

Interlude

Gilded Cage

The weight of the wooden door pressed against Roslyn's back as she leaned into it, the solid barrier providing a momentary reprieve from the world outside. Her breaths came in shaky gasps, echoing softly in the confines of their dorm room. The emotions she had tried to suppress bubbled to the surface, and she slowly sank onto the polished wooden floor, silk pajamas rustling softly with her movements. Drawing her knees up, she hugged them close, her tears staining the fine fabric.

"Why is this so difficult?" she whispered to herself, her voice breaking. "It should be simple. I have duties, responsibilities... Why do I want to put her first?"

The dimly lit room was filled with the soft glow of the lanterns, casting long, stretching shadows over the ornate furnishings. The luxurious trappings of her status, which usually brought her comfort, now seemed to mock her. She was trapped in a gilded cage, bound by expectations, tradition, and duty.

Taking a ragged breath, she tried to center herself. Gwyn, with her fearless exuberance, was a stark contrast to the structured world Roslyn inhabited. The impulsiveness, the sheer disregard for convention, was both endearing and maddening.

And while Roslyn cherished every moment they spent together, she couldn't help but feel exasperated at times.

"Literally no thought as to consequences," she muttered, thinking of the countless times Gwyn had leaped before she looked. "Of course. Because her only true interaction with nobility is here."

She understood Gwyn's perspective; not everyone was born into a life where every action, every word, was weighed and measured against the potential political repercussions. But Roslyn wished, just once, Gwyn could truly understand the constraints she was under. The constant scrutiny, the weight of expectations, and the delicate dance of diplomacy she had been trained in since birth.

Wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, Roslyn slowly rose to her feet, her eyes drifting to the empty frame she had gotten made. Ready for the art Gwyn would work on.

She was glad she wasn't back in Strathmore. Home, where all the portraits were of her ancestors; nobles of a royal lineage. Kings and Queens of the ancient House Tiloral. Because right now she was sure their stern faces would be judging her. Reminding her of the weight of the legacy she carried.

Manabound - Resilience

But she had made a true friend. One who never judged her, who cared deeply for her, and Roslyn loved her for it.

If only things didn't have to be so complicated.

I want to give her the world, but I can't do that to my family.

But... there was one thing she could do.

Taking a deep breath, Roslyn made a decision. She would find a way to balance her responsibilities and her friendship with Gwyn. Because both were too precious to lose.

As the weight of her thoughts pressed down on her, Roslyn moved towards her bed, the soft sheets inviting her to seek respite. She lay down, her gaze fixed on the ceiling, but her mind was elsewhere.

Earlier that day, in their Equestrian Studies class, a moment had stood out vividly. The sun had been high, casting bright hues over the training fields. From a distance, the sight of Calista taking to the sky for the first time had been enchanting. The young dragon's wings had caught the light, shimmering like a cascade of black gemstones as she soared, finding her rhythm in the vast expanse of the azure.

But amidst the cheers and claps, Roslyn's attention had been drawn to Gwyn. There was a light in her best friend's eyes, a radiant joy that was infectious. Gwyn's face had lit up, her pride and happiness evident as she watched her little sister embrace the freedom of flight.

It was then that a pang of longing struck Roslyn. Gwyn wanted to fly, to break free from the constraints, to feel the wind rush past and the world spread out below. And Roslyn, in her heart, yearned for a similar freedom. Not the physical act of flying, but the liberty to be herself, unburdened by the weight of expectations, traditions, and the ever-present watchful eyes of the nobility.

She wished, more than anything, to be strong enough to break the invisible chains that held her in place, to find a space where she could just be Roslyn, not the heiress of House Tiloral, not the embodiment of a legacy, but just herself.

It was times like those that Roslyn envied Gwyn's magic. To be so strong, so fearless. Roslyn may have paladins like her best friend, but she saw how the Church deferred to Gwyn. How everyone was caught up in the firestorm that was the First Mage.

Anyone else would have been jealous. Intimidated even.

But I would never feel that way about Gwyn. She deserves it all and more.

It would be easy to think that her friend would soon fly away, leaving Roslyn behind as she stepped to a stage that even the heiress of a duchy couldn't compare. How could one such as she live up to such a person? If she was fearful, it wasn't in her friend. It was at the thought that their promise of

being side by side against the world wouldn't weather the test of time. That her friend would realize that Roslyn was holding her back.

No. Roslyn felt so many emotions when it came to her friend, but jealousy? Intimidation? Such negative thoughts never crossed her mind. Happy that someone so amazing had shown kindness and compassion. A true desire to be her friend. Some may dismiss it as fake. As a way to simply gain influence and allies. Any noble would think as such, but that wasn't Gwyn. Roslyn knew her best friend's secret—that she wasn't born a princess.

But here? That didn't matter. Gwyn had been acknowledged as one, and if her countrymen and even her grandfather were so easily persuaded, Roslyn wouldn't be the one to tell them otherwise. Gwyn was truly a princess now. Nothing could take that away.

So, despite what others may do or try... Roslyn wasn't as dense as her best friend. She could see it in the sketches her friend drew. Sketches that almost brought tears to her eyes with how good they were.

And they were all of her.

Art that she didn't expect Roslyn to even see.

The emotion Roslyn felt? It was warmth.

She was *happy* with Gwyn.

A soft sigh escaped her lips as she turned onto her side, pulling the covers up to her chin. Gwyn always believed that Roslyn deserved every happiness, that she deserved to feel joy unbridled by duty. Maybe, just maybe, if she could find that strength within her, she could experience the happiness Gwyn believed she was worthy of.

As her eyelids grew heavy, the last thought that crossed her mind was a silent wish, a plea to the Family and stars above, to grant her the courage to find her own path, her own sky to soar in.



The first rays of dawn streamed through the window, illuminating the cozy dorm room at the Royal Academy. Standing by her vanity, Roslyn carefully put on her earrings, the delicate pieces sparkling in the morning light. Just as she was about to reach for her hairbrush, there was a gentle knock on the door.

It opened slightly, revealing Gwyn's concerned eyes. "Hey, Roz. You okay?" she inquired, her gaze flitting over Roslyn's form.

Catching Gwyn's reflection in the mirror, Roslyn nodded. "I am fine. Did you... did you sleep well?"

There was a brief pause before Gwyn replied, "Yeah... and uhh... I'm sorry." Roslyn noticed the traces of a sleepless night on Gwyn's face, further evidence of her keeping the commitment to avoid the use of her **[Frozen Heart]** spell.

While it saddened her to see her friend in such a state, it made her heart swell to know that Gwyn had kept her promise this long.

Wanting to bridge the momentary gap between them, Roslyn held up her brush. "Can you... can you help me with my hair?" she asked, her voice soft as she sat down.

The tension in the room dissipated as Gwyn's face lit up with a warm smile. "I'd be happy to, Roz."

Gratitude welled up within Roslyn. "Thanks, Firebug," she responded, her heart swelling with affection for her best friend.

As Gwyn started brushing Roslyn's hair, the two shared a serene moment, Roslyn relished the comfortable silence that enveloped the room and the soothing feeling of the brush's measured strokes.

Finishing with the final strokes, Gwyn set the brush down on the vanity. "There you go," she said, smiling at Roslyn's reflection in the mirror.

"Thank you," Roslyn replied, her fingers gently touching the neatly brushed locks. She then proceeded to gather her hair and pin it up, securing it with a delicate hairpin.

After a moment, both girls stood, adjusting their robes and ensuring they looked presentable. They moved in tandem, double-checking each other's appearances—straightening a collar here, adjusting a sleeve there. It was a routine they had perfected over their time at the Royal Academy.

With a nod of approval from Gwyn, Roslyn grabbed her satchel, ensuring her books and materials for the day were inside. Gwyn did the same, and together they left their dorm room.

Two of the paladins stayed with Calista while the two girls headed toward their homeroom class.

Walking through the grounds of the Royal Academy, Roslyn relished the gentle warmth of the spring sun on her skin. Birds chirped overhead, and the scent of blooming flowers filled the air. Behind them, Rollo and Khalan followed silently, their presence a comforting constant.

By the time they reached the lecture hall, the buzz of students was palpable. Everyone seemed eager to start the day. Roslyn and Gwyn made their way to their usual table, setting down their satchels and arranging their supplies.

Gwyn, breaking the quiet between them, asked, "We're still on for this weekend, right?"

Roslyn hesitated, her thoughts momentarily elsewhere. “Do you still plan on... attending the thing with Sansa’s family?”

Gwyn met her gaze, determination evident. “Yes, tomorrow night.”

Pausing for a moment, Roslyn said, “Maybe we should focus on ourselves this weekend.”

Gwyn’s face clouded with confusion and a hint of hurt. “Oh... okay.”

Internally, Roslyn berated herself. She wanted so much to spend time with Gwyn, but the words, the right words, eluded her.

The lecture passed in a blur for Roslyn. The professor’s words seemed distant, her mind preoccupied with the conversation she had with Gwyn earlier. She diligently took notes, but her thoughts often drifted back to Gwyn, the weekend, and the many unsaid emotions between them.

As the bell signaled the end of the class, students began packing their belongings, their voices rising in a crescendo of chatter and laughter. Roslyn took a moment to organize her notes, and when she looked up, Gwyn was already standing, satchel slung over her shoulder.

“I’ll see you later, Roz,” Gwyn said, her tone light, but Roslyn could detect a hint of hesitation. Without waiting for a response, Gwyn turned and made her way towards the door, heading to her Combat Foundations class.

Roslyn watched her and the paladin leave, a pang of disappointment settling in her chest. She had hoped to spend a few moments with Gwyn, perhaps to clarify things or simply share a few quiet words. But the moment had passed.

Taking a deep breath, Roslyn gathered her own belongings and left the classroom. She walked down the ornate corridors of the Royal Academy, her footsteps echoing softly. Her next class, Statecraft and Diplomacy, awaited. It was a subject she excelled in, and under normal circumstances, she would look forward to it. But today, her heart felt heavy.

As she entered the classroom, she tried to push aside her personal feelings, focusing instead on the lessons ahead. The world of diplomacy and politics was intricate and demanding, and Roslyn knew she couldn’t afford to be distracted. But in the back of her mind, thoughts of Gwyn lingered, a constant reminder of the unresolved emotions between them.

Making her way to her usual spot, Roslyn’s steps faltered momentarily when she noticed Princess Elora occupying the seat next to hers. The princess’s smug expression was unmistakable, and Roslyn felt a twinge of irritation.

“Why are you sitting here, Elora?” Roslyn’s voice was cold, her distaste evident.

Elora leaned in, her voice dripping with condescension. “Oh, Roslyn, surely you’re not surprised. After all, isn’t it fitting for a princess to sit next to her... closest peer? Even I must admit that your silver tongue is far more entertaining than the empty flattery of the others.”

Roslyn’s eyes narrowed, her disdain for the princess clear. “A pity you’ve chosen to sit here. The other sycophants are probably beside themselves with jealousy. They might just do something drastic thinking we’re actually engaging in a meaningful conversation.”

Elora smirked. “Oh, *Roz*, your disdain for my family and royalty in general is hardly a secret. Except for your precious Gwyn, of course. How is she? Still playing at being a royal?”

Roslyn’s face darkened. “Careful, Elora. Gwyn is more of a royal than you’ll ever be.”

Elora scoffed, but before she could retort, the professor began the lesson, cutting their tense exchange short. The atmosphere around them was thick with animosity, and Roslyn mentally braced herself. With Princess Elora by her side, it was bound to be a class filled with silent battles.

As the class delved into the complexities of statecraft and diplomacy, Roslyn and Elora’s cold rivalry persisted. They sparred with their words, each answer to the professor’s queries containing veiled digs at the other. Their mutual animosity was a silent undercurrent that the other students were all too aware of, but none dared to intervene.

During a lull in the discussion, Elora leaned closer to Roslyn, her voice dripping with malicious glee. “It’s amusing how Gwyn seems to be stepping on toes left and right. Have you heard about her little spat with House Breland’s daughter? She’s not only angered my family but also now the nobles? It seems that your family is the last support she has.”

Roslyn’s expression tightened, but she kept her composure. “Gwyn has her reasons. She’s not one to act without cause.”

Elora laughed softly, a sound devoid of warmth. “Oh yes, a servant. But reasons or not, she’s drawing dangerous attention. It might be in House Tiloral’s best interest to distance themselves. Unless, of course, you wish to be plagued by the same enemies.”

Roslyn’s gaze was icy. “House Tiloral stands by its allies. And Gwyn is not just an ally, she’s a friend. As close as family, not that you’d know the concept. But I would tread carefully if you wish to threaten us, *Elora*. We’re not so easily bullied.”

Elora smirked. “Who knows how long that will last if she continues down this path. Angering House Breland was foolish. But then again, wisdom never was her strong suit. If you wish to be pulled down with her, who am I to complain? I will relish the day House Tiloral is relegated to the pages of history.”

Roslyn clenched her jaw but refused to rise to Elora's bait. Instead, she redirected the conversation. "Although, speaking of alliances and family ties, I've heard an interesting rumor about your father and House Reinhart."

Elora's eyes narrowed. "What rumor?"

"Sorry, did I say rumor? I meant negotiation," Roslyn replied with a sly smile.

Elora's face contorted with a mix of confusion and anger. "What are you speaking of?" she snapped, her voice barely above a whisper but sharp enough to cut.

Their whispered exchange hadn't gone unnoticed. "Miss Moreth, Miss Tilorai," their instructor interjected, his tone stern and tinged with exasperation. "This is not a gossip parlor. Please pay attention to the lecture."

The surrounding students tried to stifle their giggles, enjoying the rare moment when the usually poised Princess Elora was reprimanded.

Roslyn, seizing the momentary upper hand, offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry, instructor," she said, her tone innocent, but her eyes betraying her amusement.

Elora shot Roslyn a glare, silently promising that their conversation was far from over.

The class settled into a studious rhythm, the sound of quills scratching against parchment filling the air. After a while, the instructor paused his lecture and gestured to a passage in the text. "Take a moment to discuss this with your partner," he instructed.

The students immediately began murmuring, turning to the person sitting next to them. For Roslyn, that meant Princess Elora. There was a brief, tense silence between them before Elora leaned in, her voice low and dangerous. "What were you speaking of?"

Hiding a soft laugh behind her hand, Roslyn's eyes twinkled mischievously. "My, he hasn't told you? That's embarrassing."

"Stop with the word games, Tilorai," Elora hissed, her eyes shooting daggers.

Roslyn leaned in closer, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "Ah, nothing like your brother. Maybe that's why. Tell him congratulations on being chosen as heir for me."

"He was not. Don't you dare—"

"Dare what?" Roslyn interrupted, her smile growing. "I'm surprised you didn't hear all about it. Your father offered your hand in marriage to Gwyneth in return for her support. Clearly that means he has chosen the heir. I must say, I couldn't believe it myself."

"My father would never do such a thing," Elora retorted, her voice shaking with anger.

Roslyn had the girl exactly where she wanted her. If there was one thing she could count on from Elora, it was her short temper. It'd been some time since her father had negotiated this offer, last Autumn in fact. Roslyn even knew that it had been rejected the night of the twin's party.

Apparently, that was also the same time that Gwyn was invited to the conclave of the True Nobles. Where she was almost kidnapped.

Still, she focused on the present.

"Oh?" Roslyn raised an eyebrow, her grin widening. "I think I'm starting to see how your relationship with the Crown Prince goes now. Perhaps you should ask *him*. I was quite surprised to hear he'd offer the spare to a potential rival."

"Your *girlfriend* is not a rival," Elora shot back, her voice laced with venom.

Girlfriend? Really? That's the best you've got?

"The Church seems to think so," Roslyn replied smoothly. "After all, they've sided with her against your father. Even the paladins threatened him, did you hear? I had hoped the last I would have seen you was when we left the Academy, but it seems we'll see each other often after you join House Reinhart. Oh, that is if Gwyn accepts. I'm not sure if she will. You'll have to tell me how it feels to be rejected. Must be a first for you."

Elora looked as if she was about to explode with rage, her face flushed and her eyes burning with fury. But before she could unleash her retort, the bell rang, signaling the end of the class. As the students hurriedly packed their belongings and began to leave, Roslyn and Elora remained seated, locked in a tense standoff.

The remaining moments in the classroom were filled with an electric tension. As other students chatted and shared notes, Roslyn and Elora remained locked in their silent battle of wills, neither willing to break the gaze first.

It was Elora who finally looked away, her pride forcing her to gather her belongings with an exaggerated display of nonchalance. As she stood, she leaned down, her voice a venomous whisper meant only for Roslyn's ears. "You may think you've won this round, Tilorai, but this is far from over."

Roslyn watched her for a moment, her expression unchanging. "I'm not playing games, *Spare*," she replied coolly. "Your brother had the right idea this year. Leave us alone. I suggest you focus on your own affairs and leave mine and Gwyn's out of it."

Elora's eyes flashed with anger, but she held her tongue, choosing instead to depart with as much dignity as she could muster. Her exit was anything but discreet, however, with her sharp footsteps echoing loudly in the now near-empty classroom.

Oxylus

Roslyn took a deep breath, allowing herself a moment to collect her thoughts. She felt a mixture of satisfaction and unease; while she had managed to hold her own against Elora, she knew that the princess wouldn't let things rest. The road ahead promised more challenges, but Roslyn was ready.

Gathering her belongings, she too made her way out of the classroom, her mind already turning to the tasks and meetings that awaited her. As she walked down the corridor, the weight of the morning's confrontation still heavy on her mind, she found solace in the thought of seeing Gwyn later. With her best friend by her side, she felt ready to face whatever the future held.

She met back up with Gwyn before their magic class, briefly, because Gwyn was going to be doing Abjuration class that day.

"Hey, Roz. How was your statecraft class?" Gwyn asked.

"*Elora* sat next to me."

Her friend's eyes narrowed. "Is she trying to bully you again, Roz? I'll talk to her."

Roslyn rolled her eyes. "Gwyn, that girl couldn't bully me if she tried. We had a discussion. Hopefully she leaves us alone now. Did her brother bother you in your little sword fighting class?"

Gwyn snorted.

Roz loved to tease her about it.

"No. But they did tell everyone that anyone who doesn't have a physical alignment will be given a new class starting at the end of the semester. Although, I was pulled aside and told I can stay. I've been working with the instructors who are learning abilities, and they've gotten faster and stronger. Still not quite to where I'm at, but it's getting more difficult to beat them. They said I can start using spells that don't take away from my sword fighting, so like movement spells and such. The instructor nearly pooped himself when I used **[Blink]** during our next fight."

"I bet."

The two of them walked into the Hall of Magical Studies before she and her friend said their farewells. Gwyn rushed off to her class while Roslyn went into hers.

Roslyn's class passed in a blur.

Though she attempted to focus on the lecture, her thoughts were elsewhere, primarily on Gwyn. Memories of their recent conversations, shared moments, and even their disagreements played in her mind, distracting her from the lesson at hand. Every so often, she'd catch snippets of the lecture or jot down a note, but her heart wasn't truly in it.

As the bell rang, signaling the end of the class, Roslyn quickly gathered her belongings and exited the classroom. She needed fresh air and a moment to clear her head. As she walked through the

grand archways of the Hall of Magical Studies, the sunlight outside beckoned her, where she was met with the sight of Gwyn animatedly talking with Adrienne. Both of them turned and brightened upon seeing her approach.

“Roz!” Gwyn greeted, her voice filled with warmth.

Roslyn smiled. “Hey, Firebug. How was abjuration class for you two?”

Adrienne’s eyes lit up with excitement. “I learned a new spell! It was amazing!”

Gwyn grinned, nudging the orkun girl playfully. “Adrienne was the talk of the class! She picked it up so quickly.”

Roslyn’s smile widened, and she congratulated Adrienne. “That’s wonderful, Adrienne!”

The atmosphere was light and jovial, and for a moment, Roslyn’s earlier concerns faded.

“What about you?” Gwyn asked.

Roz shrugged. “It was alright. We discussed the imprint complexity limit.”

The three friends winced and Roz’s eyes darted to Gwyn who was rubbing her temple. “Yeah... that was a painful day. But at least people are learning from my mistake.”

Adrienne pulled Gwyn into a side hug. “Not a mistake, just a painful lesson. What you do helps so many.”

Roslyn could tell the smile on her best friend’s face was forced by the way her eyes failed to crinkle up. Gwyn’s true smile was more vibrant than the sun.

Adrienne looked between her two friends. “Ready to start our weekend?”

Gwyn looked down at her attire. “I’d like to change first.”

The three made their way towards Roslyn and Gwyn’s dormitory, chatting and laughing along the way. But as soon as they entered the room and the door clicked shut, the mood shifted. Adrienne let out a deep sigh. “Haaaah... I have something to tell you two.”

Gwyn’s brows furrowed in confusion, her cheerful demeanor replaced by concern. Before she could voice her question, Roslyn prompted, “What’s wrong?”

Adrienne took a shaky breath, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I am being recalled to Blightwych. With the war between Avira and Turest, my family does not want me to be here. I am to finish this semester then leave.”

Gwyn’s face fell, and she cried out in dismay, “No! Adrienne!” Without hesitation, she lunged forward, wrapping Adrienne in a tight embrace.

A pit formed in Roslyn’s stomach. She had grown fond of Adrienne, valuing her not just as Gwyn’s friend, but as her own. The realization of her imminent departure weighed heavily on her

heart. Stepping forward, she placed a comforting hand on Adrienne's shoulder. "We... we will miss you, Adrienne."

Adrienne choked back a sob, turning to Roslyn and pulling her into the embrace as well. "I'm going to miss you two as well. You're my best friends. Maybe I can convince my family to let us meet up in your duchy, Roz?"

Roslyn smiled. "I'd love that. Gwyn and I would happily meet you at my family's estate in Maireharbora."

Adrienne just nodded as she pulled them tighter. Roslyn ignored the feeling that her bestie was staring at her.

The room was filled with a heavy silence, punctuated only by the soft snuffles and whispered words of comfort between the three friends.



The distant rumble of carriage wheels grew fainter as Adrienne's coach pulled away from the Academy's grand gates. The sight of her friend leaving weighed heavily on Roslyn's heart, making the ambient sounds of the bustling courtyard seem strangely muted.

She pivoted on her heel, her gaze settling on her two knights, Ser Janine and Ser Roderick, who stood a few paces away. She had made her mind up. She would spend one night with her friend. With determination in her voice, she declared, "We're heading to Gwyn's estate. I'll be spending the night there."

Ser Janine, the telv woman who had been by Roslyn's side for many years, knit her brows with concern. "Milady—"

Roslyn, sensing the impending objection, cut in, "Our Houses have vital matters pending. They can't be delayed any longer." She then turned her gaze to Roderick, adding, "Please make your way back to our estate and let Lord Riggell know that, regrettably, I won't be attending tonight's session at the House of Lords."

Her knights exchanged a weary glance, their synchronized sighs echoing their collective resignation. Their once rigid discipline seemed to have waned over time. It appeared she was getting too comfortable with them. While she did not usually mind, she held authority that should not be questioned.

"Is there a problem?" Roslyn challenged, her tone sharp.

Janine quickly shook her head, her eyes conveying an apology. "No, milady."

As the two knights walked away, Roslyn's gaze landed on Gwyn. Her best friend was engaged in a conversation with Ser Taenya and Evocati Amari. At Roslyn's gesture, Gwyn's eyes met hers, and she quickly excused herself, making her way towards the Tiloral carriage.

Inside, the plush seats of the carriage embraced them in luxury, but the tension was palpable. Gwyn seemed smaller somehow, her usual fiery spirit subdued. She fidgeted with the hem of her dress, her gaze focused on the intricate patterns of the carriage floor.

"You're coming to stay the night? I thought we were doing our own thing this weekend..."

"We have to talk. Then tonight you have to start on your sketch."

"O-oh. Okay..."

Her friend still didn't look up.

Eona, grant me patience... this girl. Why are you acting like I kicked you?

"Gwyn," Roslyn began.

Her best friend's beautiful eyes finally met hers and Roslyn had to hold her breath as the two glistening sapphires looked at her with both longing and fear. It almost crushed Roslyn's heart. She wanted nothing more than to pull her friend into her arms and... wipe away the tears.

But she'd been practicing this discussion over and over in her head for some time. She had to do it.

Still, Roslyn felt a pang in her chest. *Why does she look so vulnerable?*

"Y-Yes, Roz?" Gwyn's voice trembled just a touch.

The carriage lurched forward, the world outside becoming a blur. Inside, the world had narrowed down to just the two of them. "This discussion has been long overdue," Roslyn began, choosing her words carefully. "I've been going over it repeatedly in my mind. And while it's unbecoming of me to be so... indecisive, it's crucial we clear the air."

Gwyn sighed, leaning back against her seat. "Roz, can you drop the heiress act for once? Just talk to me."

Roslyn's lips pressed into a thin line. "This formality helps me structure my thoughts, Gwyn. It's important. Please understand."

Taking a deep breath, Gwyn nodded. "Alright. Sorry."

With a deep exhale, Roslyn closed her eyes momentarily, seeking solace in the brief darkness. Her heart raced, and her palms felt clammy. This was it, the conversation she had dreaded yet yearned for. "Okay, boundaries," she began, her voice quivering slightly. "That's the heart of our fight this

week. It's about where we draw the line, not just between us as friends but as representatives of our respective Houses."

She paused, glancing briefly at Gwyn, whose eyes were fixed intently on her. "Look, because you're my best friend, this is mainly about when we're acting in our official capacities. But given our statuses, those moments come more often than not."

Roslyn took a deep breath, her gaze unwavering. "I need you to think, Gwyn. Really think when you do something. Are you acting as my friend Gwyn or as *Princess Gwyneth*? If it's the latter, consider how it impacts me. If I'm there with you, to everyone else, it looks like I'm endorsing or at least okay with whatever you're doing. And that? That reflects on my House. If you do something that makes it seem like House Tiloral is backing you, then I'm backed into a corner. I either have to support you or make it clear we're not on the same page. And, damn it, Gwyn, because of our friendship and the ties between our Houses, I won't do that. Do you see the mess that creates?"

Gwyn nodded slowly, her expression pensive. "Of course I do... So, think before acting?"

Roslyn nodded emphatically. "Exactly. And for the love of the gods, Gwyn, just talk to me. Keep me in the loop about your plans, and I'll do the same."

A small smile played on Gwyn's lips. "Alright."

Roslyn hesitated, then dove in. "Are you really planning to get Sansa's family tomorrow?"

Gwyn's nod was firm. "Yes. Sansa's talking to her family tonight. Ashryn should be discussing it with hers. We'll be joining them for dinner tomorrow."

Roslyn's stomach knotted in anxiety. "You know the Brelands won't back down. They're a ducal family."

"We'll handle it," Gwyn replied confidently.

Roslyn's fingers instinctively went to her temples, massaging them. "Gods, Gwyn, I'm scared for you."

Gwyn's eyes softened. "I'll be okay."

But Roslyn's gaze, sharp and probing, locked onto Gwyn's. "That's not what I mean, and you bloody well know it. You've become... desensitized to taking a life. It's not right."

Gwyn shrugged, a defensive edge to her voice. "It's them or us, Roz. And remember, they've threatened you too."

Roslyn's voice became icy. "Not House Breland. My cousin was *engaged* to marry into their family. I seriously doubt that now because of this mess."

Gwyn's jaw tightened. "Maybe not them specifically, but others like them. Maybe it's a good thing your cousin isn't going through with it. The damn nobles and royals of this country. They're unworthy of you, Roz."

A blush crept onto Roslyn's cheeks, her thoughts a swirl of confusion and emotion. *Why does she have to say shit like that? God, it messes with my head.*

Roslyn tried to maintain her composure, but Gwyn's words always had a way of catching her off guard. They were direct, raw, and genuine. Traits she admired in her friend, yet they also made conversations like this so much more intense.

"Yes, there are those that have threatened me, Gwyn. But that doesn't give you the right to make enemies with every noble house. It's not a sustainable approach for the future," Roslyn's voice held a hint of desperation, her gaze intense as she sought understanding in Gwyn's eyes.

Gwyn looked away, her jaw set in a tight line. "They started it. They see me as a threat because of who I am, what I represent."

"And that's why we need to be smarter about it. We need allies, not enemies. We need to show them that they can work with us, not against us." Roslyn's voice was firm, but underneath it lay a layer of fear.

Gwyn's silence was heavy. "Most of them won't change, Roz."

"No, but some might. We need to give them a chance."

There was a tense pause. Gwyn's eyes, which had always been a beacon of fire and determination, now bore a distant, cold edge. Roslyn felt a pang in her heart. Every time Gwyn spoke of another battle, another fight, she seemed to drift further away, becoming someone Roslyn didn't recognize.

"I just... I want to protect the people I care about. Including you," Gwyn's voice was low, almost a whisper.

Roslyn's voice trembled, her fear evident. "But at what cost, Gwyn? At what cost to you? To us?"

Gwyn didn't answer immediately. When she finally did, her voice was almost inaudible, "I don't know. I just know you're the most important person in my life."

Roslyn felt a knot in her stomach. Feelings that she didn't understand threatened to overwhelm her. She forced herself to look away, her gaze turning to the window as she observed the crowds of people going about their day. A world oblivious to the turmoil of emotions within the two teenagers as the carriage continued its journey, the atmosphere thick with unspoken words and growing fears.

The silence that ensued was more oppressive than any argument. Outside the window, the city blurred as the carriage rolled towards its destination. The physical distance traveled seemed inconsequential compared to the gulf that Roslyn feared was widening between her and Gwyn.

Roslyn folded her hands on her lap. The tension was palpable, a stark contrast to the usual warmth and familiarity that characterized their interactions. Every enemy Gwyn faced, every battle she fought, was a reminder of the path her friend was on—a path that, terrifyingly, might not always include Roslyn.

Her thoughts from the night before came crashing back into her like the waves upon the cliffs of Maireharbora.

Gwyn was becoming a force, a power. And with every victory, every adversary vanquished, she seemed to be pulled further into a world where Roslyn, even as the heiress to a duchy, wasn't sure she belonged.

The carriage came to a halt, the sudden stop jolting Roslyn from her turbulent thoughts. She looked up, and for a moment, locked eyes with Gwyn. In that brief exchange, a cascade of unspoken emotions passed between them: fear, uncertainty, a plea for understanding, and beneath it all, an unyielding bond that neither was ready to let go of.

As they stepped out of the carriage, the crisp air filled Roslyn's lungs, a reminder of the world that continued to move around them, oblivious to the storm of emotions raging within.

Gwyn's voice, when she spoke, was soft and laced with a vulnerability that echoed Roslyn's own internal struggle. "We'll figure this out, Roz," Gwyn murmured, her gaze not meeting Roslyn's.

"I hope so, Firebug," Roslyn replied, the tremor in her voice betraying the terror of a future where the 'we' in Gwyn's assurance didn't exist.

The door to the Reinhart estate opened, illuminating the darkening evening with a spill of warm light. Yet, as they stepped inside, Roslyn couldn't shake off the cold grip of unease that clutched at her heart. Every step forward felt like a step into uncharted waters, where the anchors of their past selves threatened to give way under the tumultuous tides of change and power.

As the door closed behind them, sealing away the world outside, Roslyn was left to grapple with the overwhelming realization that the battle ahead was not just with the world, but with the spaces growing between them—a battle for which there was no preparation, and the outcome of which held the key to both their futures.

She cast a sidelong glance at her taller friend who seemed lost in thought, her gaze distant. The soft rustle of her dress with each step was a gentle reminder of the looming confrontation with House Breland. But it wasn't just the imminent danger that troubled Roslyn. Nor how it would impact her

own family and House. It was the fear that this encounter would push Gwyn further down a path, transforming her into something unrecognizable, an entity devoid of warmth and compassion.

Yet, buried beneath the layers of anxiety and dread was an even darker thought that made Roslyn's blood run cold. *What if there comes a day when I want that beast to emerge? When I want her to unleash that raw, unchecked power on those who threaten us?* The very idea was horrifying, but with each threat they faced, the temptation grew.

As they neared Gwyn's room, Roslyn noticed the subtle changes in her beautiful best friend's demeanor: the slight tension in her posture, the absentminded way her fingers played with the hem of her dress. It was evident that Gwyn was grappling with her own set of fears and uncertainties.

Unbidden, a tear slipped down Roslyn's cheek. She quickly wiped it away, but the weight of the emotions remained. *Gwyn, when the dust settles, what will remain of the amazing girl I know? And in that aftermath, will you still want me by your side?*

It was a place that Roslyn never wanted to leave, despite what she knew would be required of her. *Maybe... maybe you can be the one to break me free of this cage that traps me, Firebug.*