
The First Mage

Few examples better capture the essence of the trailblazers that contributed to the world we know today than House Reinhart. Its meteoric rise surprised many across the political landscape, enticing opportunists eager to exploit the fledgling House. Indeed, the Reinharts displayed astute judgment in locating effective and devoted retainers who pledged their loyalty to the first Head of House.

However, it was their remarkable ability to interweave Mana and magic into all aspects of their House that many consider to have been pivotal to their early success and thus ignited their unparalleled ascent to power.

None can deny the enduring impact House Reinhart has had on the world's knowledge and access to the Arcane.

A History of Mana. 184 SA

She was eight years old again, back at home after a tough day at *dopascuola*. Tears streamed down her face as she confided in her mom about another student who relentlessly bullied her and was so mean. The maestra, seemingly oblivious or indifferent, did nothing to intervene.

Seated in front of her, her mom wore a look of concern.

Her soft voice was calm but firm, “Gwyn, sometimes those we look to for help disappoint us, and sometimes adults simply think they know better than children. I am sorry that they did this, Gwynnie. Tomorrow I will talk to the maestra, okay?”

Gwyn stubbornly shook her head, fresh tears dotting her flushed cheeks. “No! I don’t want to be the *stupido americano*.”

Her mamma’s eyes narrowed at the unexpected words. “*Cosa? Hanno detto questo?*”

Mom never speaks italiano at home. Only when she’s really mad.

With a slow nod, Gwyn managed a faint, “*Si, mamma.*”

Yes, they did say this. I just said that.

Her mamma took Gwyn’s hands into her own, looking her in the eyes. “Gwyn, you listen to me. I will never, ever, be angry at you for standing up to bullies, but I will be *very* unhappy if you become one. *Capisci?*”

Gwyn wiped away her tears and nodded. “*Si, mamma.*”

“Now come here, *amore mio*,” her mamma said as she held out her arms.

Gwyn crushed into her safe embrace and cried.

Manabound - Equilibrium



Gwyn knew this was important.

She absolutely could not mess this up, and despite only being thirteen, she knew the nobles sitting around the table of this so-called Conclave would not give her the benefit of the doubt.

Silence filled the elaborate chamber built *underneath* the Marglen Keep that sat behind towering, rounded, arch double doors, their intimidating height designed to impress the metaphorical weight of what was to come.

Lining the walls at set intervals, were marble statues of what she assumed were past nobles standing tall and imposing, their hard, cold expressions seemingly surveying the room with an aloof regard. Their stone eyes appeared to be watching the table and its occupants with an unending, silent vigil.

But the prominent feature was a singular, massive round table that took center stage, dwarfing everything else within the room.

The table itself was a grand spectacle, a marvel of craftsmanship. With seats for thirteen, it was etched with an intricate motif of thorns along its border, the elaborate carvings were clearly done with great care by the sculptor. The centerpiece design was a ring of entwined briars, a symbol of unity amidst the thorns.

The seat to Gwyn's left was empty while Taenya had been permitted to sit at Gwyn's right. Her other two protectors, Lucian and Amari were required to stand just behind her chair which didn't appear to bother either of them.

Around the table were ten nobles, each who demanded their own measure of respect and authority. Four were the ones she met yesterday—Lords Trysten, Edele, and Marle, along with Lady Baelith. Then there was Lady Racine, the woman who sat next to Lord Trysten at what could be considered the 'important' part of the circular table.

The remaining five nobles were individuals she had been introduced to in passing or had merely observed. Though each had their own importance and influence, it was the five seated across her that held the highest stakes for Gwyn.

They were the key pieces on the chessboard, and she had to play her moves with careful deliberation.

Lord Trysten offered a subtle nod to Lord Edele, prompting a smile from the latter. "Princess Gwyneth," he began in his tone that dripped with fake hospitality. "We thank you again for agreeing to

participate in this Conclave. The crux of this assembly isn't solely your House and the burgeoning Third Faction you appear to be establishing. We also aim to deliberate on how we, the nobility, should navigate the emergence of Displaced such as yourself. May I request you to formally introduce yourself to our gathering?"

It was go time.

Channel Mom. You got this, Gwyn.

Gwyn returned the smile and eased her chair back, rising to her full stature of one hundred and seventy-three *and a half* centimeters. "Thank you for your hospitality, Lord Edele. Esteemed members of the Circle of Briars, I appreciate your presence here today. It has been two years since my arrival in your world, along with many other terrans. In my short time here, I've been embroiled in your 'Polite War'. 'The Great Game'. All for the simple fact of *existing*. My primary desire has always been to secure a safe haven, a desire that societal norms have barred from me.

"I am grateful for the opportunity to convene here and discuss a harmonious resolution. I want to assert, unequivocally, that I have no ambitions concerning Avira's political maneuvering or power dynamics. I am not inclined to garner influence at the expense of others, nor do I wish to partake in a game that I was not born into. My intentions are straightforward—I aspire for a peaceful life for me and mine, free from political machinations that have already claimed lives. In return, I extend the same courtesy of non-interference to you."

A pall of silence followed her declaration as the nobles took a moment to absorb her words. Eventually, it was Lady Racine who broke the silence, her smile wide as she applauded. "An admirable sentiment, dear child. However, now that we understand your perspective, it is time we confronted reality."

Gwyn's gaze hardened slightly as she met the older woman's eyes. The true negotiation, it seemed, was about to commence.



Later in the evening, Gwyn and Amari were taking a leisurely stroll along the castle's stone ramparts in the cool embrace of the Autumn twilight, leaving behind the taxing diplomacy of the Conclave. Behind them trailed the squad of four other paladins, maintaining a respectful distance to afford their Honored One a semblance of privacy.

Gwyn had left Taenya behind, down in the meeting chamber.

Manabound - Equilibrium

By now, her Knight-Captain was deep in discussions with Lords Trysten and Edele, while Lucian remained with her for extra protection.

Gwyn wouldn't have been surprised if Lady Racine had forced her presence into that conversation too, given her assertive nature and the fact that the monk would be the first line of defense against the woman's own mind magic.

Reflecting on the Conclave, Gwyn felt a mix of relief and frustration. The Circle of Briars had laid their expectations bare—they would only leave her and her people be if she pledged the support of her growing faction to their cause. However, such an alliance would heavily favor them and was only even considered due to her lack of a kingdom. To them, she represented the one thing they abhorred—royalty and a potential rallying point for those that ran counter to the True Nobility's goals.

It was just more of the same politics.

People vying for influence and power.

She hated it.

A noise in the distance brought her back to the present, she looked around but saw nothing. With a shrug, she continued on, but she still found her hand resting on the hilt of Raafe's Legacy.

That morning, she had refused to go without the cavalry saber—an act that garnered Taenya and Amari's approval, and while she sat in the conclave, Amari had held it for her.

The night was crisp, a hint of winter's bite already in the air, but she knew it was still at least five weeks away, and plus, all it took was a gentle channeling of mana to keep the cold at bay.

As they neared the final section of the castle, Gwyn and Amari came to a halt, turning their gazes back toward the direction of the distant Capital.

It was obviously too far to see, but Gwyn liked to imagine its silhouette against the night sky.

I wonder what Roz is—

An odd whistling sound echoed through the stillness, ripping her away from her thoughts.

She squinted into the darkness, perplexed by the noise, it sounded faintly like... "Amari, what's that noise?"

Amari paused, her brows furrowing in confusion as the sound grew louder before a sudden realization made her eyes go wide. "Look out!" she shouted, grabbing Gwyn and hurling themselves to the ground just in time as a massive boulder collided with the castle wall, sending fragments of stone flying.

As Gwyn and Amari were struggling to their feet, the other paladins, spurred on by the sudden threat, began to rush toward them, but their progress was halted mid-stride.

Oxylus

Two more massive boulders torpedoed from the inky darkness, slamming into the wall with terrifying force. The impact sent tremors through the fortification, shaking it to its very core.

She saw the paladins diving back the way they came from just as a large crack appeared to block their path to Gwyn and Amari.

“Down!” Amari’s voice pierced the chaos, the woman throwing herself atop Gwyn as the world imploded around them.

A deafening roar filled Gwyn’s ears as the stone wall crumbled, surrendering to the relentless bombardment, and suddenly...

Her stomach lurched and the wall fell away beneath them.

A gut punch of terror filled her as she suddenly found herself weightless.

Sharp, sudden pain arrived without invitation as Gwyn slammed into the ground and cried out.

Before she knew what was happening, a hail storm of stones struck her, their impact biting into her flesh, imparting a cruel dance of agony.

Then the world spun wildly.

Gwyn found herself tossed end over end in an inescapable vortex of pain, fear, and confusion.

It came to an abrupt end when her head slammed against something hard and unyielding. A starburst of raw pain exploded behind her eyes, threatening to pitch her into unconsciousness.

At the edge of her vision, tendrils of blackness unfurled, inching inwards, eager to claim her in their suffocating grasp.



A couple weeks after her heart-to-heart conversation with her mother about bullying, eight-year-old Gwyn found herself perched at their kitchen table, nursing a swollen lip with an ice pack.

“*Fa freddo, mamma!*” she complained.

“Keep it there,” her mamma insisted.

Gwyn had heeded her mom’s early instruction and faced her tormentor at *doposcuola*. Despite him being an entire grade above her, she had managed to stop his bullying.

Manabound - Equilibrium

No, despite a hard punch to her lip that made tears well up in her eyes, she made sure he knew she wouldn't allow him to bully her ever again. No more would he shove her to the ground, pull her hair, or kick rocks at her.

No more names that hurt worse than the stones ever did.

Her celebration of winning, however, had been cut short by a yank by the maestra, followed by a phone call to her mom, and sent home for the day.

The teachers didn't *really* care if the students resolved their own issues, it was when things got bloody that they got mad.

And his nose ended up much worse than my lip.

She almost smiled but hesitated because that would probably hurt, and her mom wasn't even looking at her.

She was facing the counter, quiet.

"Mamma, are you mad at me?" Gwyn timidly asked, feeling a surge of panic rising in her.

She said she wouldn't be upset.

Her mamma responded with a soft, ambiguous sigh, her attention seemingly absorbed in something on the counter. After a tense moment that almost had Gwyn in tears, she finally turned around, holding two bowls filled with...

Gelato?

Setting the *fragola* flavored gelato in front of Gwyn, her mom offered a comforting smile. "Gwyn, remember what I said. I will *never* be angry with you for standing up against a bully. Now, let me take a look at your lip, and then you can eat your gelato."

That was the moment she knew her mamma would *always* have her back.



Gwyn's mind returned with a jolt.

Pushing past the pain, Gwyn staggered upright, her hand gravitating to her head with a wince.

Gwyn's head pulsed with a relentless ache. As she pulled her hand down, seeing it slick with red, her breath hitched for a moment, but then she steeled herself.

Now was the time for action, not hesitation.

Amari says hesitation kills.

At that moment, eerie silence enveloped the area, and she heard nothing. She knew she had to act, so she **[Focused]**.

Immediately, she cried out in surprise as a cacophony of noise rushed back into the void.

“Amari?!” she screamed into the settling dust, her voice slicing through the sounds of distant shouting and the continuous battering of boulders.

A moan of pain echoed from beneath a heap of fallen stone. Gwyn’s eyes widened and she rushed toward it, but then Amari emerged, stone and rock cascading off of her body like rain.

With relief surging through her, Gwyn rushed to her side, offering support to the woman who was clutching at her right arm. “Are you okay?” she questioned, anxiety creeping into her tone.

Amari nodded in response, uncharacteristically leaning a bit onto Gwyn’s shoulder in a way that immediately sent off alarms in Gwyn’s mind.

“Are you?” the paladin asked.

“Yes, I think so,” Gwyn replied, uncertainty clouding her affirmation. “You’re hurt.”

Amari ignored her as her gaze darted to Gwyn’s forehead, concern flitting across her features. “No, you have a gash on your head. Let me see...”

Her words trailed off, her eyes suddenly growing wide as they focused on something behind Gwyn.

A chill ran down Gwyn’s spine, prompting her to pivot, her eyes straining against the dusty haze.

Emerging from the clouds of dust, shadowy figures loomed ominously as they bore down on their vulnerable position.

A dozen men and women solidified from the dust-choked haze, encircling her and Amari in a grim and foreboding manner.

“Get behind me,” Amari instructed with quiet urgency, but Gwyn could hear the pain in her voice as her injured arm lingered at her side opposite of Gwyn.

Gwyn shook her head.

She stood tall, her fingers wrapping around the hilt of her saber. As if to discourage her, Amari’s hand closed around her arm, but the unspoken warning did little to quell her determination.

Amari looked up at the people. “We wish no part in your quarrel,” Amari called out, her voice echoing amongst the rubble. “Let us leave in peace. We desire to avoid any hostilities between you and the faction here.”

Gwyn felt a chill run down her spine.

Manabound - Equilibrium

It was then, in the subtle tremble of Amari's hand and the rigid set of her jaw, that she realized the full extent of the paladin's injuries.

A man detached himself from the ring of adversaries and moved forward, his gaze flicking between the two women. "I regret to say, lady paladin, that it is not the faction here that we seek, but your charge," he confessed, his words striking a cold dread in Gwyn's heart. "I regret the harm caused to you by our distraction, and I hope that others of your House also remain unharmed in this."

Gwyn's breath hitched, and she felt Amari stiffen beside her. "Your intentions won't go as planned," Amari retorted. "The Church protects the Honored One. Let us leave, and we will not seek any retaliation. Pursue this, and the full weight of my Holy Order will come down upon you."

The man sighed, his shoulders slumping ever so slightly as he turned his focus on Gwyn. "I cannot let you leave, Princess," he intoned, his voice resonating with a curious regret. "We wish only to ransom you back to your House. We are but simple mercenaries, but I swear that you will not be *harmed*. Only roughed up a bit, but nothing excessive, just enough to stain the appearance of invulnerability you've cultivated. This is simply to ensure that your House is held in check and to stymie the growth of your influence, I assure you."

The icy clutch of realization seized Gwyn. "This... this is all a part of the *Game*, isn't it?" she demanded, her voice carrying an edge as she felt her anger rising.

A sad smile flitted across the man's face. "Every move within Avira is a part of the Polite War, Your Highness," he confirmed.

The distant cacophony of conflict gnawed at Gwyn. "You're willing to hurt others just to kidnap me? And then give me back?" she asked incredulously.

Amari's voice, soft but resolute, tried pulling her back. "Gwyn, I need you to stay behind me," she instructed. "Lucian and Taenya are too far for his magic to reach us, but I'm certain they will be safe."

But Gwyn shook her head, moving away from the injured paladin.

A pang of regret struck her as she saw Amari struggle to maintain her balance.

"I regret the harm caused, but we had no other way to catch you off-guard," the man conceded.

Gwyn sighed. "What's your score?"

The man's head twitched in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Your score. This is all a Game, right? That's all I have been told since arriving in this world. Polite this, game that. No matter what I do, or what I say it seems I have to play this dumb game. So, what's your score?" she asked.

Oxylus

The man glanced at a woman who stepped next to him, then back to Gwyn. “It’s... I see that you are injured, Your Highness, but it’s not a game like—”

“What’s your number?” she interrupted. “How many people have you killed?”

The man gave her a long look before coming to some internal decision. “Seven.”

Gwyn nodded. That made sense.

“Did they deserve it?”

The man shrugged. “Some did, some didn’t. I took the job. *Someone* felt they deserved it. Where are you going with this, Princess? Don’t think you can delay in time for your people to arrive. The more you delay, the more likely that they will get hurt.”

Gwyn ignored him.

“Well, since it’s obviously a game, I think I’m doing pretty well,” she continued. “I mean, I lost track of my points after the first thirty, you know? I just... it’s so hard to keep track of it all. Why would it be a game unless to keep score of all you do in it?”

“*Points?*” the woman next to him snapped. “What are you talking about, girl?”

“Don’t you get points for each person you kill?” Gwyn glanced questioningly at Amari, who was staring at her calmly, but with clear concern. “I mean, there has to be some... *point* to this right? I mean, why else would you all just *kill* and *hurt* and *harm* so many people in this kingdom? My friend died to some... *bandit* to protect me. My handmaiden died right in front of me, taking a bolt that was meant for me. Do you know what it’s like to see someone burn to ash? Do you know what gets to you first? Or at least for me. It wasn’t the sound of his screams. No, it was the *smell*. Why didn’t the movies ever talk about that? Maybe because you get used to it after the first few.”

She took a deep breath, but it was clear that the mercenaries were uneasy as they all kept glancing at their leader and shifting in place.

“Then there was the... *army* that attacked. I think that moment... that entire thing, I think that was what made this into the game that is, you know? If people can die so easily, then what’s the point? Clearly, this is all just a game. So why not go for the high score? You all love this game so much, why do I keep trying to hold back? Do you know how hard it is to hold back? No, you don’t Mister Seven. You don’t know what it’s like walking around knowing that *everything could be ash if you wanted it*.

“I grew up on stories of heroes and fantasy,” Gwyn continued. “My mom *loves* fantasy. But how do people become heroes when the world presses down on them like this? When there is just one thing... one beautiful rose with all its prickly thorns that keeps you going through it all when everyone else wants you to simply sit down and play nice? To bow to them and their desires. To control how you live your life. How do you keep going when all you want to do... the only thing that crosses your mind

Manabound - Equilibrium

when you lie in bed at night is how you want to burn it all down. People keep coming after me, and we just sit there and react. Why? Why do I have to wait for you to attack *me*? Me, when I can burn the entire capital to the ground if the Crown Prince doesn't stop *his* little games."

She shook her head, feeling the tears stinging the corners of her eyes. "Do you know how hard it is? How hard it is to have to act as if nothing bothers you? To have come to some backward world at ten and for over two years to have to literally control your *thoughts* and *emotions*, otherwise, people will know how numb you are? At how broken you are?" She chuckled ruefully. "I'm thirteen, and it feels like I've been having to fight and kill my entire time since being here. I don't get it. How do you live this way? *Why* would you live this way? Maybe you can explain it to me."

There was a long silence as everyone sat and contemplated what she said. It felt good to actually say, but... as she said it, she started to realize how messed up she was.

The man started to speak, but he hesitated. It took another minute of silence before he tried again, "Your Highness, I know not but rumors of what you've had to endure. I... you're *thirteen*?" He took a deep breath. "Despite what others may want, you have my word that we will not hurt you. I will ensure that the gash on your head is tended to. Just come with us, and the rest of your people can remain safe. We are not... monsters, your Highness. You will be back in your home within the next week, I swear."

The group took a collective step back as Gwyn felt her anger finally boil over and her vision go red. After all that, they were still going to go through with this. Why did she try?

Everyone constantly felt the need to play with fire.

Maybe it was time they met their dragon.

The man raised a hand and looked at her pleadingly. "Do not resist, Your Highness. We've come prepared for your magic."

As soon as he finished, four members of the group cast overlapping magical shields in front of them all.

Amari staggered forward, one hand gripping the hilt of her sword as she drew it. The blade wavered in her grasp, reflecting the shimmering moonlight of the sisters above them that peaked down through an opening in the cloud cover.

But even in the darkness, it was clear as day. Her stalwart paladin was gravely injured, and if left to fight as her duty demanded, would die.

As Amari prepared to defend her, Gwyn knew what she needed to do.

The other paladins will be able to take care of her.

Gwyn's duty was here, to protect her people, even if they only desired to protect her.

No one else would fall tonight.

Not if she could help it.

She drew on her mana, reaching deep within herself. Her magic swelled within her like a bright flame that enveloped her very thoughts.

Gwyn delved into her mind where she knew the runes of her spells resided, and touched upon the ethereal glowing rune for **[Blink]**.

All this time, she'd had the alteration domain, but she'd barely used it and only to affect her spells in the most basic of manners. But she knew it was capable of more, she knew she could use it to alter her already-formed spells.

Slowly, she began to weave her spell, taking it slow to focus not on herself, but on Amari.

The magic resisted, pushing against her will.

But Gwyn was the *First Mage* and her will was iron-clad.

Her core was stronger than any force in existence, and her intent was clear.

She wanted to **[Blink]** *Amari* to the safety of the other paladins on the wall.

A fierce struggle ensued and it was as if the intent that filled the paladin, the mana that pulsed through her conduits and built up her constitution, resisted as it fought against Gwyn's attempt to force her magic to affect someone who was not willing.

Yet Gwyn remained resolute and **[Focused]** as she drew more mana into herself, channeling all her capability and control toward this one goal.

Time stretched taut as she fought an unseen battle against Amari's innate defenses that felt like an eternity wrapped in a fleeting moment.

And then, finally, with a surge of triumph, her magic broke through.

A flash of light consumed Amari, her eyes widening with confusion before she disappeared, whisked away in a crackling surge of arcane energy.

Gwyn was left standing alone against a dozen mercenaries and their shields as her heartbeat pounded in her chest. A second had passed, but to her and the wave of exhaustion that filled her, it was as if she'd fought all day.

But Gwyn had done it.

Her paladin was safe, but she was now alone and surrounded.

Yet, her will remained unbroken.

Gwyn's lips quirked into a half-smile.

Manabound - Equilibrium

They were prepared for her magic, they thought.

But they had no idea.

The man's face scrunched up in confusion and surprise. "Where did she go?" he demanded.

Gwyn heard a distant shout of anger that she *knew* would result in a severe talking to later.

She's safe. That's all that matters.

"It's just us now," Gwyn answered, finally able to pull her saber free and adopt a stance while forming an orb of fire over her other palm. "And I'm going to raise my high score."

Gwyn barely had time to register the sudden net that was magically soaring toward her before she cast her **[Pillar of Flame]**, incinerating it to ash.

Her lips curled into a smirk.

This was child's play.

With a flourish of her hand, she summoned five **[Fireballs]**, sending them hurtling toward the conjured shields of her adversaries. The initial explosions shattered two, but the secondary defenses held fast.

"We need her alive! Capture her!" the leader roared as Gwyn quickly danced between the threats of hostile magic that buzzed around her.

Spells began to fly at her from all directions. A cascade of sizzling energy bolts along with a blizzard of frost shards that she managed to return to sender with a speed and accuracy that the mailman would envy.

Determined to press her advantage, she **[Blinked]** behind the leader. "I don't need you alive though," she taunted. A surprised gasp escaped him as he began to turn, but it was too late. Her saber slashed through the unprotected area behind his knee, causing him to collapse down onto the leg. As his eyes met hers, she saw the pain and fear that filled them as she drew back and thrust forward.

Gwyn plunged her blade through his skull while simultaneously launching a point-blank **[Fireball]** at the woman next to him. The burst of fire echoed around them, her screams drowned out by the roaring flames.

Sword removed, she **[Blinked]** to the side in time to avoid some chains glowing with a crackling purple of arcane energy that intended to bind her. Each spell, a vividly colored and distinct manifestation of its caster's intent, was a deadly or restricting projectile that she had to evade or counter all while the shield mages constantly sought to rudely interrupt her reply with their protective spells.

In a swift motion, she unleashed her [**Aura of Winter**], the icy mist rushing out from her like a tide, obscuring the area and veiling her actions from the remaining assailants.

Then, as the mist settled, she used her [**Mana Sight**] to help her see through the icy fog.

A volley of stone missiles shot in a wide dispersal that sought to catch her unawares, and with another [**Blink**], she appeared elsewhere, the stones crashing harmlessly against the ground in the area she once stood.

“Take her out!” a voice echoed, and then all hell broke loose.

Every remaining assailant was apparently a mage as magic lit up the evening. They hurled dangerous magic all around, while their shields held firm against her own spells.

This was a battle she was starting to see that she wouldn't be able to win head-on, not without drawing in others and potentially getting them hurt; she had to draw them away, out of the castle.

Running toward the gate, she could see the portcullis was destroyed and laying on the ground.

As she ran, she deflected the spells as well as she could, using her fight against Aran as inspiration, she used her [**Fireballs**] and [**Pillars of Flame**] like an air-defense system swatting different types of spells from the air as they sought her.

Using [**Blink**] another time brought her both outside of the castle and a bit of pain, realizing that using it too much was starting to strain her mental stamina.

Her pursuers were close behind while the dense forest loomed ahead of her, promising cover and a chance to divide her enemies.

An icy arrow whistled toward her, conjured from the bow of a frost mage.

But Gwyn was faster.

With a flick of her wrist and an easy contest of competing wills against the intent of the spell, she seized control of the arrow and turned it back toward its caster.

The man tried to evade, but Gwyn had full control of the spell, swerving it last minute like a missile that found its mark, causing the man to fall with a gurgle.

A slow-moving orb of lightning emerged from the gate next as the group of mercenaries formed together behind a moving set of shields.

As she prepared to fire at the orb, a sudden black mist swirled next to her, and a sword came slashing out of it.

She lifted Raafe's Legacy and parried the blow just in time, the man appearing out of the mist instantly launching a flurry of attacks that forced her to divert her full attention to the man with eyes as

Manabound - Equilibrium

black as the void. His relentless assault started forcing her back, pushing her swordswomanship skills she'd learned over the past year to the limit.

The forest was her only hope now, and she was ready to make a stand.

She swung her saber, then followed up with a thrust that had the man take a step back to avoid, then readied herself for the pain and **[Blinked]** as far as she could toward the forest.

Pain flared through her head, her gash throbbing, as she emerged from the teleport with bile rising in her throat. She winced, her hand instinctively curling through her hair.

After a few deep breaths to collect herself, Gwyn looked back and threw her hand up to launch a **[Fireball]** toward the mercenaries. As the spell burst against the shield that was conjured, she sprinted into the woods.

With their attention again on her, she heard shouting as the group formed up to follow her.

But she would be ready.



Gwyn wasn't sure how long she'd been in the forest, but it felt like hours had passed.

The forest was a riotous blur of color and sound as Gwyn darted through the underbrush, the relentless pursuit of the mercenaries nipping at her heels. Her body screamed with exhaustion, her muscles aching and her mind growing clouded with fatigue. Yet, she pressed on, her heart pounding a drumbeat of desperate determination in her chest.

Suddenly, the black mist swordsman emerged from the shadows again, lunging at her with deadly intent.

Reacting instantly, she **[Blinked]**, reappearing behind him and ignoring the biting pain of her overworked magic.

He swung wildly as he spun toward her, but she used her **[Telekinesis]** to thrust him backward.

He stumbled off balance, and she seized the opportunity to cast a searing **[Pillar of Flame]**, the man erupting as if like a match head.

His screams echoed briefly through the forest before they were swallowed by the roaring flames.

The trees caught alight around them, the branches high above crackling with an insatiable fire.

Gwyn grimaced, quickly altering her **[Wave of Frost]** to a narrower scope and launching it upward. The chilling mist quickly subdued the flames, extinguishing them before they could spread further.

As she turned, a slow-moving bolt of lightning crackled toward her.

She dove behind a tree, the air fizzing with static as it hit the bark and erupted like a firecracker.

Gwyn reemerged and hurled several **[Fireballs]** at the mercenaries, but their layered defenses remained strong, the shield mages effectively protecting their comrades as her fiery magic again failed to penetrate all four barriers.

Come on! Ugh!

Again, the lightning caster sent out a volley of energy orbs while the stone mage sent a hail of rocks at her.

Gwyn avoided the fast-moving stones by stepping back behind the tree, then as she stepped out, she noticed the lightning orbs tracking her. She countered each one with her **[Fireballs]**, two of them detonating in a burst of electric energy.

The third orb held firm, pushing through her barrage with almost unerring accuracy. At the last moment, she cast a **[Blast Wave]**, the fire overwhelming the orb and causing it to burst against the kinetically infused fire spell that went off like a bomb with her at the epicenter.

Her fiery wave spread out, and just as quickly, she formed and cast two **[Wave of Frosts]** in two wide crescents to quench the spreading flames.

She was ready to cast again when she heard a rustle in the undergrowth. Instantly, her **[Flame Shield]** was up, and she sent out a wide pulse of **[Telekinesis]** as she **[Blinked]** out of the way.

Arrows pierced through the trees, not only where she stood, but also the mercenaries. She saw as two were taken down before they could react, leaving six left alive.

Gwyn watched in surprise as the mercenaries hastily reformed their shields to protect them from all sides...

But one.

From above, two more arrows plunged down aimed at the shield mages.

One managed to block the one aimed at him, but the other fell, an arrow jutting out from his chest.

The defense weakened, the lightning and stone mages, seemingly the only remaining offensive casters, began to wildly throw spells in all directions, only to be met with a rain of arrows.

Another fell, and one of the shield mages barked out an order to retreat.

Manabound - Equilibrium

Gwyn crouched down lower as her eyes darted around the area when she heard movement closing in on her.

Without a thought, she **[Blinked]**, pushing her magic to the brink as she cast it over and over to cover as much distance as possible away from whoever had attacked them.

Her vision blurred, and the world tilted as she came to a staggering stop.

Bile rose in her throat and she doubled over, retching out what little remained of her previous meal.

Pushing herself up, she wiped her mouth and tried to steady her throbbing head. She looked around, and despite knowing it was probably a bad idea, she used her **[Mana Sight]** to scan the area out of necessity.

Seeing no signs of anything, she took a moment and used **[Focus]**, straining her ears for any sound of approaching enemies.

Nothing.

Suddenly, as she stood there warily, a soft melody, like a lullaby sung in mana, filled her senses.

It was a beautiful, ethereal song that seemed to beckon her. Knowing *Mana* had never steered her wrong before, she followed the pulse, staggering through the forest while her senses honed onto the strange song.

After what seemed like more years than she had been alive, she collapsed against a tree, her body screaming with fatigue. Her eyes fluttered closed as she fought to stay conscious, the song of mana echoing softly in her weary mind.

Blinking away the fatigue threatening to overtake her vision, Gwyn looked up to find a strange opening between some trees. It was large, like an entrance to a burrow or some subterranean hideaway.

The melody of mana seemed to emanate from within its depths.

Gwyn pushed herself upright, wincing at the pain.

Taking a deep breath, she moved toward the entrance, sword in hand, knowing that her magic was too spent for any significant spellcasting.

She cautiously approached the opening, her senses on high alert, and stepped inside.

The first thing she noticed as she walked down into the earth was that the burrow itself was massive, like something far larger than she had hollowed it out. The walls were worn smooth and rounded, the ceiling above seeming to have been fused together. The earth beneath her feet was packed hard and bore the imprints of what could be massive claws.

The deeper she delved into the burrow, the hotter it became.

Oxylus

It was as if she were descending into a furnace, the temperature steadily rising with each step. Despite the oppressive heat, Gwyn pressed on, her senses tingling in anticipation of danger.

Finally, she stumbled into a wide-open area, the burrow opening into a cavernous space.

In the center of this space was a strange arrangement of bones, shaped and organized into what resembled a nest. The bones were of all shapes and sizes, some from creatures Gwyn could recognize, others from beasts she couldn't even fathom. She could see the remnants of broken eggs, as if whatever had been here had given birth and moved on.

At least I hope it has moved on.

Cautiously, she approached the nest, her heart pounding a steady rhythm of alarm in her chest with every instinct telling her to run away.

She ignored it and pressed on.

As she neared, she could make out something nestled within the bones, something that took her breath away.

Right there, in the nest, obscured by the surrounding skeletal debris, was an egg.

A large, multicolored scaled egg.

Its surface shimmered with iridescent hues, catching the limited light and casting colorful patterns across the cavernous space.

Gwyn's eyes widened in awe and disbelief as she was unable to tear her eyes away from the beautiful spectacle before her.

Her hand extended, trembling slightly, and as her finger grazed the surface, the ethereal song of mana swelled in a deafening chorus.

She inhaled sharply as mana surged from her core, drawn inexorably into the egg, forcing her to hold her breath as she felt heat leave her body. The rush was so intense, so overwhelming, she felt her consciousness waver on the brink of collapse...

Then, the eerie tranquility was shattered.

Without warning, the egg quivered, a subtle shudder running through the thing that caused the colorful scales to ripple in the dim light.

Gwyn's heart skipped a beat.

The song of mana danced on the edge of frenzy, like an anxious bird ready to take flight.

And then, with a deafening echo that she would later swear that ricocheted off the walls of the burrow, a fissure snaked across the egg's surface. The crack seemed to glow, a thin line of pulsating light that radiated warmth and ethereal energy, spreading its tendrils outwards in a spiderweb pattern.

Manabound - Equilibrium

The song of mana was now a symphony, a crescendo of notes that heightened the anticipation in the air. The burrow held its breath, the world itself sucking in air as the impending change hung in the balance.

All the while, Gwyn watched with bated breath, her racing heart pounding in sync with the rhythm of the unfolding spectacle.

The song of mana, so vibrant and frenzied a moment ago, hummed its final note, concluding in a tranquil whisper that seemed to echo through the very marrow of her bones.

It was almost like a hushed, no, a reverential sigh that flitted through the air as the large egg moved once more.

The serpentine crack, now a vivid pathway of glowing mana, splintered further, like a river breaking its banks. Piece by piece, the vibrant scales fell away, cascading down in a shower of iridescent fragments that scattered across the cavern floor akin to a gentle rainfall.

Then...

In the midst of the remnants of its once formidable enclosure...

Something stirred.