a thoughtful air.

Gwyn couldn’t help but smile, the presence of her friends infusing a spark of warmth into the room. “I’m glad you all made it!” she said, her voice tinged with both relief and sadness.

The group exchanged hugs and laughter, the initial awkwardness melting away into familiar camaraderie. The room, despite its bareness, began to fill with the energy of their presence, the walls seemingly echoing back memories of their times together.

As they settled into a circle on the floor with cups of frozen strawberry drinks of pure goodness in their hands, the mood shifted subtly. It was an evening not just of farewells but of celebrating the journey they had shared and the adventures that lay ahead.

“Let’s make this night memorable,” Salla declared, her eyes shining with excitement and a hint of the inevitable sad goodbyes to come.

Eventually, they all found themselves in comfortable spots. Lorrena had gotten a bit sad and grabbed Salla’s hand to drag her off to Gwyn’s room for a chat.

Gwyn and Roz were snuggling on the couch as they shared a warm, relaxed conversation with Daria. The hearth crackled softly, casting a cozy glow over the room and banishing the evening chill. Daria, lounging in an armchair, spoke of her plans to visit Drakensburg with Salla whose parents were moving there after graduation.

At the mention of the city’s name, Gwyn perked up, her eyes sparkling with interest. “My House has a vineyard there!” she exclaimed, her voice laced with a mix of pride and excitement. “We’ll have to visit all the time. I stayed there for an entire winter on the way to the Academy.”

“I was rushing to the Academy that winter,” Roz said.

Gwyn shrugged. “Yeah, but I had to share a room with Taenya and she snores.”

Roz chuckled. “Remember the first time we shared a room? Oh, I wanted to strangle you.”

Daria looked amused. “I’ve shared a room with Gwyn! She’s not that bad!”

Roslyn groaned. “You try waking up with a leg draped over your body every day.” Gwyn rolled her eyes, but Roz kept going. “Or finding long, curly hair *everywhere*. And I literally mean *everywhere*.”

Gwyn snorted. “I blame whoever did our laundry. It’s not my fault it wound up there!”

“Where is ‘there?’” Daria asked.

Gwyn felt her face heat up and she tried to say something but nothing came out. Roz, however, was unfazed. “My butt. Well, my undergarments, but still.”

Daria almost fell out of her chair laughing.

They went back to talking about Drakensburg. Roslyn had really wanted to visit it with Gwyn, and they both committed to going together one day. Apparently, Salla's family was opening an inn there, and Daria was a bit excited to see the city as she'd only briefly visited one time many years ago. Gwyn wondered if Lorrena knew, which as Salla's best friend, she probably did. *I wonder if Salla will want to stay there too.* They continued talking about random things until their conversation was interrupted by faint snuffles coming from Gwyn's room. Exchanging a knowing glance with Roz, Gwyn excused herself. "Be right back."

She untangled herself from Roz and tiptoed to her room's doorway. Peeking inside, Gwyn's eyes widened in surprise at the tender scene unfolding before her—Lorrena lifting to her tiptoes and pressing a gentle kiss on Salla's lips.

Gwyn hastily covered her mouth with her hand, a muffled gasp escaping her. Retreating to the couch, she plopped down next to Roz, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and surprise.

Daria and Roz regarded her with puzzled expressions. Gwyn shook her head, signaling that it was nothing to worry about. Roz leaned in, whispering cautiously, "Everything alright?"

Gwyn, still reeling from the sight, grabbed her bestie's head with both hands and brought Roz's ear closer to her mouth. "T-They kissed!" she whispered, barely audible.

Her bestie's eyes widened, her cheeks tinged with a blush as she pulled away. She glanced fleetingly at Gwyn's lips before averting her gaze, managing a stuttered, "G-Good for them."

Daria's giggle broke the momentary tension. Both Roz and Gwyn turned towards her, surprised. The raihe girl shrugged nonchalantly. "They do it all the time in our dorm."

Gwyn gasped, a mix of shock and curiosity in her voice. "R-Really?"

She nodded. Gwyn glanced over at Roz, who was now biting her lip, her gaze fixed on anything but Gwyn. *Why is she acting all weird?* Gwyn wondered, a flicker of confusion crossing her face.

When Lorrena and Salla emerged from the room, their faces were aglow with happiness and a shared secret. Lorrena's eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint, while Salla's smile was warm and content. The room seemed to brighten with their presence as if their joy was both palpable and infectious.

The group turned to greet them, a mix of curious and knowing glances exchanged. Gwyn, still reeling from her earlier discovery, felt a surge of awkwardness threatening to spill over. She opened her mouth, teetering on the brink of saying something that could shatter the comfortable atmosphere.

But her bestie saved the day. Roslyn, sensing the potential for discomfort, smoothly intervened. "Hey, how about we all head to the dining hall for dinner?" she suggested, her voice casual yet timely.

*She's the best. That's why she's in charge of talking.*

Gwyn, grateful for the distraction, jumped up from the couch, her face brightening. “Yes, let's go!” she exclaimed, her eagerness to escape the room evident. Her voice was a touch too loud, a tad too enthusiastic, but it broke the brief tension that had started to form.

Lorrena and Salla exchanged a quick, amused look, then nodded in agreement. Daria stood up, stretching her arms with a relaxed smile. The group gathered their things, the mood shifting to one of anticipation for the evening ahead.

As they made their way out of the room with the usual paladin escort, Gwyn's heart raced with a mix of relief and excitement. The prospect of dinner together in the familiar buzz of the dining hall promised a return to normalcy, or at least the comforting illusion of it.

The dinner at the dining hall was a blur of laughter, shared stories, and the clatter of dishes. The group, enveloped in the familiar cacophony, enjoyed a momentary respite from the day's emotional rollercoaster. The hall buzzed with the energy of students savoring their final week with excitement and nostalgia hanging in the air.

As they were leaving, the mood shifted. Prince Aran walked straight toward them and Gwyn did all she could to not groan. He wore an expression of earnestness that she just *knew* was fake and his eyes were fixed on Gwyn with a clear purpose.

“Roz, don't leave me,” she whispered to the blonde holding her arm.

“Never.”

They came to a stop just as the prince approached.

“Princess, may I have a moment in private?” he asked, his voice polite but firm.

Before Gwyn could respond, Roz did. “I'm coming too,” she declared, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Aran opened his mouth, possibly to protest, but Roz's narrowed eyes and firm grip on Gwyn's arm spoke volumes. “I'll be at her side, and our paladins will be close by. Don't even think of trying anything,” she warned, her voice low but fierce.

Gwyn rolled her eyes at the overprotectiveness, a small smirk playing on her lips. “Give me a moment,” she told him, more amused than concerned. Roz's unwavering loyalty and protective streak were as endearing as they were exasperating.

With a nod from Aran, he stepped away. They said their goodnights to the others and Roz whispered a few things about keeping Gwyn safe—which had Gwyn rolling her eyes again. After her friends hugged her and walked away, the two of them reluctantly headed after Aran with Roz firmly at

Gwyn's side. The air was charged with tension and unspoken questions as they walked but the presence of their paladins was a silent reassurance in the background.

*Let's get this over with.*

Aran led them to a quieter corner of the corridor, his expression solemn. "Gwyneth, I must admit, your departure... it brings more mixed feelings than I anticipated," he began, his voice tinged with an unexpected vulnerability.

Gwyn, taken aback, listened intently. "Oh? I thought you and your sister would be happy that we're leaving," she said, a hint of surprise coloring her tone.

Aran's gaze met hers. "You have been... an unexpected presence in my life. One that has challenged and intrigued me in ways I hadn't foreseen. I cannot speak for my sister, but you were the first... peer that I have met. I'd like to again apologize for my actions in the previous year. I had hoped to try and garner your friendship. Perhaps discuss our shared interest in magic." He paused, as if searching for the right words. "Your spirit, your... fire... I will miss them in class."

Gwyn had to force herself to not roll her eyes at the pun.

They spoke briefly with him asking about Strathmore and if she would return to the capital. He talked about his father and sister. As he spoke, Gwyn felt a flicker of something warm in her chest. Maybe Aran wasn't as terrible as she had always thought. Finally, their conversation started to wrap up.

"Although, I suspect we will see each other at future events and balls. I look forward to seeing you again when we're a tad older."

Roslyn took a single step that put her slightly in front of Gwyn. "Thank you, Your Highness. We really must get back to our dorm room."

"Of course, Lady Tiloral." He smiled at Gwyn. "I believe we will work well together in the future, Your Highness." His eyes flicked downward as if looking her over before turning and walking away. Instantly any positive thoughts went away and she felt... gross.

Roz leaned close to Gwyn, her voice barely above a whisper. "He's lying."

"He is? What made you think that?" she asked.

Amari, who had been quietly observing, joined them and nodded in agreement with Roz. "She's right. But," she hesitated, "I'm not sure what he's lying about. Some of the things he said were as if he were twisting the truth. Or omitting things. He's... surprisingly adept at lying."

After their unsettling conversation with Aran and a quiet walk back to the dorm, Gwyn and Roz parted ways for the night. Gwyn entered her room, her mind still a whirlpool of thoughts. She changed into her nightclothes, her actions mechanical as she mulled over the day's events.

Just as she settled into bed, the soft knock on her door pulled her from her reverie. It was Roz, standing there with a hesitant look. “Can I... sleep in here tonight?” she asked quietly. Gwyn could almost hear the vulnerability and need for companionship in her best friend’s voice.

Gwyn smiled gently and patted the bed beside her. “Of course.”

Roslyn slipped into the bed, releasing a deep sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the world. “I’m going to miss this place,” she murmured.

What she left unsaid was the reason they had to leave. The lives lost. Gwyn knew it weighed heavily on her friend. How she felt like she’d failed. That having a ducal family needing to ‘run’ from the capital was admitting defeat.

Gwyn nodded in the dark, feeling the same strong emotions. She knew that if it were earlier in the year, she would have retreated to her **[Frozen Heart]** by now. The bed shifted as Roslyn rolled onto her side, her back to Gwyn. There was a moment of silence, a comfortable stillness, until Roslyn turned her head to look back at her.

“Good night, Firebug,” Roz whispered, her voice soft but carrying a warmth that echoed through the darkness.

Gwyn closed her eyes, a sense of peace settling over her. “Good night, Roz,” she whispered back, drifting into sleep with the familiarity and comfort of her friend by her side.

Her dreams that night had her waking up sweating and feeling weird, but then as soon as she tried to remember them, they vanished as if they’d never happened.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, with Roz providing a comforting presence, her occasional jokes trying to lift Gwyn's spirits. They moved through their morning classes in a similar rhythm, Gwyn's mind often drifting to random things like Lorrena and Salla's newfound closeness.

*Am I horrible for forcing Lorrena to leave her friend? Wait, friends don't kiss like that... what are they?*

*I need to ask.*

She leaned over to Roz who was busy talking to one of their classmates who was also from the Duchy of Tiloral. The girl was from a city Gwyn had heard of, obviously, but was in the northwest of the duchy. They were talking about attending the ducal court or a ball after the girl graduated.

Roz was so good at this.

She nudged her friend. Roz said something to the girl then leaned close to Gwyn. “You alright?”

Gwyn took a deep breath. She had to ask this right. “Do you think Lorrena and Salla are more than friends?”

Roslyn blinked. She sat motionless for far too long that Gwyn started feeling really awkward and silly. “Sorry, I’m being weird. I—”

Her best friend slowly turned her head and canted it slightly to the side as she stared Gwyn in the eyes. “Really?”

Gwyn frowned. “What?”

“*Of course*, they are.”

“Oh.”

Roslyn’s tinkling peal of laughter made Gwyn’s cheeks burn in embarrassment.

So, of course, her best friend teased her for the rest of the day. Gwyn *knew* girls could be in love with each other back on Earth, but it was so different here. She’d never actually *seen* two girls together that she could remember. Not to mention the very distinct conversations people had about the marriages of nobles and royals needing to be between a boy and a girl. All because it was required or duty or whatever else it was that was going to take Roslyn away from being her best friend. So, she felt extra silly when Roslyn talked about it.

Luckily, lunch came, and with it, the glorious distraction that were their other friends.

“So, I’m considering not attending the upper school after I complete my lessons here,” Daria said offhandedly.

“What? Why?!” Salla asked, peeking over Lorrena’s head. Those two were so stinking cute.

“I’ve been seriously thinking about entering the naval academy.”

Roz’s head whipped around so fast Gwyn felt *her* neck hurt. “You’re going to Maireharbora? Are you parents sailors or merchants? Or in the navy themselves?”

Daria shook her head. “No, no. But before we moved to Avira, we lived by the sea. I miss it.” A fond look fell over her. “I’ve always loved it.”

Roslyn was practically bouncing in her seat. “I will write a letter of—No, that won’t do. I’ll have my mother write a letter of recommendation. She’s the Countess of Maireharbora, she commands the ducal fleet.”

Daria squirmed and seemed really uncomfortable. Roslyn didn’t seem to catch on and was about to say something else, but Gwyn reached over and squeezed her thigh. Her friend yelped.

She turned and glared at Gwyn but a quick jerk of Gwyn’s head had her catch on. “Oh, Daria, I apologize. I seem to have gotten a bit carried away.” She chuckled a bit to herself. “I love Maireharbora even though I spent a lot of my time with my grandfather in Strathmore. I’m sure with



your standing in the school, you will be sure to get in. But please, if there's *anything* I can do to help, don't hesitate to ask. You're one of my friends."

That seemed to do the trick because Daria visibly relaxed. "Thank you, Roz. I really appreciate that. I would never want to even appear to be taking advantage of your friendship, but I swear to come to you if I find myself needing assistance."

Roslyn nodded and that was that.

The afternoon brought their final class to the gardens, where they simply spoke of things to expect the following year. When it was finally over, Gwyn was excited to be done. She just wanted to go back to the room and curl up with her sketchpad and draw. And maybe drink some tea with Roz.

Of course, she couldn't even retreat back to her sanctuary of art and relaxation in peace.

As she and Roz attempted to escape the gardens, Elora approached with determined strides and a stern expression. Aran's twin sister glanced around, seemingly ensuring that they were alone before the blonde princess rounded on the two of them.

"I need to speak to you," she said, locking her gaze onto Gwyn. "Now."

Gwyn, taken aback by the sudden confrontation, felt a knot of apprehension in her stomach. Before she could react, Roz was at her side, her arm protectively around Gwyn's and drawing her closer. "What do you want, Elora?" Roz's voice was sharp, her stance defensive.

"This doesn't concern you, *Tilorol*." She snapped. Her head turned back to Gwyn. "Stay away from my brother you harlot."

*What?*

"I will not allow you to try and get your filthy hands on Aran. You're a princess from *nowhere*." Her eyes narrowed. "And now I know all about what you did, you murderer. You killed Varek, and you burnt down grandmother's mansion. You will *not* get away with this. "

Gwyn's brow furrowed in confusion. *Why is she bringing this up now?*

"What are you talking about?" she tried.

"You are a *murderer*," she spat. "You burnt down the manor of House Racine and killed dozens because you're a maniac."

Roslyn's grip on Gwyn tightened as she stepped forward, her voice dripping with contempt. "Really, Elora? If she's such a maniac, why provoke her? If Gwyn's as dangerous as you claim, aren't you afraid she might just turn you into cinders... you insufferable harpy?"

*Oh, no.*

Elora staggered back, her face a mask of outrage. “How dare you speak to me like that. I will see you—”

But Roslyn was unyielding, her voice cutting through Elora's indignation like a blade. “Oh, save your threats, Elora,” she interjected, her tone icy and unwavering. “Since I’ve been at the Academy, there have been countless eyes on us. You think your baseless tirades against me went unnoticed? I made sure they didn’t.”

Elora's mouth opened, but no words came out, her outrage rendering her speechless.

Roslyn continued, her voice laced with scorn. “You think I just let you belittle me and slander my name for all this time without a plan? Because you’re a princess? Really?” She let go of Gwyn and took a step closer, her eyes locked on Elora's. “I am the heiress to the wealthiest and most powerful duchy in the kingdom, Elora. You do not scare me.”

Gwyn moved forward and placed her hand on the small of Roz's back, just enough touch to show that she was there. But she wouldn't stop her friend from whatever she was going to say if her life depended on it. Mainly because it was also something Gwyn needed *Roz* to say. Her talky-plotty best friend could weave words in a way Gwyn couldn't and she loved her for it.

“No one will take your accusations seriously. What will you cry about?” Roslyn's voice was dripping with contempt. “That I called you a pathetic *bitch*? Please.”

Gwyn's eyebrows raised.

“And let me enlighten you, Elora,” Roslyn's voice grew colder, more menacing. “Your grandmother's minions dared to cross House Tilorai, and a Tilorai *never* forgets.” She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. “You think the devastation at the manor was the extent of our fury? We've barely started.”

Roslyn was relentless. “Choose to stand with her, and you'll regret it. Your brother, at least, has the sense to feign civility. But you?” She shook her head in disdain. “You're nothing but a delusional little girl playing at politics while the kingdom fractures under *real* threats.”

“Mark my words, Elora, things will be vastly different the next time we cross paths.”

The princess, her face a storm of emotions, struggled to regain her composure. “Even if it's the last thing I do, *Roslyn*, I will see your House crumble. You think you can just—” she began, her voice quivering with anger.

But Roslyn cut her off with a dismissive and cold laugh. “Oh, Elora,” she said, shaking her head. “You have *nothing* to back your threats with. But take pleasure in the fact that we are leaving. So, I suppose you can count that as a minor victory. And don't worry, I'm sure next year you'll find someone else to throw your little tantrums at.”

Turning to Gwyn, she said, "Let's go, Gwyn. We have better things to do than entertain the delusions of a petulant child."

Elora's face flushed a deeper shade of red, her mouth opening and closing in search of words that wouldn't come. With a sound of pure indignation, she turned on her heel and stomped away.

Gwyn reached out her hand towards Roslyn. Roz glanced at Gwyn's outstretched hand and, with a soft smile that contrasted sharply with the harshness of the confrontation, took it in her own. Their fingers intertwined, and together, they began to walk away from the scene, their steps synchronized. The tension that had hung in the air moments before began to dissipate with each step they took.

Roslyn looked back and let out an exhale. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that. It felt *so* good."

Gwyn shook her head, a chuckle escaping her. "I'm glad you got it all out. It was everything I could have hoped for. Just... beautiful," she said, while imitating the chef's kiss her mom used to do. "But what if her knights heard you?" Gwyn asked, her mind racing from how Roslyn just verbally eviscerated the freaking princess.

She glanced over to see Roslyn blushing. Roz shrugged. "They didn't. Elora left them behind. Also, I gave the signal for Khalan to use his magic that would help keep the conversation private," she explained.

Gwyn looked back where Khalan was trailing them and he just gave her a thumbs up. She glanced at Roslyn, appreciating her friend's unwavering defense and the fierce loyalty that drove her actions.

But something else bothered her. "I didn't know that Countess Racine was related to Aran and Elora."

Roz shrugged nonchalantly. "Yeah? It's not exactly a secret. The Crown Princess is estranged from her mother. Couldn't get over the fact that the countess is anti-royalty."

Gwyn mulled over this information. "Strange," she murmured.

"Very," Roz agreed. "My grandfather calls her a snake that tries to lurk in two gardens."

Gwyn looked at her friend, puzzled. "What does that mean?"

Roz glanced at her, a hint of wryness in her expression. "It means he thinks she's playing both sides."

"And what do you think?"

"I think she chose poorly by making enemies of you and I."

The walk back to their room was a silent one with Gwyn lost in her thoughts about Roslyn's fierce defense. It was even the first time she'd heard her actually curse, instead of one of the silly ones that included one of the gods' unmentionables.

It was becoming increasingly clear how protective Roslyn had grown lately, and her actions today were just the latest example. Gwyn couldn't help but wonder about the depth of emotions driving Roslyn's actions. *It's probably because of everything that happened. They tried to do something at the market. Her manor was attacked, her people killed. Then they attacked us at the estate... She's been so strong.*

Upon entering their room, the familiar surroundings offered a comforting embrace. She couldn't believe they would be leaving the capital after all this time. Sure, she'd done the brief trip that had brought Calista into her life, and met Neira and Rhion, but that was it.

It would be nice to get somewhere... safe.

They both moved to the couch with each of them settling into their evening routine. Gwyn sat at one end with her sketchpad propped up on her knees like an easel. She immediately engrossed herself in sketching a group portrait of their circle of friends, something she'd thought of while they'd all sat around and chatted the night prior.

On the other side of the couch, Roslyn sat in a relaxed pose, one leg crossed under the other that dangled off of the couch. She was deeply absorbed in a new book she'd gotten, something called *The Lady's Maid*. Her friend's eyes moved swiftly over the pages, and Gwyn caught the occasional blush and biting of her lip that made her really want to know what was going on in that story. Whenever she'd asked Roslyn, the only response was 'romance'.

They sat like that for a while, and the only sounds in the room were the soft scratching of Gwyn's charcoal pencil and the occasional rustle of pages as Roslyn turned them.

As the evening deepened, Gwyn's sketch gradually took on life, her friends' faces emerging from the paper with tender strokes of her pencil. Roslyn, meanwhile, progressed through her book with a relaxed rhythm.

Breaking the silence, Roslyn looked up from her book. "Are you hungry, Gwyn?" Her voice was gentle, considerate.

Gwyn, momentarily pausing her sketching, nodded but then added, "I think I'll just grab something snacky later. I want to keep working on this."

Roslyn shook her head with a soft smile. "No, I'll go grab us something proper to eat." She glanced over at the two younger paladins stationed at a table in the room. "Could one of you come with me to the dining hall? I want to fetch dinner for us."

Gwyn smiled warmly at her friend. “Thanks, Roz. That means a lot.”

“Of course,” Roslyn responded, standing up. “Anything specific you’re craving?”

“Just surprise me,” Gwyn replied, her focus returning to her art.

Roslyn’s smile widened. “Gladly.” She slipped her shoes on and draped her coat over her shoulders. Calling back as she left, she said, “Be back soon!”

Once Roslyn and the Tiloral vicori had exited, Gwyn turned to the remaining paladin, Rollo, who had been quietly observing. “You good, Rollo?”

“I am. Amari and Khalan should be back soon,” he replied, his posture relaxed yet alert.

Gwyn nodded. She lifted her sketchpad but paused as she caught sight of Roslyn’s book on the other side of the couch.

Curiosity consuming her like dragonfire in a forest, she leaned forward and picked it up. She flipped to a random page, her eyes scanning to see what the big deal was.

*...The lady stalked across the ballroom like a lioness on the prowl and I have never felt more like prey in my life. A small part of my brain wanted to flee like a rabbit. The other part of me, that currently kept me frozen in place, had me staring at the way her incisors were biting her bottom lip. That part... she wanted to be—*

Gwyn snapped the book closed. Her ears burned. Her face burned. She fanned herself and reflexively used **[Cryomancy]** to cool herself off.

*That... Oh my goodness. Roz!*



Roslyn stepped out into the biting cold, immediately regretting her decision to volunteer for this errand. A shiver ran through her as she wrapped her coat tighter around her. “Why did I offer to do this?” she grumbled to herself. “Gwyn’s the one with fire magic to keep herself warm.”

Beside her, Mathias, wrapped in his own heavy cloak, offered a sympathetic glance but remained silent. They trudged through the slowly thickening snow as the flakes gently fell around them in a serene, yet chilly, dance. The campus was eerily quiet, the usual chatter of students replaced by the soft whisper of the winter wind.

As they walked, Roslyn’s thoughts wandered to the trip back home. She would get to see Dirn Loduhr again. The dwarven city was an absolute marvel of architecture and she couldn’t wait to share

the experience with her best friend. She imagined the awe in Gwyn's eyes as they traversed the majestic city under the mountains.

She knew Gwyn didn't *quite* share her obsession with architecture, but her friend had always seemed so *interested* when Roz talked about it. She always knew just the right questions to ask and would never judge or tease her as she rambled on about the things she loved.

It was going to be so much fun. The best part though was how it would be so much warmer than it was out here. The cold seemed to have driven everyone indoors, as the usually bustling paths were now eerily deserted. Roslyn couldn't help but think it was cold enough to freeze Alos's balls off, a thought that brought a brief, wry smile to her face.

She shivered again, then looked around as she even noticed that the path was darker than usual. "Strange, the lamps are out tonight. Did they not have the groundskeepers working tonight?"

Mathias shrugged. "Maybe not, it is snowing, after all. We can go back if you want? I'm sure Gwyneth will not mind."

Roslyn huffed a laugh that caused fog to emit from her mouth almost like Calista and her smoke. She blew some more, then shook her head. "Gwyn deserves a good meal tonight."

Her mind drifted back to their upcoming trip, but with the anticipation came a twinge of apprehension. Once home, she knew she would face her grandfather's disapproval. The inevitable arguments about her relationship with Gwyn's House loomed in her mind. She steeled herself for the confrontation, determined to stand her ground.

She would spend as much time with Gwyn as possible, and with the republic attacking, her friend would need to help protect her people. Roslyn would stay with her to make sure she didn't do anything reckless.

Suddenly, Mathias's head snapped to the side, his demeanor shifting instantly. He unsheathed his sword in one swift motion, his voice low and urgent. "Roslyn, we're not alone. Stay behind me," he instructed, his eyes scanning the shadows.

Roslyn could feel the mana coursing through her, ready to be unleashed. She remembered the attack on the estate, how she had stood her ground. Now, she would do the same. *I can be strong like Gwyn*, she thought, her resolve hardening.

If there was danger, she wasn't going to leave her paladin to face it alone. She could do this.

A sudden rustle in the bushes nearby made her heart skip a beat. *What if they're going after Gwyn now too?* The thought spurred a new wave of fear and urgency. She needed to get back to the dorm, and quickly.

## Oxylus

As they moved cautiously back the way they came, Roslyn kept her senses alert for any movement, any sign of the unseen threat. The silence was unnerving, the tension almost tangible.

“If you see an opportunity, run,” Mathias continued, his voice barely above a whisper. “Run back to the dorm as fast as you can, and don’t hold back. Use all your magic if you need to. Make sure you get there.”

Roslyn nodded, her senses heightened. She knew the seriousness of Mathias’s warning.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow move. It was quick, barely noticeable, but it was there. Mathias must have seen it too, for he tensed, his grip on his sword tightening.

“Roslyn,” he whispered urgently, “now!”

In that split second, Roslyn had to make a choice. Stay and fight or take the chance to run back to the safety of the dorm.

She drew on her mana.



Gwyn put her sketchpad and pencil down with a frown. *What’s taking her so long?* She glanced towards the door, her heart skipping a beat in anticipation.

Almost as if on cue, a knock sounded on the door. *Finally!* She smiled broadly and rushed to open it, expecting Roslyn. However, standing there were Amari and Khalan, not the person she hoped to see.

Amari raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her voice. “Not excited to see us?”

Gwyn let out a small sigh, stepping aside to let them in. “I just thought you’d be Roslyn,” she explained, her smile fading.

Khalan glanced towards Rollo, who was seated at the table. “Where’s Roslyn?” he asked, his tone turning serious.

“She went to get dinner,” Gwyn replied, a hint of concern creeping into her voice.

“When did she leave?” Khalan pressed.

Rollo furrowed his brows, thinking. “Maybe half a bell?”

Khalan shrugged slightly. “That’s not too much time.”

Gwyn returned to her sketchpad, but her strokes were absent-minded, her focus shifting. As the next bell chimed in the distance, her concern morphed into worry. “Guys?” she called out, looking

over at Amari and Khalan, who were conversing in hushed tones. "I'm a bit worried now. She was just getting dinner, right? Where are they?"

Khalan stood up decisively. "We were just discussing that. We're going to go look for them." He turned to Rollo. "Be ready."

Rollo nodded, standing up and grabbing his sword from behind him.

Gwyn's eyes widened as she felt a surge of anxiety. Instinctively, flames danced in her hands, her readiness to act palpable. "What's wrong?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

Amari moved towards the door as Khalan pulled on his cloak. "Probably nothing, but better safe than sorry," she said, clearly trying to sound reassuring but Gwyn wasn't falling for it.

Gwyn didn't like the uncertainty. "Let me come too," she implored.

Amari shook her head firmly. "No. Not a chance. You stay here." She then turned to Rollo, her voice stern. "Do not let anyone in but us or Mathias."

"Understood," Rollo replied.

As the door closed behind Amari and Khalan, Gwyn stood in the middle of the room, the flames in her hands now a mere flicker. Her heart pounded with a mix of fear and frustration. The silence of the room, punctuated only by the occasional creak of the building settling in the cold, felt oppressive.

Gwyn paced back and forth, each step felt increasingly heavy along with her growing anxiety. She glanced repeatedly at the door, hoping for Roslyn's return or any news. Her mind raced with possibilities, each more unsettling than the last.

Rollo, sensing her distress, spoke up in an attempt to ease her worry. "They're both skilled, Gwyn. Mathias, as well. They can handle themselves. It's just snowing and dark, maybe the dining hall closed early and they tried somewhere else."

Gwyn gave a brief, distracted nod, her gaze still fixed on the door. She knew Rollo was right, but it did little to quell the storm of concern raging inside her.

Time seemed to crawl, each minute stretching out interminably. Gwyn's initial resolve gave way to a gnawing unease. The sketchpad lay forgotten on the couch, her earlier artistic focus now lost in the tide of apprehension.

When the next bell chimed and nothing happened, even Rollo was growing concerned. She'd wanted to leave, to go search herself, but he managed to talk her out of it.

She was about to say screw it and go anyway when the sound of hurried footsteps in the hall broke the heavy silence. Gwyn's head snapped up as the door swung open, revealing Amari flanked by Academy Guards. The guards' faces were drawn and tense, their eyes avoiding Gwyn's gaze.



## Oxylus

Amari stepped forward, her jaw clenched tight. "Gwyn," she began, her voice trembling, "we found Mathias."

Gwyn felt her heart lurch. "And Roslyn?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Amari shook her head stiffly. "Mathias... he was dead. We found him surrounded by the bodies of a number of assailants that were killed by both blade and magic. But Roslyn..." She paused, swallowing hard. "Roslyn is missing."

The room seemed to spin around Gwyn. Her knees felt weak, and she stumbled back, her hand reaching out to steady herself against one of the chairs. But then the reality of Amari's words crashed over her like a tidal wave and she fell to her knees.

Roslyn, *her* Roslyn, was gone.