How Innocence Dies

Gwyn was just standing back up, with everything sounding muffled, when she saw her. Emma lay there on the ground where she had knocked Gwyn away. A bolt lodged in her side. *No...* She felt empty as she took in the sight. Emma wasn't moving, and her chest didn't rise and fall as it should. Her handmaiden's body was still, and blood pooled around her from the wound on her side. *We were just talking. Everything was fine.*

A burning rage started building up inside of her, threatening to overwhelm her senses. She looked up and saw that Sabina was fighting two elves, and they were forcing her backward, one step after another. One of the two had a quiver hanging from his belt with bolts in them. The other had none.

Him.

She focused and called on the blue magic to shut down almost every emotion within her. Cold fury and determination took over where the fire had sought to consume her. She had failed. *Again.* Another one of her family was dead, and she didn't stop it.

Him.

Gwyn demanded her magic come to her, the colorless magic all around them. She reached out and felt it constrict around the elf that had killed her family. She closed her fist and then with a thought, *Altered* the mana around him so that it grabbed and threw him away from Sabina. Her knight would handle the other. *This one must die.*

She stepped toward him. "*You,*" she snarled at the man. Her hold over the blue magic faltered. She felt the fire licking her skin as her eye sockets became nothing more than a route for the flame to escape the inferno raging within her. Her eyes *were* fire and everything she saw was tinted in red. She focused and used her ***Mana* Sight**, her vision took on a new hue as all of the mana around them came into focus. *Yes. The ring makers were right. This is what it is.*

The killer got up from the ground and lifted his sword. Sabina called out in impotent fury from where she fought the other guard, unable to push the man back.

The man in front of her narrowed his eyes. "It is nothing personal, Princess. Your knight started a war. We are here to finish it." His voice quivered, and he hesitated. That was his last mistake.

"It's personal for me." She lifted her hand. *Him.* "**Burn**."

Her magic rushed at her order and her **Pillar of Flame** instantly ignited on the man. The flame was white with a tinge of black at the edges, and it engulfed the elf. The man screamed. Oh, how he screamed. A primal howl of pain that died out within seconds, but she didn't stop. When she did let go of the magic, a molten mass of metal and ash spilled to the ground. She turned, regaining control over the blue magic. The other man was already on the defensive as he held his sword up and kept his front focused on both Sabina and Gwyn.

She looked at Sabina. "You have magic. Finish this."

Her knight's eyes widened slightly. *~Gwyn...~*

Kill him, Sabina. Now. She ordered mentally.

Sabina narrowed her eyes but nodded and focused on the man. The elf started backing away but then Gwyn saw his eyes go wide and then suddenly glaze over as he froze in place. Slowly, the man released his sword, letting it clatter to the ground. Sabina gave her one last questioning look, to which Gwyn nodded once. Sabina's eyes turned black as they reflected the knight's mana. The man's hand shook fiercely, but he reached down with jerking movements and withdrew a dagger from a sheath on his belt. The man fought it the entire way, but the outcome had been determined as soon as Sabina committed.

Gwyn didn't look away as the man brought the blade over and down into the hole in his chest plate where his neck protruded. She didn't look away as he plunged it to the hilt and collapsed.

Even with eyes as black as an abyss, she couldn't help but notice the look of concern that showed within as Sabina peered at her.

Gwyn ignored it. "We need to make sure everything else is okay."

To her credit, Sabina didn't press. Gwyn kept her blue magic moving throughout her mind, shutting down any chance of the situation catching up to her.

Sabina knelt next to the woman, feeling at her neck and mouth before she glanced at Gwyn and subtly shook her head, eyes clearing as she did. Gwyn took a deep breath and let her magic settle throughout her body. *I am frozen. My emotions are ice. Now is the time to protect my family.*

Gwyn took one last look at Emma's still body.

She could let it all crash into her later.

Turning toward Sabina, she resorted to thoughts instead of speech, knowing her voice would betray her. *Let's go. Lead the way. I will protect us.*

Sabina nodded. *~**We will need to move quickly.**~*

The two of them exited the room and moved down the hall. They found Maris near the stairs. The woman was also dead, but two of the attackers were also dead next to her. Gwyn looked up at Sabina, her eyes already black again and her hands clenched tightly around her sword. *They will all burn.*

They continued down the stairs, hearing yells and fighting throughout the house. There were guards and staff dead down the stairs. *How? How did they do this?*

*~**I do not know. I didn't feel anything until it was too late. It was like they all hit at once, everywhere. They moved quickly. Overrunning everything as soon as they committed. My... range didn't catch them until they were already entering the manor. I am sorry, my Princess.**~*

Do not be sorry.

They moved toward the great hall and a crash resounded to their right, Sabina lifted her sword and a man and a woman burst through a doorway. Gwyn saw a flash of mana inside and threw up an **Ice Wall**. It was a weak thing that barely covered the entrance to the door, but it was enough to stop the bolt that slammed into it.

The wall collapsed almost immediately and Sabina called out to the two. "*Get out of the way! Hurry!*"

They quickly moved behind Sabina and Gwyn, huddling together. Sabina glanced back at Gwyn. *~**Three men. Two crossbows.**~*

Can you?

*~**Not without excessive focus. It takes a lot out of me... I can... distract them. Can you—No. I will—**~*

Distract them. I will not hesitate. My people are dying.

Sabina seemed to war with herself, but she nodded. *~**Be ready. As soon as you hear them yelling.**~*

Gwyn channeled *mana* and got ready to move. Orbs of fire formed over her shoulders. Her hands burst into flames and she nodded to Sabina. She saw the woman tilt her head and squint her eyes in concentration.

She heard the scream of surprise from within. The thwack of a crossbow firing. Gwyn moved. She entered the room and without care of any damage, launched her **Fireballs** at where she thought the men would be. Three of the four fireballs missed, but a scream of pain came from one she had sent to the left. Her hands lifted and forced

the fire to launch out in a **Gout of Flame**. She sprayed the fire left and right and she slowly walked into the room.

She barely had the presence of mind to jump backward as a form came barrelling at her from the right. A man crashed into the wall but quickly lashed out with a sword that narrowly missed her. Her eyes widened and she almost let her blue mana drop as her focus was nearly torn away. Gwyn did the only thing she could think of and dug deep into the frozen rage within her. She shaped that rage into the same spell that she had given to Taenya to protect herself, letting it loose.

A **Blast Wave** exploded from her and consumed everything within five paces of her with white flames of incinerating fury. The man didn't even get a chance to scream as he burned.

Gwyn turned and looked at the last man alive in the room. The telv quickly dropped his sword and raised his hands. His eyes were wide with fear as he scrambled backward.

"No. No No No... *Please!*"

"**Burn.**"

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Sabina stood impatiently as waited to move into the room, the heat was unbearable, and she knew that it would not discriminate in who it consumed. While she waited for the inferno to die down, she felt at the emotions throughout the manor, feeling guards and servants alike fighting their attackers. She knew many had died, but House Reinhart was not overrun yet. Sabina went on alert the moment she felt the slight crack forming in the ice that held Gwyn's emotions at bay.

She heard a shrill shriek coming from the room, which caused her to raise her blade and look through the door just in time as all of the flames were pulled from the walls and furniture back into Gwyn's outstretched hand.

She glanced back at the two servants who remained huddled together in fear. "Lock yourself into a room. I believe the upstairs is clear. *Be careful*. Run if you have to." They quickly nodded and moved away.

Sabina looked at the girl that emerged and tried to **Sense Emotions** from her and felt... *nothing*. Gwyn was completely blank to her senses and it scared her. She scrutinized the princess who was moving back into place behind her, seeing nothing except calm determination. She reached out mentally to her. ***Stay close***.

Gwyn stumbled slightly but nodded. *~I will.~*

Sabina moved quietly but deliberately through the manor as they made their way to the great hall. She felt four people entering through the front door just up ahead and moved her sword into position. ***Four***.

Gwyn's **Fireballs** formed over her shoulders and the girl glanced around, settling on a guardswoman who lay slumped against the wall with a bolt protruding from her neck. The princess moved over and closed the woman's eyes, but then drew the woman's dagger out from its sheath. She turned and nodded at Sabina. *~Ready.~*

Sabina narrowed her eyes. ***Magic. Not dagger. Understood?***

Gwyn scowled at her for a moment but then acquiesced, dropping the blade to the floor. *~Fine.~*

Sabina turned and made her way toward the four she sensed, flattening her back against the wall next to the corner near where she felt them. She moved her sword slowly to the edge and used the mirrored finish to try and see around the corner without exposing herself. She wasn't able to see much, but she caught sight of two men looking away from her.

With swift movements, she quickly moved her sword to her left hand and drew a throwing knife. Taking a deep breath, she stepped around the corner and threw the blade at the first man she saw. Another man jerked in surprise and shouted out, but wasn't quick enough in warning her target. The blade flew through the air and embedded itself just behind the man's ear.

She brought her blade up, but then immediately jumped back behind the corner, pushing Gwyn away as she did. Not even a heartbeat later, two bolts came flying past the corner, punching into the wall behind her. Sabina felt at their minds and used **Conjure Hallucinations**. Her magic caused the remaining attackers to see two House guards rushing at the men from around the corner. In *her* sight, she saw two shadowy forms with swords and shields rush the remaining three men. Sabina rushed from behind the corner and raised her sword. All of the attackers rushed the apparitions and were thrown off guard when their attacks simply passed through what they thought were guards. One of the men stumbled as his swing caused him to almost fall from overextension.

The spell collapsed immediately, but then Sabina was there. She swung and caught one of the men at the weak point where his breastplate overlapped with his cuisses, or thigh plates. Since the man had almost fallen, a gap just large enough for her blade opened up, and she quickly took advantage.

Her blade bit deep and she knew that the man was done even as she yanked back to move toward the next two men. Both of them yelled out, and she had enough

presence of mind to **Sense Emotions** letting her feel two more presences coming in the door. Sabina raised her sword and took a step back, two large knights entered. Each held a longsword and settled into stances as they confidently moved toward her.

Shit. Gwyn. Her charge had been using a lot of magic, and she wasn't sure how much more the girl could handle. She had to get her away.

One of the knights lifted his visor and gestured behind her. "Give us the terran, and all of the death ends. You need not die for an outsider. The only two who must die are her and the knight that killed Lord Nicolas."

"You'll not have her, you bastard. You chose the wrong House to attack, and your lord will die like his son," Sabina sneered.

The knight frowned but set his visor back into position. "Very well then we will purge this entire House."

She felt another presence approach and Sabina settled into a stance. ***Be ready. I will need your fire. Hit the first to approach me with all you have, unless you see a crossbow. Those need to die first.***

Gwyn moved out from the corner, her hands alight with a fluttering flame. *~Understood.~*

Sabina narrowed her eyes. *She's reaching her breaking point. The strain is getting to her as it does me. Just one more fight. You can do this, Sabina.* With a deep breath, she took a step to the right to give Gwyn room to cast her spells, but then she heard the princess gasp. *~Wait!~*

What is—

A spear came flying through the front door behind the two knights and impaled the one that had talked to her. Someone in silver and blue armor came striding through the door with a sword. *Theran?*

Theran raised his sword and then launched it at an impossible speed toward the second knight who was just turning around. The blade seemed to glow yellow as it pierced through the knight's armor like paper. Sabina took advantage of the shock and rushed forward, bringing her sword up and across one of the guards who had nothing but a surprised look on his face. She followed up by moving toward the last guard but the man managed to get his sword and shield up to block her attack. He swung back at her, but she parried and stepped back. She moved to swing at the man again, but Theran appeared behind him, grabbed him by the armor, and threw him to the side. The guard crashed into the wall, his weapons clattered away as he crumpled to the floor.

Her fellow knight stepped forward and knelt behind the man, grasping at the man's neck and head as he did. The guard struggled, punching and batting at the elf's armor and helm, but Theran was able to position his hands where he wanted. With a quick, final motion, he snapped the man's neck.

Letting the body fall, Ser Theran picked up his sword, turning toward them as they stood. He removed his helm and saluted. "I was training and came as soon as I could. Are you injured?"

"We are fine, Theran. I'm happy to see you," Gwyn said.

Sabina felt more presences approaching with her **Sense Emotions**. She gestured to Theran and warned, "More coming, prepare yourself." Sabina shifted to face the front door, Gwyn's hands reignited into flame, and Theran turned and lifted his own blade.

Sabina sighed in relief as she heard a familiar voice call out.

"House Reinhart! We're coming in!"

Taenya and... *a paladin* came in followed by Siveril and what seemed like all of the remaining guards. Her friend's eyes widened but then seemed to sag in relief as she recognized Gwyn. Her sword fell to her side, blood dripping from the blade onto the floor as she exhaled a large breath of air. "Your Highness, Sabina, you're both safe. Are you injured?"

Gwyn did not say anything so Sabina shook her head. "Her Highness and I are not injured. Emma saved the princess, and one of my guards died, and I do not know where the rest are. I have no idea if the House is secure, but for now, we are alive."

Sabina's gaze narrowed as she took in the presence of the paladin. "What are *you* doing here?"

They removed their helm, showing a sun elf woman, one that Sabina had seen before. Sabina instantly went on guard, but the woman bowed toward Gwyn. "Your Highness. The church could not ignore this attack. I... was already nearby and decided to assist."

Sabina narrowed her eyes. "You were spying."

The woman gestured at herself. "Hard to spy when you stand out so much. We have been watching the manor since Her Highness met with the Archpriestess. Yet even my small team was surprised at the ferocity of this assault.

The paladin… Amari… saluted. "I am here to protect Her Highness. I sent my team to the temple. A full contingent should be coming soon. We will help you secure the grounds."

"We will speak of this later. For now… Guardsmen, teams of four, secure the House. Theran, stay with the paladin," Taenya ordered.

Sabina gasped and clutched her chest as she felt a storm of emotions surge from behind her. It seemed the girl let go of whatever magic was keeping it contained.

She turned and saw the girl collapse to her knees as she broke down in sobs. Sabina rushed to her side.

It's alright. You're safe.* We're *safe.

<p style="text-align: center;">* * *</p>

Taenya walked into the office with two of her guards right behind her. Theran was already inside along with the paladin, Evocati Amari. Siveril was at the ducal palace with Sabina meeting with the duke.

While that left Gwyn without a knight at her side currently, she had ten guards upstairs protecting her. The other two of Taenya's guards and all four of Theran's along with four others from the House. The remaining members of Sabina's team had all been found as Theran cleared the manor after the attack. The missing three were found surrounded by eight dead bodies of the attackers from Marquess Angwin. One of the guards was dead, and one more had died of his wounds later that night. The last was still recuperating from her wounds, but the surgeon had hopes that she would be on her feet within the week. The guard was adamant that she would be ready in time for the trip to Avira.

The attack itself had claimed many lives and not just the guards. It seemed that the attackers had killed indiscriminately and almost forty percent of the House had died either to a blade or bolt. None of them had expected such a response from the marquess, and it caught them completely off guard. They had been outnumbered by the attackers twofold, and that was including the servants.

The servants didn't go down without a fight though. Even they had claimed many kills against the attackers.

"What can you tell me?"

Theran shook his head. "We are as secure as we can be." He gestured to the paladin. "With the paladins here, it is a sufficient deterrent for anyone who thinks they can attack. This show of force cannot be good for us, however."

"I do not care about appearances right now. Evocati, how long are your forces able to remain on the grounds?"

The sun elf glanced toward the window. "I can justify a presence until the duke acts. After that, it returns to an Aviran issue. *I* would be able to remain, but if there is no active threat to an Honored One, the rest cannot stay."

Taenya jerked in surprise. "An *Honored One?* When did this occur?"

"Her Holiness decreed it this morning. Lady Roslyn had already been recognized. The Archpriestess recognized Princess Gwyneth officially which is what authorizes her protection to this level."

She sighed and glanced at Theran. "We need to move up the timetable. One week, then we make for Avira. Whatever guarantees Siveril gets from the duchy will not be enough. The marquess doesn't have influence within the capital, and the princess will be safe at the Academy. The Polite War is forbidden upon its grounds."

"We can have people ready by then. Ser Sabina…" He glanced at the paladin.

Evocati Amari sighed. "I know of Ser Sabina. Not fully, but I know enough. Her Holiness has ordered our silence on the matter. You can trust us."

Taenya narrowed her eyes. "How?"

The paladin tilted her head. "How… what?"

"How do you know?"

"I—I cannot say."

Taenya shook her head. "If you cannot trust us, then we cannot trust you. You will not be coming with us."

Amari's eyes shot open. "I have been ordered—"

"No. Unless Her Highness overrides me, you are not coming. Not to mention you are not conspicuous at all."

"Your armor and sigil are widely known at this point as well, Ser Taenya. You too will stand out."

She scoffed. "I do believe that red—"

"Taenya. You may need her. It's just her. Not all of them. More protection for her highness is a good thing. Just being near, Evocati Amari may dissuade some from attacking. No one wishes to go against the Church."

Taenya narrowed her eyes, but with a sigh, she relented. "Fine. You will answer to me in absence of any direct orders from Her Highness. I will not have you get in the way."

Amari smirked. "That is no problem. The Paladins of Alos only chaff at taking orders from those we do not respect. After what we've seen of you? You have it."

"And don't start kissing my ass. That won't make me like you," Taenya said.

The smirk fell, but the paladin nodded. "Understood."

"Now, please excuse me. I have a traumatized princess to go prepare."

Both nodded to her before she turned and walked out.

Taenya took a deep breath as she reached the door to Gwyn's suites. Pausing and leaning into her arm as she placed a hand on the doorframe. She closed her eyes, ignoring the concerned guards near her.

She thought back to when Sabina had explained what had happened in Gwyn's rooms when they were attacked. The woman explained what Gwyn had ordered her to do. While Taenya may dislike it, the attack was within the conditions she had set with Sabina for use of her powers in such a way. Yet, it seems that it had disturbed even the elven knight to use her magic in such a fashion.

Gwyn had gone through much since arriving on Eona. Through it all, she had maintained a level of innocence and hope that was admirable. After this, Taenya had to trade duties with Sabina. The mind mage hadn't been able to withstand the feelings coming from the princess. Sabina confided her suspicion that her connection with the girl had made her too susceptible to any overwhelming emotions emitted. Since then, Sabina had described it as a dark storm, an emotional tempest filled with grief, guilt, and rage.

"Ser Taenya? Are you alright?" one of her Drakyyd Guards asked.

She nodded once then turned the handle and entered the suite.

I just hope that happy, kind girl is still in there somewhere.