

## Strength Comes in Many Forms

“Have you heard from Friedrich?” Gwyn asked Sabina.

The elf shook her head. “Not since last time. I know they arrived in Drakensburg safely. Niles purchased some more supplies and they should have left soon after.”

Gwyn nodded. “Hopefully we hear something else soon. What do we have to do today?”

“You have nothing on your agenda today, Your Highness,” Emma said from behind her.

Sabina shrugged. “Siveril made sure everyone knew you were preparing to leave for the Academy. We still have a few weeks, so that is why we are doing everything needed this week. You will be inundated with last-minute meetings for the next two weeks.”

Gwyn looked down at her feet as she followed Sabina through the manor. “Oh. No studies either?”

Emma replied instead, “Mr. Branigan and Ms. Rolfe are preparing everything you will need for the Academy. They are also assisting with Lady Lorrena’s studies so that she may pass the entrance exams.”

Gwyn nodded again. She knew Lorrena was struggling with learning everything needed before the Academy would accept her. She was glad they were giving her more help. Siveril and the girl’s parents were adamant about ensuring Lorrena was able to attend as her majordomo had insisted that having a retainer join her there was expected. Everything had become almost too much for Gwyn and she continually questioned her immaturity when first meeting Onas. *It is just so difficult doing this whole princess thing. At least it’s not pretending anymore... I really do know how to act now.*

The three of them walked into the main hall where Siveril spoke with Taenya and Onas. She noticed them staring down at a small box that lay on the table next to them while they conversed amongst themselves. Gwyn couldn’t make out what they were saying but caught sight of Ilyana standing alone off to the side near where she entered. Ilyana waved and walked over when she noticed Gwyn. After a curtsy, she crossed her hands in front of herself and said, “Greetings, Your Highness! It is a pleasure to see you today!”

Gwyn gave the girl a lopsided smile and tilted her head. “You see me every day, Ilyana! What are you guys up to?”

Ilyana stepped next to her and leaned closer. “We... I mean, Ser Taenya and Mr. Fenren got you a present!”

Gwyn smiled. Of the three, Ilyana tried really hard to be her friend. It was sad that it felt... fake. It wasn't that the girl was trying to take advantage of her or anything, it just seemed that Ilyana did not know how to be friends with someone almost six years younger. It made her act in a way she thought Gwyn would *want* her to act. The reality was, Gwyn just wanted the older girl to be herself. In fact, it was the biggest problem with all of her ladies-in-waiting, or the crew as she'd come to call them. They were stuck in performing to the expectations of their parents and how they thought they should act around a *princess*. Meanwhile, Gwyn just wanted them to be her friends.

“What did you get me?” She lowered her voice slightly. “*Don't worry I won't tell!*” she asked conspiratorially.

Ilyana hesitated. “Uh. I—”

Gwyn giggled and patted the elf's arm. “It's okay. I'm joking. Come on, let's go see what they have to say. They're acting all serious.”

“Oh... about that.”

She narrowed her eyes as she looked at the high elf. “What happened?”

“Nothing... *bad?*”

Gwyn pressed, but it was clear Ilyana did not want to say. “Okay, come on. I'll get Taenya to tell me.”

She walked over to the group with the rest in tow, amused that the three were so distracted that they didn't even see her arrive.

“Hey everyone, what's got all of you acting super serious?”

Taenya jumped slightly. She immediately noticed and narrowed her eyes at Sabina. “You could have warned me.”

“Could have. This was more fun,” Sabina said.

Gwyn loved the way her two aunts acted ever since Taenya's duel. Something had changed between them and she could tell that they were closer because of it. She suspected that it had something to do with Sabina's magic. She glanced at Sabina, *You two talk like you and I do, don't you?*

The woman smirked. ~***We do. Thank you for the boost in my confidence, Gwyn. I would never have even tried if it weren't for you.***~

Gwyn reached over and playfully punched Sabina in the arm. *Don't mention it, auntie.*

Sabina rolled her eyes. *~Have you told Taenya about that yet?~*

*Nope! Have you?*

*~No, I thought you would.~*

*Well, aren't you two... like girlfriends, now?*

Sabina's eyes went wide and it caused Taenya to raise her brow and look between the both of them. "Ahem. You two can have your secret messages, later."

Gwyn looked at Sabina and giggled because her eyes were still wide open. "Sorry, Taenya. Whatcha guys got there?" she asked innocently, but quickly glanced at Ilyana and winked at her. Her lady-in-waiting just shook her head with a smirk.

Taenya sighed and Onas looked between those present with an amused expression. "Remember when we spoke of getting you a magical item, Your Highness?" he asked.

Gwyn nodded.

"Well, with Taenya's timely assistance, we were able to purchase one," Onas said.

He reached over and picked up the box. She looked expectantly at the small glossy wooden box and mentally guessed what it was. *Bit obvious.* Gwyn was proven right a moment later when he opened it and a... large... ring was gently placed inside. It was pretty and silver with a diamond that was set into the ring. *Looks like something that would be done in my world.* All of the rings she had seen here hadn't had a gem like that. It seemed everyone wanted to show off as big of a gem as possible, instead of almost hiding it in the band. *Actually, that's pretty similar to Earth, as well. They weren't common.*

What looked genuinely pretty though, were the four little glowing... *symbols* on the band. They were a pretty blue and glowed softly.

*Do they expect me to wear that? Uh... Is it a ring for my big toe?* She glanced between the ring, her hand, and the adults around her and struggled with what to say. *Surely they know, right?*

Taenya chuckled and reached down, plucking the ring from the box. "Hold out your hand, trust me."

Gwyn furrowed her brows but did as she was told. Her knight slid the ring onto her index finger and she gasped as she felt a small surge of magic signal a connection between the ring and herself. The magic in the ring seemed to flow into her as if it knew her and her magic connected with it excitedly. She felt a sudden rush as her connection to the magic around her expanded, an act that caused her to gasp. Gwyn looked down at the ring and cried out in surprise as the ring *shrunk* onto her finger. “It’s shrinking!”

Taenya laughed. “It’s resizing itself to fit you!”

“That’s so cool! Wait... you knew this would happen. Jerk, you coulda told me,” she said, her eyes narrowing at the woman who held a smug smile.

“That’s what you and Sabina get for startling me!”

“Hey! She did that, I just walked up. Aren’t you a knight that should be aware of her surroundings?”

Taenya gasped exaggeratedly. “Hey now! I will have you know that—”

Siveril cleared his throat. “Ser Taenya, it seems that your duel has raised your confidence as of late. Please remember how to act when not in private.”

Gwyn narrowed her eyes but noticed Siveril looking at Onas. “Don’t worry, Siveril. Mr. Onas is part of the family, too. He won’t tell anyone how we act in the House. Right, Mr. Onas?”

The merchant elf adopted a serious expression and bowed his head. “Of course not, Your Highness. I am honored you think so highly of me. I would not betray that trust.”

Gwyn smiled and looked at Siveril. The man seemed to scrutinize Onas searchingly, but he finally nodded. “Thank you, Mr. Fenren.”

Taenya shrugged slightly, just enough so Gwyn would see and Siveril would miss it as he glanced at her finger. “How does the ring feel, Your Highness?”

She flexed her hand and probed at the ring with her magic. It quickly answered her and seemed ready to surge her with magic as she wished it. She channeled magic normally and the ring automatically connected with it and helped pull even more into her. It felt as if any magic she used would be stronger and more controllable.

“It feels great, actually. It is really comfortable and I think it’s going to make all of my magic stronger! I can try some of the new stuff I have been wanting to do, now. Probably. Oh! I can try to do some of those magics like you, Taenya! The ones where it makes me stronger. Or—”

Sabina chuckled from behind her. “Slow down, Your Highness. Let’s not get too carried away. We’ll make time for your training.”

Gwyn sighed. “You’re right. I’m just excited to be as strong as you two.”

Taenya chuckled. “Strength comes in many forms, Your Highness. You’ll get there.”

Gwyn nodded, smiling as she looked at Taenya and Onas. “Thank you both for the ring. I really appreciate it.”

Onas returned her smile and reached out a hand. “May I?” he asked, gesturing to the ring.

Gwyn shrugged and took it off of her finger. She noticed that the ring remained the same size as she did. Onas turned it over and showed her the inside. There were more tiny gemstones hidden inside the inner ring of the band. Four, to be exact, with three on the top and one on the bottom. “There is more in here. These gems help what the makers call *mana* to connect with you. The little opal here at the bottom is what does it. At the top we have...”

He glanced down at a piece of paper that was in his other hand. “The blue sapphire is what allows it to do what it does, and how it tells the mana what you want it to do. The amethyst helps you use the ring for the shaping of mana, and the ruby allows your ring to *use* the mana it connects with. The diamond *amplifies* everything the ring does for you.”

He pointed to a small marking inside the band. “Then finally, on the side here, is the maker’s mark of the people that made it. The Farum Merchant Company made this. I am trying to connect with them further. I think our House would do very well if we were able to secure sole rights to import their products into Avira.”

Gwyn nodded. Truthfully, she had started to tune him out after he explained what the different gems meant. It sounded like when mom explained how her different gadgets had worked like her watch. It was cool to look at the inside of the watch, but usually, everything seemed to go blurry and she grew more tired as her mom described each little chip. *I wish she was here to explain this though. I would listen to everything.*

“That’s really interesting, Mr. Onas. Thank you,” she said as he handed the ring back to her. She slid it back onto her finger and sighed as the connection was established. *I don’t think I ever want to take this off.*

The man nodded and backed away. They all seemed to look at her expectantly, so she decided to say something. “Thank you so much, everyone. I am excited to see what we can do with all of these. Between Ser Taenya and Ser Sabina, I think getting more magic items will be just what the House needs. It would also be good for us to be the

only ones to bring these things to the kingdom.” She looked at Siveril, who nodded slowly.

“I agree. This is a good venture for the House if we can manage it. I will write up something for you Onas, and you can enter House Reinhart into a contract with this Farum Merchant Company if possible. Avira is a large market, surely they would want easy access through its only port. I will also send a letter to the duke. I think we can obtain a deal for it. Use it to sweeten any deal with the owners.”

Onas tilted his head in thought. “That should work. I will leave *that* in my pocket, just in case. I have just the person for it.”

Gwyn smiled.

*The House is going to be in a good spot for when we find mom.*

\* \* \*

“Good evening, Maris,” Emma greeted the telv guard next to the door to the Princess’ rooms. The woman was one of the four guards assigned to Ser Sabina’s team. *The Ravens* was what they had taken to calling themselves. Three women and a man who trained heavily with the knight in secret. They seemed like a strange bunch. Especially after having been working more closely with Ser Sabina.

Emma knew it was because of Ser Sabina’s magic, and they had been sworn to secrecy as to what it entailed. However, Emma knew. She was always with the princess; she could see the magic in the way the knight acted. *Ser Sabina had used it when we first met.* She shivered involuntarily, remembering the feeling she had felt at the time. She had won the woman’s begrudging respect since then, and the knight had won hers.

“Evening, Emma. How are you tonight?” the woman asked.

“I am well. A bit tired, tonight. Been getting ready for the big move.”

“Aye! Me as well. I’ve got everything packed. Ser Sabina has been working extra to prepare for it. Not much longer! I hear it’s only a few more weeks. I heard that the Wynvers have come back to the manor exhausted almost daily. Ser Taenya has been running them all ragged from what I’ve heard.”

Emma nodded as the woman gossiped about Ser Taenya’s team of guards. The *Drakyyds* named their group after the large reptile that roamed and hunted in the forests near the forest regions to the west. She recalled that Gwyn had said it looked like

a dragon without wings. She tilted her head as the woman finished talking about her fellow guards. “Is that why Ser Sabina has been staying with Her Highness more often? I thought it was something else.”

Ser Sabina’s group was named after the small flying reptile that they thought was sufficiently similar to the dragon that adorned the House crest. *I wonder if they know exactly how large the princess has described a dragon as being.*

Maris nodded. “Yes, Ser Taenya has been very busy and every spare moment she has spent practicing with her team. The only ones that have gotten rest are the *Apcerosi*.”

Ser Theran’s guards had chosen a large reptile called the Apceros for their emblem. The animal was not native to this region of Ikios and could only be found in the deserts or dry regions of the continent, where it was used as a beast of burden. The large beast had a hardened shield-like back and its tail looked similar to a mace. The same mace that those guards had tried to use as their main weapons... until Ser Theran shut that down and admonished them for leaning too hard into the image.

She refocused on the guardswoman as the telv continued, “Ser Theran continues to strengthen the defense of the House, but his guards don’t have as much training to do to... acclimate to our leaders.”

Emma could understand that, and it was likely the reason for the guards having so much time to come up with antics. Ser Taenya and Sabina both had magic while Ser Theran did not. She knew that the lady knights were working with their guard teams in a way that took advantage of that magic. She could only imagine what the *Wynvers* had to go through. Emma shivered again.

The woman seemed to realize what she was thinking for she said, “It’s not as bad as it sounds, Emma. We have our duty, and we respect it. We are Her Highness’ shadow. Her protectors in the dark.”

Emma and Maris heard noise from within. Maris looked at her. “I believe she’s ready for you.”

Emma straightened her back and then nodded to the guard. Maris opened one of the double doors, and with one last glance at the... shadow guard, she walked into her liege’s room.

She walked into a sight she had seen more than once. Jagged stalagmites of ice dotted the edges of the room and at the center stood a girl red-faced and fists clenched in frustration. Emma sighed and turned back to the door. “Guard Maris?”

The guard peeked her head in, eyes going wide as she took in the sight. “Yes, Ms. Emma?”

“Could you please retrieve, Ser Sabina?”

“At once.”

The guard hurried off and Emma turned back to the girl. “Your Highness, perhaps it is time for a break. Why don’t I get you some tea? Maybe something to warm you up? It seems someone must have left a window open, winter is coming sooner than normal this year.”

Gwyn tilted her head and then looked up at her slowly. Emma smirked at her joke as the girl glanced around, groaning as she did. “I almost had it, Emma. I am *so* close!” the princess said.

“What are you close to, Your Highness?”

“Dream-me was able to turn everything frozen in a flash! I tried it a different way and that’s how I made my **Aura of Winter**. That wasn’t right though. I *need* something like uh... **Flash Freeze**, but I can’t get it,” she bemoaned.

Emma was certainly not the one to discuss the finer points of magic with. It was utterly beyond her. She wished Ms. Rolfe was here, that woman had done miracles with the young royal. Still, she had to say *something*. “Perhaps this Dream-you, was not an insight into what you should be able to do now, but something you may be able to accomplish when you grow stronger? Maybe there are other things you need to learn first?”

Gwyn perked up. “That makes sense! It’s like the games back home. I have to level up! I’m not high enough to get that spell, yet. Wait, no. That’s silly.”

“It’s not silly, Princess. You are just relating it to what you know. It’s like when you practice your sword with Ser Theran. He made you do all of those stances and movements before even touching a sword, right?”

The princess’ eyes widened. “You’re right! He called it fundamentals. I don’t have the fundamentals of ice magic, yet. You’re so smart, Emma. Thank you!”

The girl was always so sweet.

She hoped that never changed.

Emma smiled and took a step to the side as she heard Ser Sabina enter behind her.

As Ser Sabina spoke quietly with the princess, Emma simply got to work. The room would be ruined if they didn’t remove everything before the ice melted.



She had barely moved some books when she heard noises from outside. Emma peeked up at Ser Sabina who had frozen more still than the spikes of ice around them. After a moment, the knight's eyes shot wide.

"We're under attack." She quickly glanced at Emma and Gwyn before darting to the doorway. "*Maris! We're under attack! Warn the others! I have the princess!*"

Emma looked at her princess even as her hand slid down her dress to the dagger she had hidden on her leg. She glanced at Ser Sabina, the woman wore a face of determination.

She turned toward the door. Her own determination rose, and she was ready to meet whatever came. The '*it*' arrived quicker than she had imagined.

Emma saw movement and instinctively jumped to protect the princess. She managed to knock the girl out of the way but then felt a pinch in her ribs.

She looked down, seeing a rod coming from her side.

"Oh."

Then she fell.