
A Refined Path

Everyone who has reached one of the five known refinements knows that the person who emerges is not always the same that went in. For better or for worse.

That the First Mage was the first to undergo a refinement was no surprise to most.

A History of Mana. 184 SA

Sloane looked around the terminal, thinking slowly about what she wanted to do. All of her being wanted to rebel against this, to lash out for taking her Gwyn away, but she knew it would be a pointless act. Being here would make her stronger, and would help her chances of reaching Gwyn.

The sight of her daughter was etched into her memory, the young woman who had stood before her looked so *grown up* and at only thirteen. She wouldn't be surprised if her daughter kept growing, and knowing what she did... she now had to wonder what effects all those levels would do to her. All of that extra constitution that came with being so high.

And her core is Renowned. Holy shit.

That both assuaged and deepened her concerns of what her daughter was going through. Gwyn had said it herself.

She had to fight. To protect her people, to protect this 'Roz', someone Sloane knew was very important to her daughter just by the way she gushed about her and how it was as if her daughter had wanted to tell her a hundred more things about her and the things they did together.

Ah, young love. I wish I could have been there to see it, Gwyn.

She was clearly her mother's daughter. Oblivious.

We both see what can't hurt us, don't we? You have a good thing with being her best friend, and you don't want to lose it. Likely your first true friend in this world. I bet it's getting more and more difficult to keep that line solid, though, isn't it? Trust me... I know.

It was very clear her daughter would do much to keep her companion safe, and after seeing her strength as she tried to tear down the barrier, Sloane was sure she *could* do whatever she wanted.

Sloane wondered if Gwyn, herself, knew how she really felt. Sloane *could* be reading the situation wrong, after all, it had only been a brief conversation, but the way Gwyn's face had lit up when talking about her...

How she *blushed* when she said Roz was in bed holding her.

Manabound - Resilience

A girl that my daughter is clearly head-over-heels with is in her bed?

There was no way the mother in her could have missed that quick comment. Call it intuition, a sixth sense, or whatever... but there is more to it, and Sloane. Wasn't. There.

Mother and daughter needed to have a discussion about all that entailed, and they couldn't. Clearly someone was there helping her, otherwise Gwyn wouldn't have gotten so far, but try as she like, there was no way she could ever be truly satisfied that someone else would give Gwyn what she needed.

The thought hurt so much that she wanted to cry, but the stupid place she was in refused to relent. To let her be anything other than calm and relaxed.

Which, she supposed, helped her process her thoughts.

There was nothing she could do about that from here. Sloane just had to trust her daughter to be careful. She sighed before turning back to the other-Sloane.

"So, what now?" she asked the possessed with a supposed sliver of a planet's core.

The woman shrugged. "Now you see what options you have."

She started walking toward the closest of the ten routes where a kiosk was waiting.

"I swear, if that runs on windows, I'm going to slap you."

"I may have a sliver of the world Guide within me, but I am made mostly from you and we're not masochists."

Sloane hesitated right before reaching the kiosk. Feeling oddly calm despite just seeing her daughter and having her get whisked away yet again. She whirled on the avatar.

"You're mind fucking me right now. I am way too fucking calm. What is going on?"

The other-Sloane had the decency to look ashamed.

"You're inside your Inner Self. It has a calming influence on all people. It is literally your most safe place. Or should be."

Sloane refused to dignify that with a response, instead returning to the kiosk. "So, what do these do?"

"They will show you a potential path for you to choose."

Instead, Sloane approached the kiosk with a mix of curiosity and skepticism, her eyes darting between the other-Sloane and the device before her. The kiosk looked similar to something she'd make, which admittedly was probably the point.

The other woman stood there, waiting for her with an almost disinterested expression on her face.

Sloane clicked her tongue in annoyance and extended a hand, hesitantly touching the surface of the kiosk. It responded immediately, glowing brighter under her touch. A series of images and texts appeared on the screen.

The path name was at the top, with a brief description underneath.

[Ruinous Sorcerer]

Embrace the path of devastation and wield magic that spells ruin for your enemies. The Ruinous Sorcerer is a master of destructive forces, turning the battlefield into a canvas of chaos and annihilation. Those who dare stand against you will find only obliteration in their path.

Sloane raised a brow and turned to the other woman. “Really? Ruinous Sorcerer?”

Other-Sloane smirked. “You should see both sides of the coin, but it’s not done...”

“Wha—”

A flash of white filled her vision and suddenly Sloane was *somewhere else*.



Sloane the Ruinous, strode through the chaotic battleground, her presence a harbinger of annihilation. The ground around her quaked with each step, and the air crackled with the raw energy of her unleashed fury. The once-clear skies turned tumultuous, mirroring the storm of emotions within her as she forged ahead, single-minded in her quest to reach her daughter.

Her eyes, glowing with a maelstrom of mana, surveyed the battlefield with cold detachment.

Enemy lines crumbled before her, not just from her overwhelming power, but from the fear that her very name now inspired.

Constructs, wrought from dark steel and her potent sorcery, tore through her foes with an efficiency that was both terrifying and awe-inspiring.

They were extensions of her will, merciless and relentless.

With a mere flick of her hand, Sloane summoned a surge of arcane energy, shaping it into a devastating barrage. The air shimmered with the intensity of the magic as it hurtled towards the enemy, exploding upon impact and leaving nothing but ruin in its wake.

The screams of her adversaries were drowned out by the roar of her spells, their desperate pleas lost amidst the cacophony of destruction.

Manabound - Resilience

As she advanced, Sloane's constructs, twisted amalgamations of metal and magic, descended upon the enemy. Their razor-sharp limbs sliced through armor and flesh with equal ease, leaving a trail of carnage behind them.

She felt no remorse, no hesitation; her heart was steeled with the singular purpose of reaching her daughter.

The battlefield, once a place of strategic maneuvers and clashing steel, had transformed into a nightmarish landscape, reshaped by Sloane's overwhelming power.

The ground was scorched and broken, the air thick with the stench of magic and death.

No barrier stood for long; no defense was sufficient

Everything that sought to block her path was met with unrelenting destruction.

She walked through the desolation, coming upon a fortress, a last bastion between her and Gwyn.

Without hesitation, she raised her hands, and from them erupted a cataclysmic blast, a maelstrom of arcane energy that tore through walls and soldiers alike. Her constructs descended and the fortress, once a symbol of strength, was reduced to rubble, a mere obstacle cleared from her path.

As she stepped through the ruins, the vision shifted, showing her finally reaching Gwyn. But the girl who looked up at her was not the daughter she had just seen. The one who had wanted nothing more than to be back with Sloane.

No, in her eyes was a mixture of terror and hate, a reflection of the monstrous power Sloane had become. Sloane bent down, reaching toward her daughter's face when suddenly pain erupted in her abdomen.

She glanced down, seeing the blade in her stomach... held by her daughter's hand.

Sloane's eyes met her daughter's in disbelief.

Gwyn looked up with tear filled eyes. "Why?"

Why, indeed.

No! Not this one!



Gwyn looked around the room they were in. Arrayed around the edge of the circular room were pedestals with basins of water laying atop them. The Jerkmage of Jerkiness stood smugly next to her as she just finished explaining all she had to do to see her potential paths.

She didn't really want to go through all of this, not when she had seen her mom. Something was going on, and she felt as if she had to finish this. Like something was pushing her toward a destination.

Which was likely her path upgrade or evolution or whatever it was.

Instead of going back to her room and snuggling with Roz, she had to stand here and go through an entire production.

"Really, can't you just hand me a list? I don't need another theatrical display of potential futures, even if they're not real futures. The Vision of Potential was enough," Gwyn quipped. She wasn't in the most patient of moods, especially knowing that this entire place had been messing with her mind to keep her calm and relaxed.

She just wanted to reflect on everything her mom had said.

Like what in the heck did she mean when she said *sister?!?*

The older her exhaled a long, weary sigh. "Gwyn, it's essential that—"

Gwyn interrupted, a mischievous glint in her eye. "And here I was, thinking a high Constitution would spare me premature greying. Was that a deliberate choice on your part? Now I'm convinced you're not actually me."

Archmage of Gullibility momentarily flustered, began to fuss over her hair. "I most certainly do not have grey hair!" she protested.

Suppressing a chuckle, Gwyn watched the woman's reaction with amusement.

A scowl settled on the Archmage's face. "I had forgotten how irksome you can be."

"Oh, come off it. You're not really an older version of me. This is my soul, my Inner Self. So, I think it's time for a change in management. You're no longer the Archmage of Discovery in my head."

"Why you—"

Gwyn closed her eyes, centering herself. Changing her perception of her inner self was simpler than she'd thought. After all, she'd been working on it for sometime with Sabina. It's why the wall was there, afterall. It was her sanctuary, her mind fortress, even if it wasn't her [**Mind Fortress**]. It was all about...

Perspective.

When she opened her eyes again, she was greeted by just the person she wanted to see.

"Hey, Aunt Katie."

The visage of her aunt, just like she was the last time Gwyn saw her back on Earth was pretty. A bit taller than Gwyn, her straight hair a lighter shade of brown from hers and her mom's and with green eyes.

Gwyn had missed her so much.

Her aunt sighed. "You know this is a *terrible* idea, right?"

"Yeah, I do. It's weird talking to myself, alright? Plus, I just miss her, and after seeing mom... I couldn't use her. So, that leaves you auntie K."

"I'm not Kathryn Rossi, you know this."

"Maybe not, but you're also not the Archmage of Discovery. So, if you draw on my personality, that means you have to draw on my memories of her."

The woman sighed. "Yes, yes. Are you ready?"

"Good and I am! But do I *really* have to see the visions?"

"Technically, yes. It's part of the process."

Gwyn's expression turned hopeful. "Can you at least give me a rundown of the options? Maybe we can skip the ones that don't resonate."

"Sure thing."

"Thanks, Aunt Katie."

"Can you at least just call me Katie? I know you know how weird this is. It's not fun being on this side of it," her fake aunt pouted.

"Fine. Fiiiine. Katie. There, better?"

The girl tapped her chin, then smiled. "Yeah, that's better *Gwynnie*."

Gwyn rolled her eyes as Katie walked with her and described to each basin in turn, pointing out which paths the Archmage of Discovery felt would best fit her.

In the end... Gwyn was sure of one thing.

"I'm glad I fired her. Can you swap all of these out?"

The smug look on Katie was much more deserved. "Of course."

A flare of light later and they were ready. "Alright, what do we have?"

Katie's frown was a bit disconcerting as she prepared to unveil the paths. "Right, let's get started. The rule is, you need to confront the most... um... challenging vision first. It's about understanding the obstacles you might face."

"Okay, let's do it. Hit me with the worst."

Oxylus

Katie gestured to the first basin, its waters swirling with a dark, ominous hue. “This path... it's the Dread Elementalist. It shows a potential future where you become consumed by your own power, losing sight of everything you once held dear.”

Gwyn paused and turned slowly. “What? Why would you show me—”

Everything went white.



The mist around Gwyn thickened, swirling into a vortex of chilling possibilities. She braced herself, stepping into the vision that was to reveal her as the Dread Elementalist.

The world around her morphed into the devastated streets of a city. Buildings lay in ruins, their once proud structures reduced to rubble and ash.

Smoke hung heavy in the air.

Amidst the chaos, Gwyn found herself standing over a body.

She fell to her knees next to her mom. “Mamma?”

“Mamma?! No, no no no no!”

The sight of her lifeless form, eyes forever closed to the world she had loved, ignited something dark and cold within Gwyn.

She heard footsteps approach and looked up to see a group of soldiers.

Aviran soldiers.

Gwyn used [**Frozen Heart**].

It crept through her veins like ice, numbing her heart, erasing pain, fear, and love.

Emotionless, she rose, her eyes a void of endless frost. She became the embodiment of vengeance, a commander leading her people in a ruthless crusade against their enemies.

Her followers, loyal and unwavering, rallied behind her. But the path of revenge was a treacherous one. The first to fall was Taenya, the woman who had helped raise her after arriving, struck down in a skirmish that left her lifeless in the mud, her eyes still holding the shock of betrayal.

Gwyn's heart stayed cold.

Everything else burned.

Manabound - Resilience

Then came Amari, ever the brave heart, who met her end in a blaze of glory with dozens of enemies piled around her, fighting until her last breath was drawn. Her fall was a blow that would have shattered Gwyn's heart, had it not been encased in ice.

Sabina was next.

She fought valiantly, her magic weaving through the battlefield like a deadly dance. But even her skills could not save her from the arrow that found its mark, silencing her forever.

Gwyn fought on from battlefield to battlefield. Burning castles, towns, cities.

Then she reached the capital with Roslyn at her side, the two intent on ending it once and for all.

Her magic was a whirlwind of destruction. The army fallen. Mages and warriors alike dying to her flame. She flung fire spells with deadly precision, incinerating enemy archers and their arrows alike, a relentless force of nature.

But then, a gasp—a sound that pierced even her frozen heart.

She turned to see Roslyn, her best friend, her confidant, her anchor to a past now lost. Arrows protruded from her body, her lifeblood ebbing away.

“Why?” Roslyn whispered, her eyes searching Gwyn's for an answer, for a glimpse of the friend she once knew.

Gwyn's frozen heart cracked, a single tear escaping her emotionless facade.

But before she could reach out, before she could attempt to mend what had been broken, the vision faded to black, leaving her alone with the haunting echo of that one word, resonating through the abyss of her soul.



The vision faded, leaving Sloane standing in the terminal, her heart racing and her mind reeling. She felt a hand on her shoulder. “Not all who leave here remain the same, Sloane. This is one of the tamer paths of darkness. You should know, none of the visions that you will see are true visions of the future, they are simply possible ends to such paths.”

“Do not show me another. If you are me, then you know that is not what I want.”

The other-Sloane nodded. “I know. Let us begin.”

They moved to the next kiosk, and dove in.

Oxylus



Sloane sat in her workshop, surrounded by the tools of her trade. The room was utilitarian, every inch dedicated to the art of creation. Here, luxuries were unnecessary, for her true passion lay in the melding of magic and mechanics. Her hands moved with practiced ease, assembling intricate components into something far greater than the sum of their parts.

Before her lay a half-completed construct, a fusion of golem and arcane machinery.

Its design was sleek yet powerful, embodying her vision of harmony between the mystical and the mechanical. The air hummed with potential as she infused the construct with mana, each rune she etched pulsating with life.

This was her sanctuary, a place where her thoughts were solely focused on the act of creation. It was here, amidst gears and glyphs, that she found a semblance of peace, a brief respite from the chaos of the world outside.

In this space, she was not just an artificer, but a creator of wonders, forging a legacy that would echo through the ages.

It was a place she never needed to leave. She—

No. Not for me.



In the heart of Blightwych, within the walls of a stately manor, Sloane reclined in an opulent chair, the weight of her noble title resting comfortably upon her shoulders. She had finally settled into her role as a distinguished figure in the city, her days filled with the intricate dance of politics and power.

The manor was a reflection of her newfound status, with grand halls adorned in lavish tapestries and sparkling chandeliers that cast a warm glow over the polished floors.

Sloane, dressed in an elegant dress that bespoke her rank, presided over gatherings of influential individuals, her sharp mind navigating the complex web of alliances and rivalries with grace and acumen.

In her rise to nobility, she had not lost her touch with the arcane.

Her reputation as a powerful artificer added a layer of respect and slight wariness among her peers. In the quiet of her study, surrounded by ancient tomes and arcane artifacts, Sloane continued to weave her magic, now a subtle tool in her arsenal of influence.

Her life in Blightwych was a balance of elegance and power, a testament to her journey from a wandering artificer to a respected noble. In this role, she had found a new way to wield her strengths, her influence extending far beyond the confines of her workshop, shaping the very fabric of the city's future.

Not this one either...



One-by-one they went through the options, each one having only an inkling of what she wanted. Most not even giving anything that would help her find Gwyn.

“These aren’t for me,” Sloane told her other self. “If you really know me, you should understand that.”

“Of course, but these all *fit* you and what you have done. Tell me, what do *you* want?”

What did she want? That was simple.

“I want something that builds on what I’ve been doing. Something that augments my creations while giving me options to attack on my own with magic.”

Other-Sloane smiled. After a moment, the kiosk and the path next to her changed. Next to it was what looked like the boarding platform of something that flew. Which... wasn’t what Sloane wanted.

She frowned.

Then she looked at the kiosk at the name and description. Her lips curled back upward.

“Yeah, I think this may work.”



Gwyn came out of the third vision and groaned. “These just aren’t clicking! Come on, I need something that works for what I’m doing. I have to *protect* my people, not just kill everyone that comes after me or sit in some court sending my people out to fight and possibly die. I have to be there with them.”

Katie frowned. “You really do not want to go the noble route? It would give you plenty of options. You wouldn’t lose your magic, it would just make noble traits more powerful.”

“That’s Roz’s whole thing, not mine. I’m definitely more martial. I will be the focal point of an army, and when I get older I will lead one. I need a path that will work, war is coming, Katie. My people may be far away from it for now, but that doesn’t mean we haven’t already been fighting one against the Crown Prince’s people.”

“Hmm. We have two more, I think they will both be options.”

“Then let me see them.”

Gwyn was led to another basin and looked down, seeing the path name and description.

[War Princess]

Seize your destiny. You have convinced the largest nation of your new lands that you are a royal and one to be feared. Plans are made to counter the strength and influence you are gaining. As a War Princess, you will show those who stand against you and your people that you are not to be trifled. A War Princess takes the field, leading her armies with a wave of her hand and turning the tide of battle with her own martial prowess. Rise to become the ultimate symbol of strength and leadership on the battlefield.

“Hmm, let’s see it.”

Like the other times, everything flashed white.



In the heart of a raging battlefield, under a sky streaked with the scars of war, Gwyn stood resolute, her armor gleaming with the crest of her House. She was the War Princess, a beacon of hope and a harbinger of victory. Her presence alone bolstered the morale of her troops, who fought with renewed vigor under her command.

The clamor of the battle in front of her was deafening as if it were a symphony of steel and sorcery. Gwyn’s eyes, sharp and unyielding, surveyed the chaos, quickly identifying the faltering line where her soldiers struggled against the overwhelming might of the enemy.

“I’m entering the field. Ser Taenya, take command.”

Her right hand nodded and started giving orders while Sabina and Gwyn’s personal guard joined her.

Without hesitation, she raised her sword, its blade singing with the promise of triumph.

A surge of magical energy pulsed from her, flowing like a river of power, infusing her troops with strength. With a battle cry that echoed across the field, Gwyn [**Teleported**], bringing all of those

with her to the front lines. Her arrival came in a flash and she immediately went to work, her figure cutting through the enemy ranks like a comet.

The ground trembled under her feet and the soldiers of the faltering line rallied. Her magic swirled around her, a storm of destruction, as she cleaved through the enemy forces with a combination of martial prowess and arcane mastery.

Then, amidst the turmoil, a man stepped forward—a towering figure clad in armor dark as night, wielding a massive sword and shield that thirsted for blood.

She didn't even hesitate before charging.

The clash was titanic, a dance of death and destiny. Steel met steel, magic clashed with might, and the air crackled with the raw energy of their duel.

Gwyn parried a deadly strike, countering with a blast of searing magic that staggered her foe. She moved with grace and ferocity, each strike a testament to her skill and determination. The champion fought fiercely, but Gwyn's resolve was unshakable.

With a final, thunderous swing, Gwyn shattered the champion's defenses. Her blade found its mark, and with a flash of light and a cry that resounded like thunder, the enemy champion fell, defeated.

The moment the champion hit the ground, the tide of the battle shifted.

A cheer erupted from Gwyn's army, their spirits lifted by the sight of their princess triumphing against insurmountable odds. Inspired and rallied, her soldiers pressed forward, turning the tide of the battle and securing a hard-fought victory.

Standing amidst the fallen foe, Gwyn raised her sword to the sky, her figure a symbol of unyielding strength and hope. In that moment, she was more than a princess; she was a legend, a War Princess whose name would be etched in the annals of history.

No, not quite. It's so close, I can feel it.

And just like that, she was pulled back out.



Amidst a landscape scarred by conflict, where the air was thick with the scent of brimstone and magic, Gwyn stood tall and unyielding. She was a master of destructive and strategic sorcery, commanding the battlefield with her formidable arcane prowess.

Oxylus

The ground around her was littered with the remnants of the fierce confrontation that had unfolded during the earlier stages of the battle. Her eyes, alight with a fierce inner fire, scanned the chaos, identifying strategic points and weaknesses in the enemy's formation.

With a swift gesture, Gwyn summoned a vortex of elemental fury, a whirlwind of fire and lightning that roared across the battlefield. Any type of magic was possible if you could just bend it to your concepts.

The enemy soldiers, caught in the maelstrom, were tossed like leaves in a storm, their formations broken, their resolve shattered.

In the eye of this tempest, Gwyn moved with calculated precision, her spells weaving a tapestry of destruction. Each spell was a precise strike, dismantling the enemy's defenses with surgical accuracy. Bolts of fire, ice, and arcane arced from her fingertips, searing the sky and striking down foes with unerring accuracy.

The enemy, desperate to counter her might, sent their elite mages to challenge her. But Gwyn, undaunted, met their magic with her own. The air crackled with power as spells collided, a dazzling display of arcane mastery.

Gwyn's magic was relentless, a barrage that left no quarter for her adversaries.

She conjured shields of force to deflect incoming attacks, countering with blasts of raw magical energy that decimated her opponents.

One by one they fell, unable to contain her.

Still, even as they struck, her magic strengthened her army. Her soldiers pressed forward, intent on victory.

Then the final enemy mage fell, defeated by her overwhelming power, a hush fell over the battlefield. Gwyn stood alone amidst the devastation, her presence commanding and formidable.

With a final, resounding war cry, Gwyn unleashed a cataclysmic spell that sealed the victory. The ground shook, and a pillar of fire shot into the sky, illuminating the field and signaling the end of the conflict.

As her troops rallied around her, cheering their War Mage, Gwyn's gaze swept across the battlefield, her heart heavy with the weight of victory. In that moment, she was more than a mage; she was a symbol of power and resilience, a War Mage whose name would be whispered with awe and respect across the realms.

Yes. This is the one.

Everything went black.



Sloane's smile lingered as she opened her eyes, the vision of her chosen path still vivid in her mind. It was a path that resonated deeply with her desires and aspirations. The scenery shifted seamlessly, and she found herself in a well-furnished room, sitting across from the other-Sloane.

“Is that it? I wake up now?”

“Soon.”

“You have something more to say then.”

The woman across from her nodded. “Next time we see each other, things will be different. With the speed of which you and your daughter reached this point, things were not entirely prepared. Consider this an early glimpse, a sort of alpha test, if you will.”

Sloane closed her eyes briefly, a flicker of concern crossing her features. “This isn't going to backfire on me, is it?”

“The process will take longer for you than most people, yes,” the other-Sloane admitted. “But now, allow me to clarify a few things.”

Sloane motioned for her to continue, her mind racing with a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

“Your core identity remains unchanged, Sloane. Even with this new path, you are still fundamentally an Innovator, but with a Mage specialization. You have a sense of what this entails, but let me elucidate further. Your purpose is your essence, your guiding principle. Everything you do aligned with your purpose will be augmented, and your spells and abilities will inherently surpass those of others who do not share your purpose. At earlier steps, the impact of this may seem trivial. But as time goes on and more individuals advance, you'll find that the raw power of your spells will not scale as dramatically. Additionally, the world around you will become more resistant, infused with increasing amounts of mana. Achievements that were once effortless will demand more from you.”

“Well, shit.”

She really wanted to get out of here, and she honestly was too worked up to think about any questions she *should* ask. So, the woman had briefly spoken about Gwyn a few times... so she tried to get some answers.

“About Gwyn—”

“Is not a topic I can discuss. But you never know, something may be relevant when I give you answers to other questions.”

“She’s a mage, isn’t she?” Sloane probed, her tone a mix of curiosity and concern.

The other-Sloane remained noncommittal. “I cannot tell you that.”

Sloane sighed. “It’s clear she’s a mage. Just how much stronger are mages than me with magic?”

The other-Sloane’s expression softened with understanding. “As an Arcane Battlesmith, you won’t match the sheer magical might of a purposed mage, but your spells will be considerably stronger than those without Mage specializations. Your strength lies in the versatility and creativity of your magic and inventions.”

“Hm, that’s not too bad. I’ll take my versatility with the golems and weapons over most. Although, from what I saw of Gwyn, she’d probably kick ass.”

“She’s not the First Mage for nothing, I agree.”

Hmm, actually...

“Why were we brought to this world?”

“A cosmic accident, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Can we go home?”

“This is your home.”

“No, I...” Sloane bit her lip, dropping that line of inquiry. “What about Earth? Do you know what’s happening there?”

“The world cores do not *gossip*.”

Sloane chuckled, then her mind wandered to another topic. “What about the gods? Do they exist?”

“People’s beliefs give credence to many things,” the other-Sloane answered evasively.

Sloane exhaled slowly. “That’s not really an answer, is it?”

“You’re right, it isn’t,” the other-Sloane conceded.

That brought a sigh from Sloane. “Essentia increases our attributes, yes?”

“It does.”

“How much per level?”

“That has not been quantified by anyone yet, though not for lack of trying by someone close to you. You as a people will need to determine what *one* of each attribute actually represents which will help you determine how much is gained per *step*. Find that baseline, and much will open to you.”

Sloane smiled, thinking of Aila’s efforts. *She definitely means Aila. You go girl. Figure that shit out.*

“Can someone increase the quality of their core?”

The woman smiled as if Sloane finally asked the right question. “Of course. There is a potential for it at every refinement. Your feats and achievements determine whether you are worthy.”

“So, I didn’t qualify this time?”

“You are not someone who deserves the renown, yet.”

“And Gwyn is?”

The other-Sloane paused before answering, “Some are destined for extraordinary paths, Sloane. You, yourself, are an exceptional woman. Each journey is unique.” A fond look overcame the woman as she glanced to the side, as if listening to someone. “As I said before, Gwyn is to be cherished.”

Then her voice changed, it took on a deeper tone, but Sloane could feel the matronly aura it gave. **“Gwyneth’s very soul sings to me, resonating with my mana in a harmony unmatched by any other. She first sung with fury and hope, and I could do nothing but listen and respond.”**

The pride that swelled within Sloane was immense. Her daughter, her precious Gwyn, not only strong and resilient but also uniquely attuned to the very essence of this world. It filled Sloane with a comforting reassurance. Despite her worries, which were intrinsic to her role as a mother, she felt a deep-seated belief in Gwyn’s ability to overcome any adversity.

Hold on a little longer, Gwyn. I’m coming for you, Sloane thought determinedly.

With a sense of closure, Sloane nodded. “I think we’ve covered everything necessary.”

“So we have. Strive to improve, Arcane Battlesmith. Know that I look down upon the slaying of sapient as all are precious and benefit me. Spread your innovation, improve the world around you, and I will reward you for your advances. I await with eager anticipation all that you will accomplish, Sloane Reinhart.”

Before Sloane could formulate a response, her surroundings dissolved into darkness, a peaceful oblivion enveloping her as she transitioned back to consciousness. The last echoes of the other-Sloane’s words lingered in her mind, a guiding beacon for the journey ahead.



Gwyn sighed in contentment as she returned to the mage tower. Instead of being in one of the circular rooms, she was in another, smaller room sitting across from Katie.

Good.

The woman smiled at Gwyn, and it looked just like when her aunt did it back home. Gwyn had always called Aunt Katie on her phone to tell her about her day, to talk about all sorts of things. But now she would never see her or anyone else back on Earth again.

“Are you ready, Gwyn?” the woman asked softly.

“I am. Let’s do this so I can wake up.”

“No final questions?”

Gwyn shook her head. “Nope. Not unless you’re going to tell me about my mom.”

“I am not.”

With a shrug, Gwyn stood up and pointed away from the two of them. “Then let’s get to yeeting.”

Katie rolled her eyes, then she spoke, but not with Aunt Katie’s voice, instead it sounded like when Mana spoke to her at night. **“Gwyn Reinhart, you have undertaken the path of a War Mage. Conflict has hounded you since you have arrived, I charge you with showing restraint and mercy to those who oppose you, but to crush those who would seek to bring ruin to those you protect. Continue to discover new spells that enrich Mana as a whole, take on others and teach them, show the world the joy and wonders of magic as you have. I look forward to all that you will accomplish, little mage.”**

Gwyn smiled at the form of her Aunt Katie, a tear rolling down her cheek as she committed it to memory. *I miss you.*

Before she could say anything, Katie was suddenly next to her. A finger shot out and touched Gwyn’s head. **“A gift. For being the first mage to refine.”**

A surge of *something* shot through her as she slumped forward and her vision went black.



[Conditions Met: Trait – Spell Tome obtained!]

Gwyn’s consciousness drifted back from the depths of oblivion, gently pulled by the warm embrace of sunlight filtering through the window. She lay there for a moment, her mind still entangled in the ethereal threads of dreams. A soft groan escaped her lips as she turned her head, her gaze falling upon the serene figure beside her.

Roslyn, her dearest friend, lay curled up like a guardian angel, her presence a comforting constant in Gwyn's tumultuous life.

A smile curled the corners of Gwyn's lips as she watched Roz, her heart swelling with a warmth that felt both familiar and surreal. Tenderly, she reached out, her fingers gingerly brushing a stray lock of blonde hair from Roz's face, tucking it behind one of those delicately pointed ears. The touch was feather-light, yet it seemed to stir something within Roslyn. The subtle twitch of an ear, a faint shiver that ran through her body, and then those eyes—amethyst orbs that held galaxies within them—slowly fluttered open.

For a moment, Roz's gaze was vacant, lost in the fog of sleep.

But then, like a star piercing through the night sky, recognition dawned in her eyes, and they widened in a mix of surprise and relief.

“Gwyn!” she exclaimed, her voice a mixture of joy and disbelief.

The ensuing moments were a blur of motion as Roz, in a burst of agility, barrelled over Gwyn. Suddenly, Gwyn found herself pinned beneath Roz, who was now intently holding her face with both hands. There was a searching, almost frantic quality in Roz's eyes, as if she were seeking assurances that Gwyn was truly alright.

“Are you alright? What happened?”

“I'm fine,” Gwyn assured her, a chuckle escaping her as she looked up into her friend's face. “My core was refined, and I've embraced a new path. I'm a War Mage now!”

Roz's response was slow, her nod deliberate, as if she were processing the information through a fog.

“You... you scared me and everyone else so much,” she murmured, her voice tinged with a cocktail of emotions.

Gwyn's brow furrowed in confusion as she tried to glance around, her movements restricted by Roz's concerned embrace. “Why? It's just the morning, right?” she asked in mild bemusement.

Roz tilted her head slightly, her expression softening as she spoke in a voice that barely rose above a whisper. “Firebug, it's been two days. I skipped classes to wait here.”

The words hit Gwyn like a cold splash of water, jolting her from the remnants of her dreamlike state. “W-What?” she stammered. “*Two* days?”

Roz's nod was slow and heavy with emotion. “Yeah... I should let the others know you're awake,” she said, her voice laced with a sense of duty that seemed to weigh on her.

As she began to lift herself up, Gwyn's hand shot out, her fingers wrapping around Roz's arm with a gentle firmness.

“No, stay,” Gwyn implored, her voice soft but insistent. “Just a little longer. I’ve missed this... missed you.”

The surprise that flickered across Roz’s features was unmistakable. “You... missed me?” she asked, as if she couldn’t quite believe the words she was hearing.

“I did.”

There was a moment’s pause, a breath held in time, before Roz’s face broke into a smile, a ray of sunlight piercing through the cloud of worry. With a little wriggle, she settled herself back down, her head finding a perfect spot on Gwyn’s chest.

Gwyn’s hand, almost of its own accord, found its way into Roz’s hair, fingers gently weaving through the golden strands. A soft hum vibrated in her throat, a soothing melody that filled the room with a sense of peace. “So, it’s been two days?” Gwyn mused aloud, her tone a mix of wonder and apology.

“Mhmm,” Roz murmured, her voice muffled against Gwyn’s chest.

“I’m sorry, I had no idea. But... there’s something good that came out of it,” Gwyn ventured, a hint of a smile playing on her lips.

Roslyn lifted her head slightly, yawning as she gazed up at Gwyn. “What’s the good news?” she asked, her voice tinged with curiosity.

“Are you comfy down there?”

“Mmm. Very,” Roz replied, a smile blooming on her face as she snuggled closer. “Now, what’s the good thing?”

“My mom can’t wait to meet you.”

Roz’s brows shot up and she shoved herself to a sitting position, making Gwyn groan as she put a bit too much weight on her belly. “What are you talking about?”

“My mom was there. For a little while, but then she got taken away.”

The news seemed to act like a jolt of electricity through Roz, who sat up abruptly, her movement causing Gwyn to let out a small groan. “What do you mean?” Roz’s eyes were wide with astonishment.

“It was an accident apparently since we both refined at the same time—which is really cool,” Gwyn explained, her voice tinged with a blend of awe and regret. “She told me she’s in Rosale, heading toward Calling. They’ll make a stop, then come to us.”

“I... Wow. Gwyn, that’s amazing news! Now we know where our people can meet them!”

Gwyn's head bobbed up and down. "Yup! I can't wait." She sniffled as all of the emotions caught up with her. Her mom was coming, and she'd talked to her.

"Gwyn?" Roz's voice was soft, filled with concern.

"Yeah? *Hic!*"

"Come here."

Roz shifted, lying back against the pillows, and gently pulled Gwyn into her embrace. "It's okay," she whispered, her voice a soothing balm. "You've been so strong for so long. It's alright to let it out. I'm here for you, always."

A hiccup escaped her again as the pressure in her head built up. She tried to force it down, she should be happy. She *was* happy.

Tears brimmed in Gwyn's eyes as she nestled into Roz's lap, her emotions a tumultuous sea. She wanted to be strong, to be the rock that others could lean on, but in that moment, in the safety of Roz's arms, she allowed herself to be vulnerable, to be just Gwyn.

"I... *hic*... I told her about you. I just had to and I can't wait until you meet her. Until she meets you. She's gonna love you."

"You told her about me? Only nice things I hope," Roz teased.

Gwyn's response was immediate, her hand reaching out to clasp Roz's, bringing it close to her cheek. "Only the best things, Roz. There's nothing bad to say about you. You're incredible, you know? I care about you so much. It's us against the world, right?"

There was a brief pause, a moment where the air seemed to hold its breath. Roz's hand stilled in Gwyn's hair, then slowly, she pulled it back, gently but firmly grasping Gwyn's face. As Gwyn sat up, Roz's eyes bore into hers, deep and fathomless. "Gwyn," Roz whispered, her voice low and serious, "Those are dangerous things to say to me."

Gwyn hiccuped. "Why?"

Her friend's eyes misted over. "Because, I will hold you to it. Don't promise something you can't keep."

Gwyn's fingers interlaced with Roz's, their hands a tangled symbol of their connection. "I mean every word, Roz. I'm here, always. You're my best friend, my rock."

In the stillness of the room, she felt Roslyn's eyes boring into hers, and there was something there, something *more* that had Gwyn yearning. Her gaze drifted to Roz's lips, watching the nervous bite on the lower lip, a gesture so endearingly familiar yet suddenly charged with new meaning. "Roz..." she whispered, her voice a breathy echo of her racing heart.

“Yes, Gwyn?” Roz’s voice was soft, a gentle inquiry that seemed to hover in the space between them.

Gwyn struggled for words, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotion and something that she couldn’t explain. But then she felt Roz’s finger against her lips, a quiet command. “Don’t think. Just be here, with me.”

“I’m not thinking,” Gwyn replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Roz let out a soft, almost ethereal laugh, a sound that danced around the room and settled in Gwyn’s heart. “Gwyn?” she murmured, her voice tinged with vulnerability.

“Yes, Roz?”

“I don’t want this to end, but I’m so scared.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Of losing you.” Roz’s words were barely audible, a confession laden with fear and longing.

Gwyn leaned in, their foreheads touching, a silent communion of souls. “You won’t lose me. I’m here with you as long as you’ll have me.”

“Promise me,” came Roz’s breathy whisper, as if she were trying to not cry. “I... care about you too.”

“I promise,” Gwyn whispered back, sealing the vow with the sincerity of her gaze.

As they slowly pulled apart, Gwyn felt a fluttering in her stomach, a tingling that ran down her spine, electrifying and unsettling. The image of Roz’s lips lingered in her mind, an unspoken question hanging in the air, leaving her heart racing and her thoughts in tumultuous disarray.

All thoughts of her refinement went away as she just enjoyed the moment with her best friend and snuggled in next to her, letting Roz hum softly as she played with Gwyn’s hair.