

Moments of Reflection

Sabina winced at the door slamming behind her as Taenya followed into one of the rooms. She didn't need magic to know that the woman was especially angry. *It's not like I didn't give her a reason to be upset...* She stopped halfway into the room and turned. The look on Taenya's face told her all she needed to know. Sabina almost said something before she stopped herself, realizing it probably would be best to keep her mouth shut.

"What was that, Sabina? You're overtly doing it now?" She said calmly.

The second part surprised her. "How... How long have you known?" Sabina stammered out.

"I've known for weeks now. You're not the only person capable of reading people. Just the only person in the house with magic to do it. You were too obvious, picked out things that most wouldn't have figured out. Never mind the event with Gwyn's nightmare that had you *sprinting across the house*. And the fact that *I can feel it when you do it!*" Taenya's tone got more and more pointed as she spoke.

"Y-You felt it? How?"

Taenya stepped forward, anger and frustration filling the air. "That isn't important right now! Do you want a fucking inquisition to come down on us? Mind fucking someone? Physically harming them with insidious magic? If you continue to use your magic without restraint in ways that go against the Decrees, *expect it. Because this is how an one is formed!*" Her voice raised until she was yelling by the end.

Sabina was taken aback. The ferocity of Taenya's feelings was potent, but the Knight-Captain did not direct them at *her*, just her *actions*. That made Sabina feel slightly better about the situation she found herself in, but it didn't mean she was any less chastened.

"I.. You're right. I went too far."

"No shit, Sabina. Alos save us, because I can't keep Gwyn safe alone. Tell me. Right now. What is the extent of your magic?" Taenya demanded.

Sabina took a deep breath. “You know about the emotions. I can’t stop that. I just feel them. That’s how I can tell most things. I can also hear surface-level thoughts if they’re strong enough. Almost as if the person says them out loud.” She hesitated for just a moment. “I... I was pulled into Gwyn’s nightmare.”

Taenya’s eyes went wide. “Does she know? Have you—”

“No! She doesn’t. That was the first time I’ve actually been inside someone’s mind. I did it while I was sleeping—”

“You are going to fix that. You need to—”

“I know! Taenya, I know! I swore to myself I would never betray her trust like that, especially after that happened. I will *never* influence or listen to her thoughts. I swear it. I want to protect her. If she doesn’t trust me, I can’t do that.”

Taenya scoffed. “Sabina. She will not trust you if she thinks you can enter her mind at any time and change things. IF...” Taenya took a deep breath to calm herself before continuing, “*if* you let her find out on her own. We will need to inform her. You will swear to *her* that you will never do those things before the thought even comes up.”

“I will.”

“Good. Now, what in Relena’s name was that? What did you do to Ms. Levings? You *physically* harmed her. Then she acted as if everything was fine and completely changed her mind.”

“You don’t think I know that?” Sabina snapped.

“Sabina, tell me. *What* happened?”

Sabina considered how to respond. She *had* gone too far. The terran's thoughts were too much for her. She spoke of taking Gwyn away. Then Amanda subtly tried to influence the princess into leaving them. She felt it and heard it in the woman’s thoughts. She was never going to believe them. It was so easy just to nudge her thoughts in the right direction, but she pushed too far in her fear. Instead of a slight push, she slammed her desired outcome into the woman and hammered it home. *How does Gwyn make magic seem so easy?*

She took a deep breath and explained, “I tried to push her in a different direction. I don’t think I can actually change someone’s thoughts. At least at this point. I basically whispered in her mind, making her doubt herself and think other thoughts. Trying to push her to what I wanted. I—I pushed too hard. She was far too receptive to it.”

Taenya looked up at the ceiling and let out a deep sigh. She brushed her hair out of her face and tugged at it while lost in consideration. The utter lack of any leakage of the woman’s thoughts impressed Sabina. *She is exceptional at keeping her thoughts internal. Not the time, Sabina.*

“She wasn’t important, Sabina. She was nothing. Just a human who had the same experience as Gwyn and Friedrich. Amanda is not handling it well. She saw Gwyn and found something from her home she could latch onto. She wasn’t *malicious*.”

“You didn’t hear her thoughts, Taenya. She wanted to take her, *no matter what it took*.”

“And how would she do that, Sabina? We literally just stopped a *marquess* from doing anything, and, of course, the *count* that Gwyn literally burned. How will some *commoner* human do it?”

“But...” Sabina deflated as her chin dropped to her chest. Taenya was correct. Sabina had vastly overreacted and brought harm to that woman. She felt tears flow down her cheeks but couldn’t bring herself to wipe them away.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, then another that lifted her chin up. Taenya’s hazel eyes peered into her. “Sabina, I am frustrated and angry, but I am not angry with you, just how you reacted with such immediate aggression to the situation. We can’t do that. We’re under too much scrutiny. There need to be rules, and we’re going to set them right now. Come, let’s sit.”

Sabina followed and sat down next to Taenya, still too embarrassed to look into the woman’s eyes of her own volition. She heard the telv sigh. “Sabina. Look at me.”

She nearly broke into tears again as she heard and felt the emotion in that one demand. It was filled with compassion and resolve. She wasn’t going to push her away or harm her. *I am really messed up.*

Sabina looked up at Taenya and saw the caring, strong woman that would do anything for Gwyn and felt that same feeling directed at her. The resolute desire to protect those she

called her own. If there were ever someone that embodied the core of what it meant to be a knight most, it would be Taenya. It resolved her to do right by her. Taenya was everything she wanted to be.

“Sabina, first, do not use any of your magic against *anyone* in the House unless I directly order it and am with you. Continue listening to the surface thoughts and feeling emotions in others. We... We will figure out a way to restrict the staff’s thoughts or something. I’m sure you’re not the only one with this ability. *I just have zero clue how we’ll accomplish that without them learning about the reason or you planting it in their head.*” Taenya mumbled the last part to herself, but quickly composed herself. “That ability is beneficial in dealings with external agents. However, do not invade anyone’s thoughts who is not *physically* hostile to the House or the Princess. Even then, do not harm their mind. Actually, we cannot have knowledge of your ability to get out. It *must* stay a secret. Try to use that ability as only a last resort. That said, if there are ever assassins or anyone else that invades our House, do *whatever it takes* to ensure the Princess’ safety. You are the last line of defense for that girl.”

Sabina’s eyes widened. “Me? You trust me for such—why? Why not yourself?” She asked, curiosity overwhelming her desire to slink into a corner.

“You are not the only one to gain magic since the event, Sabina. Just the only one who apparently can’t keep it a secret.” Sabina winced at the cutting comment but said nothing. She was correct.

Wait. “You...” she started, but a stern look made her close her mouth.

Taenya glanced back at the door, then sat forward slightly. “I know our roles. I will be the one to hold fast against any force that comes against us. You will be protecting the princess while disrupting our enemies. *And Gwyn will rain fiery death upon them.*”

Taenya abruptly stood up. “Enough of that. We can discuss more later. Now, we need to prepare for the Princess’ birthday tomorrow.”

Sabina squinted her eyes in confusion. “It’s her birthday?”

“It is! And we only found out last week. I apologize, I have been so busy and did not inform you. Wonderful timing, right? She and Maya worked it out. Siveril coordinated invitations already.”

Sabina groaned as she followed Taenya out of the room. They were going to be up late arranging everything. Yet, she couldn't help but smile as she felt the eagerness coming from Taenya. *I won't disappoint you again.*

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Gwyn was excited as she skipped down the hall toward where the *crew* lived, which is what she had taken to calling her three ladies-in-waiting. As she got close, one of the servants smiled before knocking on one of the bedrooms and opening the door. Barely a moment later, Nora emerged. Gwyn smiled at the older girl, who was already perfectly dressed. *She may just have someone help her like I do. So, not a big deal, Gwyn.* “Good morning, Nora!”

Nora lowered one of her brows, causing both of them to scrunch together as she quirked her face up. It was her way of having an amused or ‘*really?*’ face because she wasn't able to raise just one brow like Gwyn. *Or like the brow master, Mom.*

“Good morning, Your Highness.” She said with a cheerful tone.

Gwyn gave an exaggerated sigh, making sure to toss her head back for Nora's sake. “Must we do this *every* day, Nora?” She really wished they would call her by her name.

Nora chuckled softly. “Please allow me just one more day, Your Highness.” *Which is what you say every time!*

Ilyana was the next to emerge. “Your Highness! It is a beautiful morning. I wish you a pleasant Day of Birth.”

Gwyn giggled. “It's ‘*Happy Birthday*’, Ilyana!”

The oldest of her ladies-in-waiting smiled. “Ah, my apologies, Your Highness. I am positive I will get a *hang* of your world's colloquialisms soon.” She quickly looked and flashed a victorious expression at Nora, who scowled in response. They spoke about the day and waited for several minutes before another door slammed open and Lorrena nearly tumbled out.

Her eyes went wide after she saw the three of them waiting and lowered her head. “I am sorry, Your Highness. I overslept.”

Gwyn snorted and patted Lorrena’s back. “It’s quite alright, Lori. Here, let me tell you a secret.” She leaned in close, whispering into her ear, “I used to get up late all the time and had to rush to get ready. My mom was always waiting for me. Every time, she’d be tapping her foot and had the eyebrow of doom locked and loaded. Then, she’d just smile, and we’d leave to go to school.”

Lorrena smiled. “Thank you, Your Highness.” She said quietly.

Gwyn chatted up the crew as they rushed to get breakfast and start the day. After all, it was her birthday!

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Gwyn was super nervous. She had spent the day with Taenya, Emma, and the girls shopping. The group picked up all of the new dresses that had been tailored for them, which required all of them to make sure the fit was perfect. Lorrena had to have a slight fix done for hers, which took another half hour that seemed to frustrate Emma. After, they made their way back to the house to get ready. That part had taken a while and consisted of everyone fussing with hair and having makeup applied, which Gwyn luckily avoided.

Gwyn was happy after Emma finished helping her get into her dress and fixing up her hair. It wasn’t fun to sit there while the girls all just stood around and gossiped. *She hated it. Why are they so annoying?* It took everything she had to not just groan and walk away.

It took a while, but eventually, Taenya and Sabina came to retrieve the girls. Both were dressed in their fancy armor which Gwyn loved. The silver metal with blue and black accents was so *cool*. The dragons that were on Taenya’s armor were gorgeous. The two looked over everyone’s outfits and hair, which made Gwyn scrutinize them right back. She noticed that Sabina didn’t look as happy or even as *serious* as she usually did. She allowed the two knights to guide them out of her suite where everyone had been getting ready.

Walking out, she noticed Ser Theran standing with Friedrich across the hall. “Hi, Theran! You’re home! Hi Friedrich. How are you two?”

Theran bowed. “I am well, Your Highness. Ser Siveril has kept me busy, as usual. I managed to add another location to our holdings.”

Gwyn smiled. “Oh, that’s fantastic, Ser Theran. I can’t wait until you can tell me all about it.” She looked at Friedrich and said, “Ser Friedrich, you’re looking snazzy in your new armor.”

The man smiled, which made her giggle at the way his handlebar mustache curled up. “Danke, Your Highness. My *Common* is getting better, yes?”

“Absolutely, Ser Friedrich.” Turning to Taenya, she asked as they started moving. “So, what’s the plan?”

“This a small event, the people you will know are the families of your ladies-in-waiting, Guildmaster Batteux along with a few other guildmasters, Onas and his family, some other merchants that we have entered into some dealings with, a few more nobles that are interested in establishing relations, and finally a representative from Duke Tiloral. We will introduce you to them as you sit upon the Seat of the House. They will also be presenting gifts at that time.”

Ser Theran turned his head slightly from where he was walking ahead of her. “It’s about appearance. They will each be competing to see who can provide the best, most expensive gift.” He glanced at Taenya. “Baron Iemes is also sending a representative.”

Gwyn barely heard what Theran had said, instead she addressed Taenya, “The Duke sent someone?”

Taenya and Sabina both smiled as they walked next to her toward the hall where they would have the party. “Yes, Lady Roslyn Tiloral will be attending,” Sabina said. “The Duke’s granddaughter that you asked to meet.”

Gwyn’s eyes went wide. *She’s coming! Please be nice. Please be nice.*

The knights all coached her and her ladies-in-waiting on the way to the hall. They deliberately slowed down several times just to ensure the girls all understood their parts. It seemed that after all the festivities with people outside of the House, they would have another small setting with just the members.

Entering the hall was a production in itself, one that required Gwyn to stand quietly and smile while Ser Siveril, who was doing his Majordomo act, announced her... along with every one of her knights and ladies-in-waiting.

This is going to take a while.