
House of Cards

“They’re out,” Nasha confirmed, her voice low as the black mana faded from her eyes. Gwyn watched, impressed by the Shadow Guard’s deftness. The team had indeed honed their skills under Sabina’s vigilant training.

Amari nodded in acknowledgment. “Good. Both of you keep us covered. Gwyn, the lamps?”

“On it.” Gwyn felt the magic surge within her, her **[Shadowmancy]** intertwining with Nasha’s to cloak them further in darkness. She followed Amari out the door and quickly used her **[Pyromancy]** to extinguish flames along their path, rendering the hallway a void save for the faint outlines visible through her **[Mana Sight]**. She could tell by their assured movements that Amari and Nasha were using similar magic to navigate.

As they turned a corner, two guards appeared, their faces etched with confusion at the sudden darkness. “The lamps? What’s going on?”

One began to investigate, but Amari was a step ahead. With a swift, silent motion, she drew her dagger and incapacitated the guard, his body gently laid to rest by the wall. The second guard met the same fate, their presence never alerting anyone else.

They moved like shadows, silent and unseen. Nasha’s magic lulled unsuspecting servants into a deep sleep, while Amari led them with a predator’s grace. The manor’s opulent hallways became their hunting ground, each corner turned revealing potential threats that were swiftly neutralized.

Approaching an open doorway from which the murmur of voices and the warm glow of a fireplace spilled out, Amari signaled a halt. With practiced stealth, she advanced and silently took out the guard stationed at the entrance.

They quickly set up outside the office with Amari, and Nasha standing on the opposite side of the doorway from Gwyn as she and the paladin peered quietly into a room suffused with the low hum of conversation and the warmth of a crackling fireplace. The space was occupied by five individuals: three appeared to be noblemen with their fine clothing and the one armored without his helmet was clearly a knight, but her breath hitched when her gaze landed on the last one—Varek Racine, the boy from school who had tried to use mind magic against her. He stood there with an almost bored demeanor, his eyes occasionally flicking around to other things with impatience.

The man who seemed to be leading the discussion was clearly a mage to her [**Mana Sight**], his fingers dancing intricately as he manipulated the black mana to weave what looked like malleable shadows in his hand. A smirk tugged at Gwyn's lips despite having to face another mage.

Shadow magic against her? He was in for a surprise.

Suddenly, the murmur of voices was disrupted by loud noises and distant yelling from downstairs. The group in the office paused, their attention diverted. The hallway fell quiet as Nasha quickly wove her magic, dampening the sounds from below. Varek Racine dismissed the commotion with a wave of his hand, suggesting it was probably nothing. The Lord resumed his conversation, speaking about the attack on House Reinhart, his words cold and calculating. The knight interjected, a confident sneer in his voice as he mentioned mercenaries being enough to overwhelm 'the girl.'

A surge of anger momentarily flickered within Gwyn, her thoughts darting to the estate, to Roslyn, to all those she cared about who were under threat. She felt the sting of rage, the urge to return home, but her [**Frozen Heart**] spell settled through her mind to keep her emotions in check and her focus sharp.

Without another moment's hesitation, Gwyn stepped into the room, her presence sudden and startling. The group turned with expressions ranging from shock to disbelief. Varek's eyes widened in recognition, and the Lord's fingers stilled, his shadow magic dissipating into the air.

Gwyn's gaze was unyielding as she addressed them, her voice steady yet laced with an undeniable edge, "You think you can attack my home, my friends, and get away with it? You think mercenaries are enough to stop me?" She took another step forward, the weight of her words hanging heavy in the air. "You've underestimated us, and for that, you'll pay."



Sabina was tense as she and the others moved stealthily down the garden path, their shadows merging with the darkness around them as Liza's [**Veil of Shadows**] kept them concealed. Taenya led the way with her shield held up and sword at the ready. She could tell from the small movements of the paladin's helmet that he was keeping watch around them, even if he didn't need to with Sabina monitoring their surroundings.

She concentrated with her [**Detect Emotions**], expanding its reach and casting it out as if it were a wide net. A ripple of <<*Boredom*>> from one source and <<*Alertness*>> from another ahead of them alerted her. '**Guards. Two,**' she sent to the others. The other three each nodded and adjusted

their approach with Liza raising her bow and drawing an arrow from the quiver strapped to her lower back.

As they neared the guards, Taenya's form blurred into motion and the first guard barely had time to widen his eyes before the silver streak of the knight's blade glinted in the moonlight. As the first man fell to Taenya's sword, the other's eyes widened and his hand shot to his side to draw his own blade. Before his fingers closed around the hilt, an arrow pierced his neck. And then Khalan reached him. With a quick thrust and yank of his sword, the second guard joined the first.

After hiding the bodies, the team continued through the hedges of the garden from one swift, silent confrontation to the next. Each guard they encountered was dispatched with clinical efficiency. Then, as they emerged, Liza kept them hidden while the group hastily moved to the terrace and crouched down behind the wall.

'There's no one else outside. Let's move in,' Sabina sent.

Taenya nodded and led them over the wall and around the stone tables that lined the area. When they reached the rear door, Sabina checked inside with her **[Sense Emotions]** and gave the all clear.

They slipped in through the back with Khalan and Taenya leading the way followed by Sabina, the door barely making a sound as it closed behind Liza. The interior was dimly lit and the air felt almost thick with tension, or at least that's how it was to her. Somewhere upstairs, Gwyn and the others were heading toward their own goal.

Sabina kept her senses extended as they progressed cautiously, her magic probing for any sign of hostility. They made their way through a kitchen and toward a hallway when she gestured to the others when she felt contacts approaching.

She used **[Alter Perception]** on Khalan who then moved out of the kitchen and casually addressed two guards who didn't even realize that he wasn't one of theirs before he dispatched both within a second of each other.

A group of servants were in another room, but Sabina acted quickly and reached out with **[Calm Emotions]** to soothe the initial panic of seeing them. Then, with a pointed **[Suggestion]**, she directed the servants they encountered to leave the manor for their safety. Confusion crossed their faces, but they nodded, unable to resist the compelling nature of her magic.

They made their way through the halls, encountering numerous guards and servants on the way. While the servants were easily persuaded with mind magic to evacuate the estate, the guards were dealt with swiftly. Taenya and Khalan's blades were a blur as they moved through the manor's defenders while Sabina used her **[Shadow Bolts]** on others before they could even draw their weapons.

Liza had put away her bow in favor of a dagger and short sword while weaving tendrils of shadow to confuse and disorient her targets as she struck them down.

They continued their advance, making their way toward the stairs at the front of the manor. Sabina's mind was a whirl of emotions flying through the building. She caught snippets of <<Surprise>> followed by <<Fear>> coming from upstairs along with cold <<Resolve>> that she could almost taste, as if it was flavored with a bit of spice—she knew to be from Gwyn.

That searching of emotions was how she felt the presence when it rolled over them like a gentle breeze.

'Mind mage. We've been noticed.'

As they emerged into the foyer, two heavily armored knights and four men-at-arms stood waiting for them with their weapons drawn and ready. One of the knights, a man with eyes glowing green and black visible through the slit of his helmet, stared at Sabina. "You're the little rodent that's been causing trouble for my mistress," the man's voice rang out, his tone measured yet laced with a certain edge. "I've been looking forward to this moment."

Taenya pointed her blade at him. "I am Ser Taenya. Throw down your weapons and surrender. This ends tonight."

The man laughed. "I am Knight-Captain Weylind. This has only just begun, and you haven't realized how out of your depth you are or how many steps behind you have been this whole time. While you are here, your princess and the Tiloral heiress will soon be dead."

The group fell into a tense silence, each member processing Weylind's words. But one thing was good. He didn't realize Gwyn was just upstairs. They needed to keep it that way. If he was anything like her, he could alert the entire manor.

Sabina's heart pounded with the urgency of the moment, her [Mana Sense] tingling as she prepared for the battle ahead. ***'If they're attacking the estate. We need to hurry,'*** she sent to the others, her telepathic message laced with concern and resolve.

Khalan's response came back almost immediately, his voice a beacon of calm in the storm, ***'If they're getting attacked now, we won't make it in time. Lady Roslyn will be fine. She has the others with her. Focus on this.'*** Liza's mental echo ensured that Taenya received the message as well, the coordination between them seamless.

Then, she felt a shiver run down her spine as another tingling brushed over her mind. Just the knight-captain's presence was exuding some type of intimidation aura.

Sabina drew a deep breath, her mind racing as she considered their options. Knight-Captain Weylind's presence was a variable they had anticipated ever since she and Taenya had seen him outside

the Academy. She knew he would be strong, but she had trained. She'd prepared, and after numerous ambushes by mind mages from this Relena-cursed House, she wanted blood.

With a steady resolve, she sent another message to her team, *'Leave the mind mage to me, do not attack. He's strong. Keep the others off me, as I will likely not be able to defend myself.'* She could feel the acknowledgement from each member. They trusted her, and she trusted them.

Especially Taenya. She'll keep me safe.

With a nod to Taenya, Khalan, and Liza, they prepared to engage the rest of the enemies. Each of them understood their roles, their trust in each other unspoken but as solid as the ground beneath their feet.

Without warning, the knight-captain launched his attack, a wave of mind magic crashing against Sabina like a tidal wave. It was overwhelming, the force of it threatening to break through her defenses. But instead of resisting, Sabina drew him in, her vision darkening before she suddenly found herself sitting on her throne within her **[Mental Fortress]**.

The space was her own, a realm of her creation where she was in control. The walls were high and impenetrable, the throne beneath her a symbol of her dominion over her mind. She could feel the knight-captain's presence there, his initial <<Surprise>> followed by <<Triumph>> as he thought had already won. It was a simple thing to feel him as his magic started searching for her. His <<Confidence>> was clearly misplaced as she felt him moving toward the large doors that led into her fortress. He thought he had already won. That being in her mind was all he needed to kill her.

But this was her territory.

Here, she was the one with the advantage.

Sabina sat on a throne with a feral grin on her face.

The chamber that Sabina had retreated to in her mind was a place of haunting beauty and darkness, a reflection of the fears and power she harbored within. Shadows danced along the walls, their forms twisted and shifting, as if alive with a malevolent will of their own.

She glanced to the right where a massive chest sat. One that was wrapped in tendrils of darkness and chains that were bolted to the floor, ensuring the contents were locked away by shadows and steel. Every now-and-then the chest would jerk and shake as if something inside were trying to escape.

In her mind, she may as well be a goddess. Some may not like what could be unleashed.



The nobleman's eyes settled into narrow slits and his mouth opened, but Gwyn knew what to do. *Never let the villain monologue.*

She cut him off with a dismissive flick of her hand. "Don't care."

A wave of [**Telekinesis**] shot out from her hand and threw the others in the room back. Then before the mage could respond, she focused on the fire crackling in the hearth as her [**Pyromancy**] flared to life. With a sharp tug, she pulled at the fire, yanking a stream of flames towards the noble mage. He dove to the side even as the flames licked at him causing his coat to catch fire. He quickly ripped it off in a panic, throwing it away as it burned.

As he rose, shadows twisted around his hands like serpents ready to strike before settling into six blades that hovered around him. He launched the volley of shadowy daggers towards her, only for her to laugh in response. With a graceful raise of her arm, she extended her influence with her [**Shadowmancy**] and batted away his weak will, seizing control of the daggers and swirling them around herself until they pointed back at their caster. "My aunt is far better with shadow magic, and she taught me everything I know," she taunted the man who stood there mouth agape.

"How dare you," he spat as he tried to retaliate, his hands moving to conjure more shadows, but Gwyn was quicker. She took control of his magic, manipulating the shadows into wrapping around his arms and yanking them downward in a forceful bind. With a click of her tongue, she mocked, "Not only that, but my sister is a better shadow mage and she's barely a year old." Without letting him get in another word, she sent the captured daggers hurtling back towards him.

They found their mark, and he collapsed, his life extinguished in an instant.

While she had focused on him, she realized that Amari had dispatched the knight and the remaining two nobles before they could even react. As the paladin withdrew her sword from the final noble, a gasp from Nasha diverted Gwyn's attention.

Gwyn's gaze snapped to where Nasha stood, her body rigid with tension. Opposite her, Varek's eyes glowed ominously black, as he focused on the Shadow Guard. Nasha was visibly struggling, her body shaking and teeth clenched as she fought an invisible battle against something unseen.

Varek turned his head slightly as his gaze locked onto Gwyn, his voice then echoed in her mind with a malicious promise whispered through the shadows. *'I've been waiting for this for so long. You're next after this trash.'*

Gwyn didn't hesitate.

With a fluid motion, she raised her hand and unleashed her [**Sunbeam**] spell, a radiant lance of light that speared through the room, striking Varek square in the chest. His eyes barely registered in shock as the beam impaled him, then continued on to burst through the wall and into the night sky.

Oxylus

He collapsed in a heap, his face marked by staggering disbelief. As he lay dying, Nasha steadied herself, nodding her thanks to Gwyn. “Thank you. He caught me off guard.”

Gwyn’s expression tightened with concern. “It’s my fault. I should have warned you about him when I saw him.”

Amari looked over at the boy lying on the floor. “I as well. Are you alright, Nasha?”

The Shadow Guard, clearly still recovering as she massaged her temples, managed a nod. “I am well. I managed to hold him back. Just a bit of a headache.”

Amari, clearly understanding the newfound need for expediency, hurried Nasha over and the two began to rummage through the office’s contents. Their movements were swift and purposeful as they sifted through documents and drawers for any clue that might lead them to further understand the machinations of House Racine.

While they went over things, Gwyn approached her classmate, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He looked up at her, eyes filled with unyielding hatred even as his life ebbed away. Gwyn, her emotions held in check by her **[Frozen Heart]**, met his gaze with a steely resolve.

He scowled at her before eeking out a threat, his voice filled with venom and pain. “My mother will kill you for this...”

Gwyn shook her head dismissively. “She will try. And then she will die like those before her,” she replied coldly. She turned away as Amari called out for help opening a safe, leaving the boy to his fate.



The earth heaved beneath Roslyn’s trembling hands as she summoned a jagged **[Bulwark]** of stone, the ground tearing open with a roar to intercept the onrushing mercenaries. Dirt and debris showered the air like a gritty haze over the estate grounds. She barely registered the coarse taste of dust in her mouth, her focus riveted on the desperate struggle unfolding before her.

The Reinhart estate had transformed into a nightmarish setting of conflict. Flames born from magic licked the edges of the manor and across the grounds that cast ghastly shadows over the frenzied combatants. The stench of blood and charred wood filled the air, punctuated by the relentless clatter of swords and pained screams of the fallen.

For her part, Roslyn’s heart hammered in her chest. Her hands shook as she tried to use her magic to help both her own and Gwyn’s respective people.

As she cut off another group of mercenaries so the paladins and guards could fight them, the very air seemed to thicken around them like a boulder that tried to press down on Roslyn's head. She cried out and reached up as it started to hurt, but then just as her fingertips touched her temple, the pain vanished. The paladins, those bastions of faith and might, reacted with grim determination, weaving their magic into a shimmering barrier that repelled the psychic assault. But even as the barrier held, Roslyn could see the strain etched on their faces, beads of sweat mingling with the grime of battle at least until Friedrich called out a command and a hail of bolts fell upon three mages pointing toward Roslyn and her protectors.

As they died, the paladins let their barrier fall and immediately rushed back into motion. The paladin evocati pointed out a target for her. With a forceful gesture, she released a surge of **[Spikes]**, earthen daggers erupting from the ground toward an advancing foe only to be blocked by a shimmering shield of blue and red mana.

With that, the situation spiraled into chaos as several enemy mages pushed their assault, launching magic of all sorts toward anyone in sight, scattering the defenders with ruthless efficiency.

“Milady! We need to get you to safety,” Ser Roderick called out.

She nodded even as she threw up another **[Bulwark]** of stone and dirt to split the enemy forces. Roderick, Friedrich, and two paladins quickly moved to her side, and she fell into step as the group escorted her back towards the manor with urgent strides. As they retreated, the battlefield stretched out behind her—a maelstrom of violence that consumed all in its path.

Over her shoulder, the remaining paladins surged forward as they no longer needed to stay by her side. Their swords rose and fell in a dance of valor as they sought to stem the tide of invaders and help the others as the attack intensified on all sides.

Just as they neared the relative safety of the manor, another group of attackers charged them. Without a moment's hesitation, the paladins and knights sprang into action, their blades singing a deadly hymn as they met the onslaught head-on.

Roslyn's heart lurched as the battle unfolded before her.

She raised her hand, but fear of hitting one of her own stayed her hand.

Despite her fear, she knew she couldn't stand idle. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that another attacker was running toward her. Drawing deep from her core, she unleashed a **[Wind Shear]**, the air itself sharpening into a lethal force that cut through the enemy.

That was when she fully took in her attacker's appearance.

Oxylus

A girl, barely older than Roslyn, crumpled to the ground, her mouth opening and closing a few times before going still with a look of surprise forever etched onto her young face. A sickening sense of horror gripped Roslyn as she realized what she had just done.

Before she could fully process the death she had caused, a terrible heat scorched the air. Calista, the year old dragon, dived from the sky and landed squarely on another assailant. The man screamed as flames engulfed him, the fire searing flesh and bone point-blank.

Roslyn averted her gaze, the gruesome sight too much to bear.

She heard Roderick's voice cut through the chaos. "Friedrich and I have this. Take Roslyn to the safe room." His command brooked no argument, and as much as Roslyn wanted to protest, to say she could help, the truth of her vulnerability was painfully clear.

As the knight engaged the attackers, creating a barrier of steel between her and the violence, Roslyn was led away by the two paladins and through the back door. The manor's corridors blurred past, each step taking her further from the battle, yet the echoes of conflict followed her like a persistent shadow.

As they navigated the manor, a fierce cry rent the air, followed by the unmistakable sound of steel rending flesh. Ilyana gracefully stepped over a body while wiping her blade clean. Without pausing to dwell on the fallen foe, she directed several servants into a nearby room before turning toward Roslyn and the paladins. "I'll protect the staff down here," she declared.

Roslyn with the paladins hastened up the stairs, the eerie silence of the upper floor a stark contrast to the turmoil outside. The office door loomed ahead like the beacon of a potential safe haven.

The paladins quickly opened the door and looked inside before turning to her. "Get inside, milady. We will stand guard. Do not open the door unless it is one of us two."

She nodded as they guided her inside and closed her in.

Upon entering, the reality of what had transpired, of what she had done, suddenly crashed over Roslyn like a relentless wave. She rushed to a waste bucket in the corner and retched, her body convulsing with the effort to expel not just the contents of her stomach but the overwhelming guilt and terror that had seized her.

She was attacking me. I had to. Gwyn would have done it.

The mantra did little to quell the tumultuous storm of emotions churning within her. Roslyn sank to the floor, her back against the cool wood of the desk, her breaths shallow and uneven. The image of the young girl's lifeless body haunted her, an unrelenting specter that whispered of a reality far crueler than any of the books she so loved to read.

Why do they keep attacking us?

Why can't they just leave us alone?

Outside, the battle raged on, the sounds muffled yet ever-present. But in that office, in that moment, Roslyn was alone with her thoughts. *Gwyn*, she thought desperately, *I need you*.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, but as the fighting outside the windows sounded closer and closer, Roslyn turned to make sure they were closed, only to see a shadowy figure clamber through the one furthest from her. Her breath hitched as her gaze locked onto the intruder.

Without hesitation, she jumped to her feet and channeled her inner *Gwyn* as she summoned her mana, preparing to defend herself.

She didn't need to win; she just needed to delay until help arrived.

"W-Who are you? Why are you here?" she asked the figure.

The woman scanned the room, and when her eyes landed on Roslyn noticed a mix of determination and urgency painted her face. It was then that Roslyn realized that the woman was a human. "We—I'm here for the princess. Where is she? Tell me, girl and you'll be spared. We won't hurt you."

Roslyn's eyes narrowed defiantly. "You're too late, *Gwyn's* gone and now you'll never get to her," she spat out, her voice steady despite the fear clawing at her. "Leave now, or I'll call the paladins, and they'll make quick work of you. All I have to do is scream."

"No, no. She was supposed to be here. He told us that she'd be here! Ordered us to take her!" The woman's eyes flashed and her expression abruptly changed. "Thank you. You'll do for now," she said cryptically.

Suddenly the room darkened and Roslyn's ears popped. Before she could react, the woman transformed into a wisp of smoke, surging forward. Instinctively, Roslyn's hands shot forward, her **[Aeromancy]** creating a gust of wind that sent the smoke reeling back. The woman rematerialized just as she crashed against the wall with a thud.

Scrambling back to her feet, the woman lunged again, but Roslyn was ready. She unleashed two **[Wind Shears]**, one leaving a deep cut along the woman's arm while the other knocked a dagger away.

The human hissed in pain, and the muffled effect dropped.

Roslyn screamed for help.

In mere moments, the door burst open and two paladins charged in. One immediately moved to Roslyn's side, shielding her, while the other *blurred* toward the woman who barely dodged the strike by rolling closer to the window. A quick exchange of blades resounded through the room that

immediately put the woman in a desperate struggle to fend off the clearly better fighter. The paladin with Roslyn gently guided her back toward the door while keeping an eye on the fight.

The woman, cornered and desperate, looked toward Roslyn once more. That split-second distraction was all the paladin needed. He struck with precision, slicing through her side and forcing her back. But she clearly wasn't going to go down quietly. With a swift motion, she conjured a cloud of smoke, engulfing the room.

A voice flitted through her mind, *'I'll be seeing you, little elf.'*

The paladin charged through the smokescreen, undeterred. But when the smoke cleared, only he was standing by the window.

The woman had vanished completely.



In the cavernous expanse of Sabina's mental realm, the throne room stretched out before her both dark and foreboding. The fortress was filled with the echoes of tormented screams and screeches as the remnants of conjured shadow creatures that defended it fell to the invader's wrath. The fighting and sound of magic grew ever closer until it reached outside the doors of her very chamber.

But Sabina sat motionless, embodying the persona of a queen in her dark domain, surrounded by the swirling mists of her own making. Her throne of shadows seemed to absorb the scant light, creating an aura of impending doom.

Silence reigned for but a moment then the door resounded with pounding. After several minutes of weathering a continuous barrage, the large double doors buckled inward as Ser Weylind made his entrance. Ser Weylind's entry into her throne room felt like a violation, his presence an affront to this last bastion of her mind. The room seemed to grow colder at his arrival, the air more suffocating.

Here in her mind, it was as if even the man's blade of shadows dripped with <<Malice>> like a tangible force. His eyes, alight with a wicked glee, scanned the room before settling on Sabina with disdain.

"I can't believe my attack overwhelmed you so quickly," he taunted, his voice echoing sinisterly. "It seems my fears were misplaced. So, you retreated to your mind, and this is supposed to protect you? Did you think your creatures and shadows would scare me?"

Sabina's only response was a serene smile, her eyes locked on the knight.

His gaze searched the room almost lazily before falling onto the chest. She knew what lay within the chest he eyed so greedily, the terrible power she had sealed away for fear of what it might

turn her into. But now, as Weylind moved closer, as he mocked her and threatened all she held dear, she knew she had no choice but to unleash it.

“My, my. What do you have here? Is this where you keep all of your secrets? I cannot for the life of me imagine why you think any of this would be a good idea. I know you have others that have worked with you as you slink through the night. Did you truly not train against others with our magic? Physical chains? At least the shadow magic is an inspired touch. But did you really think that would keep me out?”

Still Sabina did not respond. She simply watched. Observed as the man stepped toward not a chest of secrets but a prison of horrors.

The knight almost ignored her as he looked over the chest. “What secrets do you keep, little rodent? I know you are close to the princess, and my mistress would love knowledge on how she has risen so far and how she managed to garner the loyalty of the Tilorals. Perhaps after I tear these secrets from you, I will let you live. Let you see as I burn down all that you treasure. Your princess is to be captured alive, you know. My mistress has plans for her.”

The knight reached out, his green and black mana swirling menacingly as he prepared to break the protective measures that held the chest closed. Sabina could feel the moment drawing near, the point of no return.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” she warned, her voice a whisper that cut through the tension like a knife. “It would be safer. For both of us.”

But the knight only laughed, a sound devoid of humor, full of malice. “Even now you are defiant,” he sneered. “But you have lost, little rodent. I stand in the inner sanctum of your mind. Your defenses have crumbled and all that is left is mine for the taking.”

Black mana surged from the man toward the chest and the tendrils fought to maintain their embrace of the chest before they almost melted back into the floor. Next, green mana joined the black and the chains rusted until they became so brittle that they snapped.

Once the chest lay unprotected, he paused to ensure there were no surprises to catch him unaware. Satisfied, he cast a final malevolent glance at her before stepping forward. As his hand made contact with the chest, Sabina let out a resigned sigh. She clenched her fists, her knuckles turning white. She had always feared this moment, the moment she would have to embrace the darkness she had kept at bay for so long.

It would be released soon.

But as the knight's laughter filled the room, as the chest began to creak open, she knew there was no other way. Taenya, Gwyn, Roslyn, everyone she cared about was counting on her. She had to be strong. She had to be the monster that this situation demanded.

Taenya would know what to do.

If her best friend failed, then Gwyn would.

As the chest creaked open, revealing nothing but the void within, Ser Weylind's face twisted into a mask of fury and confusion. He spun around, venomous words dying on his lips as his gaze met the horrific transformation of the realm's goddess.

Her laugh, a sound that chilled the very air around them, echoed through the chamber as the mind mage staggered back, his blade dissolving into nothingness in his trembling hands. He tried to summon his magic, to weave shadows and magic of his own, but found himself powerless as his spells unraveled before they could even form.

In Sabina's realm, he was nothing, a mere mortal facing the wrath of something truly terrible—an eldritch evil. She knew what he was seeing.

She saw it in her nightmares.

She saw it every time she peered into a mirror.

Standing up from her throne of darkness, Sabina Dominis towered over the knight as her silhouette elongated and twisted into its true eldritch form. Her arms, unnaturally long and ending in clawed fingers, hung at her sides dripping with inky darkness. Horns curled back from her head, framing a face that was no longer elven but a visage of terror. Her eyes, deep pools of abyssal blackness, seemed to swallow the light around them, and her mouth, too wide and filled with needle-like teeth, dripped with venomous shadows.

Panic ignited in his eyes as he turned to flee, only to find the grand throne room had closed in around him, replaced by a suffocating cell of darkness. The walls and broken doors that were once ornate and grand were now a living mass of writhing shadows that encroached ever closer with each passing second.

“Did you truly think you could attack me so recklessly? Did my willingness to let you into the darkest recesses of my mind not concern you?” she taunted in a raspy voice, her form shifting and flowing like liquid night before disappearing completely. “Here, in my domain, you are nothing but prey. Your sins... they call to me, a feast for the darkness I've kept locked away. The box is open once more.” Sabina's voice was a whisper, yet it filled the room, seeping into every corner like a toxic mist.

She felt his every emotion; tasted it, relished it.

<<Fear>> seized Ser Weylind, a <<Terror>> so profound it rooted him to the spot. He shouted, demanding that she face him, but his bravado was a thin veneer over the <<Dread>> that consumed him.

In a whisper of shadows, Sabina was suddenly there, leaning close, her breath cold as the grave. “You are mine,” she hissed. With a swift, merciless motion, she struck. Her claws, now like tendrils of pure darkness, lashed out, piercing into the very essence of his mind as she tore his mental self apart piece by piece before ripping into it with her teeth. He screamed, a sound cut short as her tendrils of abyss made manifest plunged into his chest, tearing at his soul with a ferocity that left nothing behind.

In moments, it was over. The knight-captain of House Racine was no more, his existence extinguished in the dark maw of Sabina’s wrath.

The chamber fell silent, the only sound the soft, sinister echo of Sabina’s laughter as she retracted her nightmarish form, the darkness receding into the corners of her mind.

As Sabina’s eyes fluttered open back in the realm of the material, the immediate sight that greeted her was Ser Weylind’s lifeless body sprawled on the ground, blood oozing from his ears, nose, and mouth. Around him, the remnants of their foes lay scattered, victims of a fierce battle that had raged while she delved into the depths of her mind.

Taenya stood a short distance away accompanied by the fierce presence of her summoned bear, its red mana pulsating with power. Khalan was wiping his blade clean with a cloth, an air of practiced indifference about him. Liza was there with both <<Concern>> and <<Awe>> at the aftermath of Sabina’s mental duel.

The three recognized Sabina’s return immediately.

Khalan’s voice broke the silence with a dry quip, “You looked like you had your own sort of fun. Don’t mind us.”

But Taenya with her brows furrowed in concern, moved closer to Sabina, her bear companion trailing behind her like a guardian spirit. Her gaze was intense as it locked onto Sabina’s. ***‘You alright, love? Is the box closed?’***

Sabina’s eyes, still flickering with the residual shadows of her magic use, met Taenya’s. She could feel the hunger within her, a ravenous entity that had tasted power and craved more. It wanted her to rip and tear into all those around her, even those closest to her. She pushed it back, down into the darkest recesses of her mind, and forced a smile. ***‘The box is open, but I am in control, my dear Tay. Let us go help our princess.’***

Taenya froze, her eyes searching Sabina for any hint of a lack of control. The <<Concern>> that was uncharacteristically *oozing* from her was tinged with a bit of <<Fear>>. It was the second

emotion that ate at Sabina's heart but she remained still as she waited for Taenya to come to a decision. She was hopeful her friend would make the right one as she was again forced to push the hunger back down. After a long moment, Taenya nodded and signaled for the group to move out, the bear dissolving into motes of red mana as she turned.

Sabina glanced once more at Ser Weylind's body and smiled before she followed behind.



As Amari and Nasha filled a sack with everything they found, Gwyn paused in front of the hearth with a floating orb of fire hovering above her for light. They had found evidence of House Racine working with the Crown Prince. Evidence that the people who had attacked her at the castle and in Neira's forest were his men.

She sighs, but then something in the ashes catches her eye.

With a flick of her wrist, Gwyn summoned a gust of wind with her [Aeromancy], gently lifting the fragile remnants from their ashen bed. A letter or what remained of one.

Gwyn scanned the contents, her expression darkening with every word. "This... they knew everything about both our estate and Roz's..." She turned to Amari, her voice low and steady. "They planned this with help."

Amari nodded. "But who sent it?"

Gwyn shook her head, the letter still clutched in her hand. "That's burned off, or wasn't there at all... Just this detailed... *betrayal*. Why would someone betray us?" She looked at the letter again, her eyes tracing over the precise handwriting, a silent vow forming in her mind. Whoever was behind this, they would pay. She would see to that.

The sound of hurried footsteps had the three of them turn to see Taenya and the other's arrival upstairs. They entered the ransacked office and looked around. "We need to leave now," Taenya said, her voice a low command. "The estate is under attack."

"We know," Amari said, turning from where she stood. "We're almost done."

It's safe now, Gwyn. You can let go, Sabina sent.

Gwyn nodded, releasing the grip of her [Frozen Heart] spell. The emotions it'd held at bay surged forward, and she doubled over retching. As she wiped her mouth and stood, her gaze fell on the crumpled form of Varek Racine, his lifeless eyes staring into nothingness. She felt Taenya's presence close beside her, the knight's gaze fixed on the boy.

"He was just a kid," Gwyn murmured, her voice a mix of disbelief and sorrow.

Nasha joined them, her expression somber. "And he caught me by surprise. I was fighting him off in my [**Mind Fortress**] but he was quite strong. You saved me."

Taenya placed a hand on Gwyn's shoulder. "Let's go."

They exited the manor, the building now engulfed in the roaring flames of Gwyn's magic. She watched the fire consume the structure for a moment, the bright tongues of fire reflecting in her eyes. "Let this be a message," she said, her voice carrying over the crackle and hiss of the blaze. "We will not be hunted. We will not be prey."



The air was thick with the scent of smoke and blood as Gwyn stepped out of the carriage, her eyes scanning the devastation that had befallen the estate. Bodies of the attackers lay strewn across the grounds, their final resting places marked by the valiant struggle of the defenders. Guards, grim-faced and weary, moved systematically, organizing the fallen into rows, while others tended to the wounded, their hands moving in a blur as they worked to save lives.

As she made her way into the manor, a blur of blonde hair and a wave of relief tackled her into an embrace. "Gwyn, oh gods, I'm so glad you're back," Roz's voice, choked with emotion, filled her ears.

"I'm happy you're safe, Roz. I was worried when I heard," Gwyn replied, her voice steady yet warm as she wrapped an arm around her friend.

Roz looked up at her with a tear streaked face. "It was so bad."

"Girls. We're ready."

Gwyn looked up from her friend to see Taenya waiting on them. She gently pulled Roz along. "Come on, we'll talk after."

The two made their way into the dining hall, the room buzzing with the aftermath of the battle. As they entered, all eyes turned to them, the room falling into a respectful silence. Gwyn noticed Friedrich seated, his torso wrapped in bandages, his posture speaking volumes about the pain he was trying to hide.

"So, where do we stand now?" Gwyn asked as she and Roz stepped up to the table.

Friedrich winced slightly as he made to stand, but Gwyn's gesture had him relaxing back into his seat. "Twenty Guards and a handful of staff died, but we fought off over a hundred attackers. You were the target."

"How did you get hurt?" Gwyn's gaze lingered on the bandages.

"I was injured taking down a mage with Ser Roderick," Friedrich responded, his eyes briefly meeting the knight's.

Gwyn nodded in acknowledgment, her gaze sweeping over the assembled faces. "Where did they get all the people?"

"They were a combination of Racine's people plus mercenaries," Friedrich replied. "We caught them off guard, but we really need to improve our information network. We should have anticipated this attack."

At that, Sabina stepped forward, her expression filled with regret. "I apologize for my failure, Your Highness."

Gwyn shook her head firmly. "No, you have been doing what you could. It's on all of us to be prepared."

Roslyn pulled away from Gwyn and looked around. "Information gathering should be my responsibility, Gwyn. I will work with my grandfather to get Sabina the resources and contacts she needs."

Gwyn looked at her friend, the determination in her eyes reflecting her own. "Thank you, Roz," she said as Sabina also inclined her head to the ducal heiress.

From there, the discussion moved to how the attack was likely only the beginning. Amari detailed the documents and evidence they had recovered from the Racine manor, each revelation was like a stone adding weight to their already heavy burden. Then she got to the letter that Gwyn had found, explaining her thoughts on a potential inside source for the attacks on both estates.

Roderick's face was etched with concern, his gaze turning to Janine who frowned deeply. "I will find our traitor," she stated firmly. "I believe we need to get home as soon as we can. The capital is no longer safe for us."

The question of their next move hung in the air until Aleanora spoke up, her voice laced with worry. "Will we have anyone remain in the capital? What about the Hall of Lords?"

Ser Roderick who shook his head and gestured to Taenya who nodded. "No. With evidence of the Crown Prince's involvement, we're leaving all of this behind," he explained. "We simply do not have the resources to protect our people here in the capital."

Beside Gwyn, Roslyn frowned. “We will need to figure out an alternative to strike back at House Racine, and potentially even those within the Crown Prince’s sphere. Simply retreating to the duchy will not solve matters.”

It was Rhion who spoke next, exchanging a glance with Taenya. “Well... about that. What about a castle?”

Gwyn, her curiosity piqued, tilted her head. “A castle? Where?”

“Near Drakensburg,” Taenya responded. “We’re building one with his family’s help.”

That got everyone’s attention as several gasps of surprise filled the room. Amari’s gaze hardened as she frowned.

“You’re building a castle...? How long until it is ready?” Roderick’s voice cut through her thoughts.

“One year,” Rhion replied promptly.

“Then in one year, that’s where we’ll go,” Gwyn declared, her voice carrying a determination that filled the room. She turned to Rhion, “We need to get word to your family. I think we need to have another meeting—with all of us present.” Her gaze settled on Roslyn, who gave a subtle nod of agreement.

As they were wrapping up, Ilyana, her voice tinged with urgency, added, “There’s one more thing. What about Lymtoria? All of us have family and people in the duchy. If they’re going to be attacked...”

The question lingered, a new fear amidst their already daunting challenges. Roslyn addressed the paladins, “Has the Church heard anything about the Republic?”

Both Church paladins and Amari shook their heads in the negative. Silence fell over the room.

Gwyn broke the quiet with a contemplative hum. “Well, everyone, we have one year to win a war. Afterwards, we will all meet at the castle to plan on how to win another.”

Roslyn shook her head with a small, rueful smile. “But first, we need to finish this school year.”