

## Overcoming Obstacles

Gwyn stared at the army arrayed against them with fury. They continued toward them slowly, as if their victory was inevitable. As if the fact that their other force was defeated meant nothing. It reminded her of the arrogance Count Telford had shown. They believed they were superior, and thus they were. No question, just absolute belief. It grated at Gwyn. The whole system was broken.

Gwyn knew it needed to be torn down. Taenya had said she could be the change those of this world needed. She didn't see how. All she could see was a path of death and destruction. Perhaps that was what her knight meant. That it should be burnt to ash so that something new could arise from it. Something better.

That was something Gwyn could do.

Starting now.

With a severe feeling of *deja vu* washing over her, she looked to the right, seeing Taenya in her armor, helmet on with the visor down. The knight's armor wasn't quite gleaming as in her previous vision, but the dragon on her shoulders was immediately recognizable.

To her left stood Sabina, her armor matched that of Taenya's except that her helmet was formed to accommodate her long elf ears. There was no army at her beck and call. Just twenty guards and her two knights. Approaching them were over two hundred soldiers of House Angwin.

Still, her people stood resolute. They had complete faith in her, and she would not fail them. There would be no army to defend her as she cast magic, no flaming phoenixes to send at the enemy to lay waste. There would be no talking. No negotiations. When those who took up arms against them entered her range, she would attack. She just needed Taenya and Sabina to get them to pause.

Then they would *burn*.

\* \* \*

Taenya took a deep breath. She knew she should be resting. Her mind felt... strained as if she were mentally exhausted. Her connection to mana was taut and felt like it could snap if she pulled too hard.

*Still, I have to do this. Just enough until Gwyn can start. Enough to make them hesitate.*

The army was nearly at the point where she needed to cast. She felt for her connection to the **Drakyyd Spirit**. It was there, strong. The spirit wanted to be unleashed, to wreak havoc upon those of House Angwin.

*One last time. Then you may rest.*

A rumble came from the mana around them.

Taenya started casting her **Summon Animal Spirit**.

Red mana flowed through her and at a position in front of their line. The guards didn't even flinch as the mist grew and the drakyyd's deafening roar emitted from the red cloud. Her spell reached the point where it no longer needed her to fuel its summoning, so she lowered her hands. The spirit was fueled by the mana she provided it, and her connection through her core was tenuous at best. Until the connection was severed and the drakyyd returned to the mana, she simply needed to pour mana into the working.

For the first time, Taenya felt a pang of jealousy for Sabina and Gwyn. Their connections were so much stronger. She knew the *why*. Taenya had a lot of time to figure out the nuances of her magic.

Taenya wasn't a pure magic user.

Sure, she could summon animal spirits and some other lesser magic, but she was also able to use her magic in a similar way to Theran. Mana seemed to affect the people of her House in three ways. There were pure magic users like Sabina and Gwyn, and physical users, like Theran. That knight could use mana to strengthen him physically, and he was able to do so much to great results.

Taenya could do both. It was both frustrating and exciting. She could use mana to augment her physical attacks as she had done in the duel with Angwin's son, or she could use magic. That, unfortunately, had revealed that she would never be as strong in a single area as those of a pure connection. Sure, she was a bit more versatile, but something could be said for big, flashy spectacles such as Sabina's dismantling of the cavalry and what Gwyn was surely about to do.

One positive was that Sabina's magic had less of an effect on her. Not that she didn't trust her friend, but it meant that other mind mages would struggle as well. Perhaps that was a benefit of having a more mental connection to mana as well.

Whatever it was, she knew that her abilities were getting stronger with each rush she felt.

Her spell started to solidify, the contest of wills negligible with the spirit already entering into a bond through oath and contract.

With the same flash of red mana, the **Drakyyd Spirit** erupted from the mist with a roar. A surge of emotions came from it. The spirit felt protective of Gwyn, it had felt the girl's fire. It bowed its head toward the girl, and Gwyn smiled as she nodded in return.

As soon as the beast spoke its fury, a black mist rushed from Sabina. The sky turned black, as the woman added her own spells to the mix. Then, Taenya saw what they'd all been waiting for. The ripple of troops halting of their own volition.

\* \* \*

It was time. The army stopped, and she could just barely hear people shouting orders as day turned to night and the drakyyd rushed at them. Shields were raised and spears were lowered.

Exactly as she wanted.

Gwyn felt her connection to her mana sing, she pulled at the mana and formed her spell.

She closed her eyes, feeling at the mana. It sang and it listened, but it was without direction. It reached out to her, and she reached back with a nudge. Gwyn sang her desire, putting her intent into her spell. She needed the army to hesitate more. To make them freeze in place.

Her **Aura of Winter** was a spell that normally would center on herself—at least from the times she'd practiced with it. She needed something that worked like Sabina's **Obfuscating Mist**. Gwyn felt her connection to mana strengthen as it started to realize what she wanted. Her hands frosted over and she raised them, the mana felt heavy almost like she was lifting weights.

The air around her grew frigid and she focused on the direction the spell would go. She imagined the swells of water in the ocean as they crashed against the rocks. Gwyn then took that image and *chilled* it until the spell would form the way she wished. She knew that her connection to mana was strong, but trying to force too much into her spellwork would leave her defenseless and vulnerable like Taenya when she had pulled too much.

It was a concept that she had been delving into, and it seemed that mana itself desired to provide answers. Her connection to mana was like a rubber band. Normally, when she wasn't using it, it was loose. However, the more she pulled at it, the stronger the tension. If she used too much mana, it would do one of two things to her. It would either snap back and hurt her, or it would break. A forceful breaking of a connection is what happened to Taenya.

Likewise, using too much mana for extended periods could cause other issues. These resulted in things that Ms. Rolfe liked to call Mana Sickness or Mana Exhaustion. It seems her knights would also need to join their lessons.

*That can come later, Gwyn. Don't get distracted.*

She breathed in deep and exhaled a nice foggy white breath. She pulled her fists into herself and then... *pushed*. A **Wave of Frost** as wide as the army in front of them started just in front of the drakyyd spirit that Taenya had summoned. Sweat was already forming on her knight's head.

*"Now, Taenya!"*

The only indication that she heard her was the drakyyd leaping into motion. The massive drake launched itself after the wave of frost, using it as a screen. It was as if it could see through all the black mist and the frost because as it neared the army, it *leaped* right over the front line and landed in the center of the formation.

Gwyn smirked and focused on the outsides even as the drakyyd started laying waste to the center. She pulled at her favored mana and felt the air around her instantly heat up. Gwyn knew her eyes were burning, and it filled her with glee as she imagined how she looked.

Her draconic flame swirled inside of her and she cast **Pillar of Flame** on both outer wings of the enemy's formation at the same time. Twin pillars of red and gold fire surged upward in the midst of the enemy.

Instantly the formation collapsed. Those in the center were fighting desperately against the drakyyd, who, if Taenya's condition was any judge, would dissipate any time... *And there it goes.*

Gwyn quickly formed as many **Fireballs** as she could and launched them at the army even as the men tried to turn around from where they had been fighting the large animal spirit.

Scarlet fire exploded all along the front lines causing men to cry out as they fell into smoldering heaps and she aimed two more **Pillars of Flame** in the center areas of the formation that were still trying to regroup. Gwyn instantly followed up by aiming another one where a group of archers was attempting to form up. The men wore fabric that seemed to simply ignite as the pillar burst around them. The act caused those around them to have to try and help them.

A shout came out from the enemy and suddenly all sense of order collapsed. The army surged forward at them, but Gwyn and Taenya had already thinned their numbers significantly.

Gwyn pulled at her mana, remembering how she had formed her **Wave of Frost** and applied her red mana to the concept. She felt her connection with mana tighten significantly as she cast the spell. She narrowed its focus slightly and then let loose an **Inferno Wave**. The spell was only a third as wide as the one of frost and it moved a bit slower, but its effect on the army was far more immediate. The charge halted immediately and turned as everyone sought to flee the oncoming flame.

*~They have called for a retreat.~*

She watched as the wave caught the rear of those trying to run, and felt satisfaction as even more of their enemies fell, burning.

Gwyn was about to turn and speak to her people when she heard horns. Her eyes widened. *“Sabina? What is that?”*

Taenya looked up wearily, the knight swaying slightly on her feet. “I don’t see anything.”

Sabina’s eyes closed and her black mist fell away and the day returned.

What she saw made her gasp. “More people?”

A large group of people on horseback were charging the army. From what Gwyn could see, they easily numbered about three-quarters of what remained of those on foot.

*“Look at their armor!”* Senior guardsman Oren yelled out.

Gwyn squinted as she tried to look close and what she saw made her eyes go wide. She heard Taenya suck in a deep breath.

“It’s the Paladins of Alos. It seems that Amari got tired of waiting on us,” Taenya said.

Angwin’s army tried to form a line, but their disorganized retreat had left them in no position to prepare for any size force attacking them from the rear. The paladins in their shiny red armor crashed into the army in a way that her spells never could. Two lines of men and women were simply trampled before a single paladin even made to swing their blades.

What had been a defeat for the army, turned into a slaughter and within five short minutes, over two hundred people from Angwin’s forces were dead and not a single paladin was even injured.

Taenya took a deep breath and Gwyn saw her look at Sabina. “It seems that we should be nicer to Amari.”

Gwyn huffed a hesitant laugh. “You better after this.”

Sabina nodded. “Let us get to the carriages and wagons. We should meet up with her.”

Gwyn took one last look at the battlefield and turned around. She needed to check on her people.

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Sabina looked around and sighed in relief as she took in the sight of the entrance to the inn that they would be staying in while in Drakensburg. It was considered one of the nicest locations for traveling nobles to reside within the city. Aleanora’s mother did well.

The paladin, Amari, raised a brow and gave her a look as she stepped around her and entered the inn. Two of Sabina's wynvers walked by behind the woman, staying close as she'd ordered. They would move to shadow Gwyn as she got settled in and assist her in whatever she needed.

Sabina had so much to do, but all she could do was just stand there.

A hand rested on her shoulder, and the lack of any emotion emitting from the source told her who it was.

“You going to stand there or go in?” Taenya asked.

“I... I am going in.” She tried to take a step but Taenya pulled her back, moving close and whispering into her ear. Sabina shivered instinctively as a chill went down her spine.

*“Are you alright?”*

Sabina nodded. ***~I am. Just relieved to be here. Will the capital really be safer?~***

***~If it isn't... we will face it together. We just need to look after that girl.~***

“You’re right. This is going to be a long winter, isn’t it?”

Taenya squeezed her shoulder and pulled her closer. “It will only be long if you snore.”

Sabina squinted her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Her friend chuckled. “Did I forget to mention? You and I are sharing a room.”

Sabina groaned. “You’re the one that snores!”

*This is going to be a long wait until the Festival of Love.*

As if her friend could read *her* mind she chuckled. “It’s only forty days or so, Sabina. The Festival of Hearth begins next week. I think Gwyn will enjoy it.”

*I hope so. She definitely could use something to take her mind off—*

Sabina’s eyes shot open. She just had an idea and one that would help *her* with all of her issues as well as others like her.

***~Taenya? I think I have something to discuss with you during this time. In secret. I could use your help.~***

Taenya paused and looked into her eyes, seeing the seriousness on her face. She reached forward and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. “I will always have your back, my friend.”

Sabina smiled. It felt good to have those that cared for you.

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Gwyn sat on her bed. Her knees to her chest. Tears stained her cheeks and she just rocked herself back and forth. *I'm sorry, mom. I had to. They were going to hurt us. I'm sorry.*

She cried. People kept trying to hurt them, and take advantage of her.

They were lucky that no one had been killed. A few guards had been hurt, but nothing serious. She felt like she was getting stronger, but it still felt like it wasn't enough.

*People are aware of what I can do now. Every new group seems to try and be ready for me.*

All it would take was for an adult with magic and she would not be able to protect her people. She knew she could only do so much. She was a kid. Her magic wouldn't be enough one day.

*And that day everyone will die, and it will be my fault.*

They were stuck here in this new city for over forty days... and she hated it. She wished she could do something. Instead, she constantly had to do whatever the adults planned for her. *Why can't I just be older? I wish I wasn't so... small.*

She squeezed her eyes shut as more tears came.

*Mom could be out there right now, and I won't know. I can't help her. I need to help her. What if she's... dead?*

Gwyn played with her ring, rotating it on her finger as she rocked herself, trying to calm herself down. Trying to not use her magic.

*I wish I had proof. Anything.*

*Just knowing she was alive would be enough.*

She couldn't even be the one to go look for her. Gwyn had to go to *school*. A stupid academy, and not even able to see Sabina and Taenya except for the weekends. Lorrena would be there, but that's it. Ilyana may be in the other part of the school, the one for older kids... that just meant she'd be close enough to know she was there, but still not able to see her.

It was horrible.

*There's Roslyn. She'll be there.*

Gwyn took a deep breath. That one fact made everything better. She'd have Roslyn with her at the school. Her best friend. Someone who would make waiting for

*any* information about her mom better. A person who wouldn't judge her in moments like this.

A person whose shoulder she could cry on.

*I miss you, Roslyn. I'll be there soon.*

She wiped away the snot and tears and pulled at her mana, letting her **Frozen Heart** settle into her.

Gwyn Reinhart put her smile back on and stood up.

She had to be strong just a little while longer.

She could continue to fake it until she makes it.

*Just a little while longer.*

*Mommy? Please hurry.*

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Roslyn heard the knock at the carriage door and sat up as Ser Roderick stuck his head in. "My Lady, we have arrived."

She nodded and brushed her dress down and pulled her cloak tight as a slight breeze slipped through the crack. "Thank you, Ser Roderick."

The man nodded and exited. She shivered and grabbed the blanket next to her, pulling it over her legs. *It is freezing!*

After leaving the dwarven Under-Nation of Dirn Loduhr, they had continued their journey nearly without pause to the capital despite the weather. They brought numerous carriages and wagons with supplies to ensure they would be alright during the journey. An absurd amount of guards had joined them, and Roslyn was not sure why they were needed. *I never needed that many to travel to Maireharbora.*

It had been so cold. They had traveled straight through the Festival of Hearth, choosing not to stop for winter, and made good time to the city. The guards had set up so many campfires during the night to keep them warm. The ovens in her tent barely kept her warm and if not for the furs she slept under she would have frozen.

*I wish Gwyn was here. She'd keep me warm...* Roslyn blushed, mentally swatting away the errant thought.

She waited as the carriage moved and stopped again, before jerking into motion once more. Roslyn glanced out of the window as they entered the city, gazing up at the massive gate they were moving through. *The Gate of Kings*. It was the gate that moved directly into the noble ward of the city, and then from there to the palace and the royal administrative center.

There were few people out and about, but the city seemed to be well maintained with street sweepers shoveling and removing snow from the boulevard. *I wonder how Gwyn is doing in Drakensburg?*

*I hope her trip was peaceful and warmer than mine.*

Roslyn snorted. *Of course, it's warmer. She can control fire!*

Her hand absently moved to the earring that Gwyn had gifted her. She smiled.

She closed the curtains to the window as the carriage moved through the gate of the Tilor Estate within the city. Palatial in its own right, it was second only to the Crown's.

As they came to their final stop, Roslyn stood up and moved to the door. It opened just as she reached for the handle and Ser Roderick pulled it back and held out a hand for her. Ser Janine bowed as Roslyn stepped down from the carriage.

Her paladin protector, Evocati Khalan, was standing with another knight. One who was dressed in *familiar* armor. *Very familiar*.

"Thank you, Ser Roderick, Janine."

She looked over at the paladin and the knight, the human's mustache just as meticulous as she remembered from when she had visited Gwyn's manor. Roslyn stepped forward and gave the man a respectful dip of her head.

"Sir Friedrich, is it?"

The man bowed and smiled as he stood, his mustache scrunching up amusingly. "It is, My Lady. Sir Friedrich von Boden of—previously of the Holy Roman Empire, now sworn to House Reinhart in this new world. Her Highness requested that I meet with you when you arrived."

His accent was thick, and she remembered Gwyn telling her that he had learned Common since arriving on Eona. Roslyn enjoyed it.

Roslyn giggled. “That is funny. She told *me* to find *you* after I arrived.”

The man chuckled. “She is fond of you, it seems.” He looked around at her knights and large guard contingent. “You also have many protectors, but Princess Gwyn wanted me to join you if you would have me.”

Both Khalan and Ser Roderick looked as if they were about to protest but Roslyn smiled. “I would love to have you join me until my friend arrives, Sir Friedrich.”

The man gave her a nod and looked to Ser Roderick. “I will take your lead, Ser Roderick.”

Her knight gave the man an appreciative nod.

Roslyn took a moment to really look at the knight and his armor and glanced back at Roderick and Janine. She remembered how much Gwyn loved talking about armor and knights, and the painstaking detail her friend had gone into to make sure what her knights wore was *perfect*.

She sighed.

*They really do have better-looking armor than ours.*

*Not that I'll ever tell Gwyn that.*