

Impressions

Sabina tried to force herself back to wakefulness as a building sense of terror, utterly not her own, pulled her deeper into an alien world. The transition caused nothing but pain that felt as if her very mind was being torn asunder. The pain obliterated her very thoughts one by one until oblivion took her.

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It was a scene of a town quite unlike any I had seen. The quality of architecture was much different, with smooth walls of solid stone, perfectly clear glass with colorful wording, and even pictures. Everywhere I looked around, there were people in strange clothes and cars passing by. I continued observing the area, taking in the sights, sounds, and even smells. The people seemed full of joy and without care or worry. Families walked about with children who ran and played. Groups of children ran around without parents watching over them. Others rode on their bicycles in groups or alone. *Everything is so peaceful. So safe.*

I tried to turn away but was pulled back by a hand. “Gwyn, pay attention.”

I looked up, and a car passed by where I had wanted to go. *Wait, a car? That’s what a car is? That thing nearly hit me.* Turning back, I faced a beautiful and tall woman who looked down at me with a slightly unamused face. *Why does she seem so familiar?*

“Sorry, mom. I’ll make sure to look both ways,” I promised.

“Please do. Now, let’s get some gelato. Shall we?” mom invited and positioned herself so that I could hook my arm into hers.

I followed my mother to a small shop that sat overlooking a canal. There was a terrace outside that had a large fabric awning held up by a single pole with metal ribs fanning out from the top to create shade from the sunlight. Mother—*Mom* ordered two cups of a *frozen* dessert

and I listened as the beautiful woman spoke to the woman serving at the counter and ordered two flavors, one after the other. I took note as the woman scooped out the dessert upon request, and I examined them as mom grabbed them. The first cup that had been ordered was a pink one made from strawberries, and the other, a brown-colored dessert, was the chocolate mom had asked for. After retrieving our desserts, we made our way to the terrace and sat down before mom handed me my strawberry... *gelato*.

The first bite of my dessert sent jolts through my system. The taste was the best thing I'd had in my entire life. *How do they make this and keep it so cold?* It was a dessert of royalty, yet everywhere I looked, I saw regular people taking part in the same decadent treats.

I turned and looked at my... *mother*. She was tall, much taller than I was. In fact, the woman was taller than most people around them. She had curly-brunette hair that flowed down just below her shoulder blades. Her gorgeous eyes were sapphire blue, just like... *mine*, and they held such intense intelligence within them that made me feel safe and proud. I looked down at my arm and compared my own pale tone with my mother's more slightly tanned skin.

I took a bite of my treat of the gods and giggled as mom got some of her chocolate dessert on herself. "Mom! Your chin!"

Her mother laughed and lifted a napkin to wipe it off. Then, when she was done, she used her finger to tap me on the nose. "Thanks, Gwynnie!"

I wriggled my nose as she pulled away and smiled when I saw her nails, which were glossy and beautifully painted. The almond shape of them was really pretty, and I definitely wanted to get my nails done like that one day. I would love it if mom and I could go to the salon together for manis and pedis. *Wait, I do? I don't even know what those are.*

We sat there and watched the group of ducks that were swimming by in the canal. I enjoyed sitting and just watching nature with mom. It was always so peaceful and relaxing. *It really is.*

I jerked up when I heard several screams from far away. I glanced around and noticed all the surrounding people were looking up at something. Confused, I turned my head up to find out what had everyone's attention and saw the sky-lights... *no*, the *aurora* in the sky.

I glanced back at my... mom and called out to her, "Mom! I'm scared!"

“Why be scared? It’s going to take you away and you’ll never see me again. Goodbye, Gwyn.”

What!? I cried out to her, “No! Mom! Don’t leave me!” My eyes were tearing up as fear settled into me.

“Goodbye.” Mom turned around and started to walk away from me.

I felt a knot in my chest and got really scared. I reached out. “Momma!”

Suddenly, a bright blue flash washed out my vision.

* * *

An intense feeling of sadness and pain caused her to jerk awake in bed. Sabina frantically looked around, not remembering where she was, before realizing she was in her room. Feeling at her forehead, her fingers came away slick with sweat, and she could only vaguely remember her dream. With heavy breaths, she sat in the darkness, trying to recall the images she had seen. She froze. She knew what had happened.

Gwyn!

Sabina jumped up and threw on some clothes before she rushed through the house. She had zero ideas of how it had happened, or *what* was going on with her. All she knew was that she needed to get to Gwyn. Running to the Princess’ room, the few servants and guards that were awake performing the nighttime duties quickly moved aside for her. When she reached Gwyn’s room, she barged in, ignoring all propriety.

She looked around and saw only darkness, so she called out, “Gwyn? Are you okay?”

Sabina heard the girl before she saw her. Gwyn was laying down, crying into her pillow, and Sabina *felt* waves of sadness coming from her. More intense than any feeling she had felt yet. Almost as if they were a physical thing, suffocating her.

“Gwyn?”

The girl responded through sobs that were muffled by the pillow she had buried her face into. Sabina sat next to her and placed a hand on her back. It was an awkward act for her. Sabina had never done especially well with children before, but this *sadness. I have to do something.*

“Gwynnie? Can you talk to me?”

She felt the girl lock up, then after a moment, Gwyn slowly rolled over and faced Sabina. They could barely see each other in the dark, and the moons shining through the windows provided the only light.

“My mom calls me that,” Gwyn whispered through the tears.

“I know. I know she does. I am so sorry, Gwyn. I know you miss her.” Sabina said softly.

“She’s gone, Sabina. I’m never going to see her again. I—I should have held her hand like she told me to. I let go. I let go, and she’s gone. It’s all my fault. I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t have—” Gwyn stopped as she started hyperventilating.

“Shh, shh. Gwyn, please. Don’t talk like that. It’s not your fault. I know it’s not. You’re going to see her again. I promise.” Sabina felt herself tearing up. The sadness was still there, but it had shifted. It was quickly shifting to hopelessness and anguish. “Come here, sit up for me.”

She helped Gwyn sit up and pulled her close, hugging the girl. Her breathing was still quick, but it slowed down the longer they held each other. *This feeling? It’s something no one her age should feel.* Trying to feel thoughts of hope and love, Sabina thought of how amazing and how strong Gwyn was. She thought of how proud she made Taenya and Siveril feel whenever she interacted with others. How happy she made Keston feel whenever she spent time with him. How much love Sabina felt coming from the girl whenever Gwyn spoke of her mother, and how Sabina wished she could feel that herself. She channeled all these feelings and Sabina realized she would help this girl until her last breath. She would follow her anywhere and would do anything to find her mother.

Slowly, the feelings she felt coming from the girl calmed down. The princess was still crying, but it had lessened the longer she held on. Gwyn was gripping Sabina so tight; as if letting go would cause Gwyn to disappear again. To lose everyone she knew. The knight just sat there, holding the young princess, that she now knew wasn’t truly a princess. Just a girl who loved her mother and was equally loved back. A girl who didn’t realize her mistake until it was

too late. Sabina would never tell a soul. Gwyn *was* her princess, and she would always stand at her side.

“Gwyn?”

“Yes, Sabina?”

“I will do everything I can to make it better. Alright? I will be right here, and if you ever need to talk or cry? I will always be available. I will never tell a soul any secret you share with me.”

“You promise?” The girl asked hesitantly.

“I promise.”

The girl took a deep breath and pulled away from Sabina. Gwyn sat there in silence, and she didn’t push. The princess could take all the time she wanted. While she waited for the girl to collect herself, Sabina made a promise to herself that she would never again try to hear the girl’s thoughts without permission. She would not betray the trust Gwyn felt for her.

A small light appeared over Gwyn’s shoulder and startled Sabina. She looked closer and saw that it was a small orb of fire, barely bigger than a gold coin. Gwyn gave her a slight smile. “Sorry, I just couldn’t see you.”

“It’s okay, Gwyn.”

“So. I... you *do* promise you’ll never tell *anyone*?” Gwyn asked again.

“I do. I promise to keep your secrets to myself and will never betray the trust you have placed in me. I will defend both you and your thoughts from anyone who would do harm to you or anything you claim as your own.” Sabina swore.

Gwyn placed a hand on Sabina’s and squeezed. “Thank you, Sabina. I am so lucky to have you. I can’t wait until you can meet my mom.”

“I can’t either, Gwyn.”

“So... my secret.”

The princess took a deep breath but Sabina stopped her from continuing. “Gwyn? Keep this secret. It’s alright. Whatever it is? It’s from before. Who you are now is an amazing princess. One that has been acknowledged and that cannot be taken away. Taenya, Siveril, and I won’t let it. You’re alright. I promise.”

Gwyn teared up and shoved herself back into Sabina for another hug. Her little arms wrapped around her, and Sabina couldn’t help but feel the love and acceptance emanating from the girl. *I will need to teach her how to control the emotions she lets out.* Sabina smiled. She was happy and thankful that they had chosen her to join Gwyn’s House. It was a kindness that she would have to repay Baron Iemes for one day.

Sabina gasped as the light suddenly died out. The girl froze again and then giggled. “Oops! I forgot about it for a second there. Sorry, I scared you.”

Sabina shook her head as she laughed and patted the girl on the back.

“Come on, you should get back to sleep.”

“Sabina? Can you sit with me for a little while? Just until I fall asleep again? I always feel calmer when you’re around.”

“Of course. I will be right here.” Sabina couldn’t help but smile. *I will hold the nightmares at bay.*

* * *

Several days passed, and Gwyn noticed she was starting to feel better. She hadn’t had another nightmare yet, and she was glad to be able to sleep. There wasn’t much to do except continue with her tutoring. She had met with Mr. Quinn each day, but today was special, as it was the day she would meet his wife.

She walked down the halls, occasionally twirling around. It felt like it would be a good day. Gwyn waved and said hello to the guards and servants as she skipped past them. *Oh, wait! I’m going to be late!*

She rushed around the corner and almost ran smack into Friedrich, who was walking with Keston. “Oops! Sorry, Friedrich!” She apologized as she quickly moved around him.

“It’s nothing, Princess. How are you doing today?” The German knight asked her.

“I’m great! Sorry, can’t talk. I need to meet with Mr. Branigan!” She hastily said.

“You better hurry. You know how he is about punctuality. Don’t be late!” Keston called out after her.

She hurried down the halls and finally reached the library. She burst through the door in a huff like the Kool-Aid man. *Ohhhh Yeaaaaah!* “I’m here! I’m here!”

Her sun elf tutor, Mr. Branigan was standing next to the table where they worked, holding a book that he tapped his hand against. “Ms. Gwyn. Punctuality is the most effective approach to establish a positive first impression.”

Okay, Mr. Grumpy-pants.

“Mr. Branigan, a queen is never late; everyone else is simply early.”

There was a snort from the side, and Gwyn looked over to see a high elf woman with an amused expression on her face. “She’s got you there, Quinn.” The woman focused her gaze on Gwyn. “However, luckily for us mere scholars, you *are* only a princess for now.”

“Please, allow me to introduce my wife.” He gestured to the elf woman who had stepped forward next to them. “This is Professor Maya Rolfe. She is a professor at the Strathmore Academy, like me. However, she deals with topics such as the historical development of civil infrastructure and techniques.”

Gwyn squinted and was about to ask what he meant when Mr. Branigan’s wife explained. “What my husband means is, I look at how different cultures and nations made things and learned how to make new things.”

Oh! “My mom does that! Sort of. She’s in charge of a lot of people that make new things. Right now, she’s working on a new watch. It’s really fancy. It’s kept her busy a lot, but she always finds time to do things with me...” Gwyn paused. *Oh...* “Or she did. You know, before we came here.”

“It is quite alright, Ms. Gwyn. I think I would *love* to hear all about some of the things your mother had people make. Perhaps we can speak about all the fascinating things from your world in the future? Then I can help teach you about the world you have found yourself in. Things you may experience that you are probably not used to.”

“I would like that, Ms... Rolfe?”

“Ms. Maya is quite alright, Ms. Gwyn.”

Gwyn nodded and looked at Mr. Branigan. “No Lorrena today?”

He shook his head. “Not today. Since it’s Maya’s first day, we wanted to just have you for this session.”

That made sense to Gwyn. They were here at the House for *her*, after all, but she didn’t want Lorrena’s learning to fall behind either.

Ms. May pointed toward the chairs and asked, “Tell me, what has my husband been teaching you this week? What’s the most interesting thing?”

Ms. Maya guided her to the table, and they all sat down while Gwyn thought about the question. “He’s mainly been teaching me about Avira and its history. Like when King Revish conquered the Kingdom of Tiloral, or when he made a deal with the dwarves that live in Dorn Loder—”

“Dirn Loduhr, Ms. Gwyn.” Mr. Branigan corrected.

“Right. Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Branigan. We also talked about the Kingdom of Meris, the Lymtoria Republic, and the Lehelia Queendom. *Whichisreallycool!* Lots of history. We also talked about the Loreni De–Diaspora. Oh and we started going over the various customs and etiquette of Avira and the other areas I may travel to.”

“History and ways to act as a noble, Quinn?” Ms. Maya raised a brow. “May as well teach her the migration patterns of the *Bisoprocta induus*. At least the etiquette will have immediate uses. She’s not from our world. No one expects her to know that Queen Ismeyra signed the Recognition Act of 851, which allows her to even establish a House in the kingdom as a foreign noble in exile. Which is most definitely the route Siveril has taken.”

Mr. Branigan groaned. “Maya, history is important. It allows her to understand the kingdom she is now a part of. It shows her *why* we do the things that we do. Before you can understand the now, you must understand where we’ve been. Speaking of dates, one thing that is relevant is that there are talks of establishing a new calendar era. One based on the Flash.”

Maya looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds and then back at her husband. “Husband of mine. She is not one of your academy students. That information is relevant *for us*, and of course, I knew that. I *literally received the same missive*. Like everyone else in the Academy,” she said and threw her hands up.

Mr. Branigan looked at Gwyn before sighing and picking up the book he had placed on the table. “Why don’t we get started for the day, Ms. Gwyn?”

“Sounds great, Mr. Branigan.”

“You get one hour, Quinn. I will teach the next subject. We’re going to learn something interesting.” Ms. Maya glanced at Gwyn and gave her a quick wink.

I think I’m going to like her.