

Exerting Dominance

It was the night before Gwyn's first elective—Arts. She sat in a private study room that Roslyn had acquired for their little group to get together. They sat huddled together, surrounded by books, quills, and inkwells.

Her bestie, Roslyn sat to her right and was concentrating heavily on her mathematics. The girl had a scrap sheet of parchment that had equations and scribbled calculations she was working through.

Adrienne, her new orkun friend and Healer Of Messed Up Spell Casting, sat across from her. The girl was working through and softly murmuring to herself as she attempted to memorize various key events and people from Avira's history.

Lorrena was on Gwyn's left, focusing on instruction for Proper Etiquette in Aviran Society. Her face was scrunched up as she used techniques Miss Rolfe and Mister Branigan had taught her to memorize and apply the knowledge.

Roslyn's classmate Salla seemed the most at ease. The girl was a natural student and scholar. As Gwyn got to know the telv, she learned that becoming a scholar was a dream role for Salla.

They had been studying for hours, trying to ensure they stayed ahead of their subjects so that they would be prepared for the exams at the end of the semester. As they worked, they chatted about their studies and shared their thoughts. She could tell Salla was a bit hesitant at first to help due to the whole rankings thing, but the girl opened up quickly after hearing about how everyone still in Class Fourteen at the end of the year would be dismissed. Apparently, that was not explained for Class One as it had been for them.

Gwyn smiled as she watched her friends hard at work. The first two weeks at school were set up to get the students acclimated to the setting. Week three would be when they started changing ranks almost weekly. As she looked down at her material, she knew she was ready.

The week had passed by fairly quickly. Likely because Gwyn was so excited to go to her two electives at the end of the week. Her fight with Taenya was a distant memory. The knight was still present in her thoughts, but that was something that she could deal with later.

She'd tried to talk to Mr. Michaels, the terran in her class, but that hadn't gone anywhere. The boy seemed to not want anything to do with her. Similar to her roommate Calanis. Daria was nice and hung out with her at times, but the girl seemingly felt almost obligated to help Calanis out.

Lady Roslyn's reaction to Gwyn's appearance, however, was like that of a worried sister. Her best friend had constantly checked up on Gwyn and spent nearly every waking moment with her.

The girl was determined to spend the weekend with her, despite her House's resistance.

The night Gwyn returned to the dorm room, Lorrena had been so happy to see Gwyn up and about, that the girl had broken down in tears. Ilyana had indeed made it to her room and the teenager had also been filled with a great deal of relief that Gwyn was no longer injured.

Her orkun friend, Adrienne, hadn't left her side the first night until she was required to return to her room to sleep. The orkun's room was one floor above hers and at the opposite end. This meant that Gwyn and Adrienne got to see each other often, but after the first night, the girl stepped back and let Roslyn fuss over her. Although, Gwyn caught her trying to subtly cast her **Healing Touch** spell on her at least twice a day.

Now, sitting together and studying, things had mostly gone back to normal.

She yawned.

Roslyn glanced up from her fierce calculations. Which, to Gwyn, was stuff she'd already done back home. Stuff like arithmetic and geometry. They had algebra, but it didn't seem as advanced as what she had expected from sixth grade back home.

I wonder how my friends are doing? Did they go back to school like nothing had happened after the flash?

"Are you alright, Gwyn?" Roslyn asked.

Gwyn nodded. "Yeah, just getting tired. I think this is it for me tonight, girls."

Salla glanced up from her notes. "Are you sure? You are the lowest ranked, I would expect that you need the most assistance," the girl said.

Roslyn and Lorrena chuckled.

The commoner squinted her eyes. "What am I missing?"

Roslyn glanced at Gwyn and smiled. "Remember how I spoke about Gwyn's entrance exam?" The girl nodded. "Well, Gwyn would have been higher ranked than me if she had taken it. We studied together a lot before arriving, and she consistently did better than I did."

Salla seemed to view Gwyn in a new light at that. "Hm. I expect that I will see you more often then."

Gwyn smiled as she started gathering her things. "Soon! It's been a blessing in disguise, though. I would have never met Adrienne had it not happened! And now we will rise through the classes together!"

The orkun girl smiled. "I cannot wait, Gwyn."

I can't either. At the very least, I will feel so much better when we get to Class Thirteen.

Gwyn said her goodbyes, and Lorrena promised to join her back in the room soon.

She thought about Adrienne and how circumstances had put them together. She involuntarily shivered as she realized what would have been different.

If I didn't get ranked last, Adrienne wouldn't have been there to heal me after the magic incident.



The next day, Gwyn walked with Adrienne to their first elective. It was their last class of the day, and she was both nervous and excited about what it would be like. She had always loved everything to do with art back home, and she had talked Adrienne's ears off as started walking.

Adrienne walked in step with her as the clatter of their boots echoed in the hallway of the building that hosted the classroom for the Arts.

Adrienne's robes were nearly identical to Gwyn's, but her orkun heritage was evident in the way she carried herself. Her build was closer to a human's than the lithe elves or even the telv. It helped Gwyn feel as if she wasn't standing out amongst a sea of elves.

Even now, she bore the staring that constantly followed her from other students. Comments about how she looked like a strange telv, or how she didn't look like a princess were just some of the comments she heard. Luckily, all it took was one look from the paladin who constantly shadowed her to scare off the mean kids.

Then there were the comments about Adrienne. Those made her mad, people calling her a Blighter, with others saying even more rude things like boar tooth. It always seemed like Adrienne never heard them, or was just really good at ignoring them. But when Gwyn had pressed Adrienne about it, it was then that she realized her hearing was better. Significantly so.

She considered it may be her mana attributes affecting her, but she didn't know what hers were currently.

It was something she intended to figure out.

Gwyn and Adrienne walked into the art classroom, looking around with curiosity. It was their first time attending this class, and Gwyn, in particular, was eager to see what it had to offer. The room was spacious and well-lit, with large windows letting in plenty

of natural light. Easels and tables were arranged throughout the room, with a variety of art supplies neatly arranged on each one.

As they walked further into the room, Gwyn noticed a wall covered in paintings and sketches. She couldn't help but stop and admire them. The colors were vibrant, and the brushstrokes were bold and expressive. Adrienne joined her, looking over her shoulder.

"Wow, these are amazing," Gwyn said, pointing to a particularly striking portrait.

Adrienne nodded in agreement. "The artist has real talent."

Just then, the door opened, and their art teacher walked in. She was a petite high elf woman with short, spiky hair and a friendly smile.

"Good morning, girls," she said warmly. "I'm Professor Pohl, and I'll be your teacher for the arts this semester. I'm so glad you could join us."

Gwyn and Adrienne introduced themselves, and Professor Pohl welcomed them to the class as she marked them off of a list she had set aside. She then gave them a quick rundown of the syllabus and the expectations for the semester and explained how they would be getting right into the action. The elf woman also showed them where to find additional art supplies if they needed them.

As they waited for other students to arrive, Gwyn and Adrienne started to explore the art supplies on the tables. They found a variety of paints, brushes, charcoals, and pastels. They also noticed a stack of sketchbooks and a bin full of styluses.

"This is going to be so much fun," Gwyn said, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Adrienne grinned. "I hope so. I cannot wait to see what we will create."

"Agreed," Gwyn said.

The orkun girl looked around. "This will be good for our first semester. Then we can choose something that will help our ranks starting after the next one begins."

Gwyn nodded. While she would personally prefer just staying in the class, she did promise to join Adrienne as they rose through the classes together.

As more students started to arrive, Gwyn and Adrienne began to feel a little more comfortable. Until Gwyn's heart dropped at the sight of a high elf entering.

Adrienne's eyes widened and she nudged Gwyn, leaning to whisper in her ear. "Why did *she* choose this class?"

Gwyn sighed. Elora, the princess of Avira, walked in with two other girls on her heels and a knight that moved just inside the door and took a position next to Amari. Her paladin guard didn't even glance at the female knight as she greeted her, much to the woman's consternation if her face was anything to go by.

The royal, on the other hand, appeared to take in the room, her eyes narrowing as she caught sight of Gwyn. Luckily, Princess Elora ignored her and walked to the

opposite side of the classroom, making sure to keep the easels in between their line of sight.

Before Gwyn could say anything to Adrienne, Professor Pohl started the class by introducing the first day's project.

"Today, we're going to start with a simple still life," she said. "I've arranged some objects on a table at the front of the room. I want you to take a few minutes to study them and then choose one to sketch."

Gwyn and Adrienne walked over to the table, eager to see what objects were there. They found an assortment of fruit, flowers, and vases. Gwyn chose a bowl of apples, while Adrienne selected a vase of daisies.

The *other* princess reached down and snatched a vase filled with white and orange rose-like flowers before another student could grab it. She scoffed before turning and returning to her seat.

Ignoring the girl, Gwyn and Adrienne walked back to their seats and started sketching. As they worked, Gwyn felt a sense of calm and focus wash over her. Even her friend joined her as they both lost themselves in the creative process, and time seemed to slip away.

At the end of the class, they looked at their sketches with pride. Whispering to each other about where they could improve. Professor Pohl quietly walked from table to table and gave each piece a critiquing stare.

After making her rounds to each student, she dismissed them just in time for the bells to chime. As they walked out of the classroom, Gwyn couldn't help but feel a mixture of excitement about the subject and dread at having to be in the same class as the princess.

I'll need to ask Roslyn how she deals with her.

Their next elective would take the entire afternoon the next day. Combat Foundations was sure to be important, especially in helping them gain rank. She hoped that there was pasta at dinner, mom always said it was important to carb up the night before a big game.

She glanced at Adrienne. "Tomorrow's the big one. We got to get some early rest tonight."

The girl nodded. "Absolutely."



The next day, Gwyn and Adrienne made their way toward the training grounds, eager to begin their Combat Fundamentals class. As they approached, they could hear the sounds of clashing swords and the grunts of exertion.

The training grounds were a vast open area, surrounded by a high fence to keep the combatants inside. Groups of older students were already practicing, their movements precise and efficient as they sparred with each other.

They spotted a group of first-year students gathered off to the side, waiting for the class to begin. They made their way over, exchanging nods of greeting with some of the other students.

An older student stepped up and addressed everyone. The tall boy stood there with a serious look on his face and carried himself with the demeanor of someone already in the army.

Gwyn thought it hilarious.

“First-years, upon arriving at the training grounds, you will enter into the baths. There is a changing room that has areas designated for each student. You are to find your designated cube and dress in the combat uniform provided. Do that now,” he explained.

Everyone murmured but he pointed behind them. “Males that way.” Turning, he pointed at the far side of the training grounds. “Females over there. Get to running, pups!”

Gwyn’s eyes widened and she felt Amari nudge her shoulder. “I’ll keep up with you, Gwyn,” the paladin said in an amused tone.

She groaned as she broke into a jog and headed toward the baths, several girls started sprinting as the older student started yelling which spurred Gwyn to match and then overtake them. As she reached the entrance, she turned and realized she had reached the baths well before any of the other students.

I didn’t think I was that fast.

Despite her speed, Amari, her paladin bodyguard, managed to keep up with her every step of the way.

The paladin had a look on her face that was almost predatory. “I am going to enjoy our weekend training sessions,” the sun elf woman stated with a bit too much eagerness.

Gwyn could only shake her head as she waited for Adrienne to make it. The orkun girl was solidly in the middle of the pack as she arrived. She was huffing and breathing heavily, but she still smiled at Gwyn as she stepped next to her.

Adrienne and Gwyn quickly made their way into the changing room and located their designated areas. They wasted no time in shedding their regular school robes and donning the black training uniform.

The training uniform worn by Gwyn and the other students was designed for practicality and protection. It consisted of a pair of sturdy, fitted pants and a matching tunic with short sleeves.

The tunic was reinforced with them donning a hardened leather breastplate that covered the chest, shoulders, and abdomen, designed to protect vital areas during combat training. The leather pieces were crafted to fit snugly against the body, providing a comfortable yet protective layer.

The uniform also included leather boots that reached up to mid-calf and were designed for ease of movement during combat. The boots had a sturdy sole and a small heel, providing good grip and stability on any terrain.

Overall, the training uniform was a combination of materials that provided both protection and mobility, allowing students to engage in rigorous combat training as safely as possible. The emphasis was on functionality and durability, rather than fashion.

She could appreciate the foresight of the school to consider personal safety a priority.

It took her a bit longer to get ready as it was her first time donning such equipment which necessitated Amari assisting and explaining how to do it herself in the future.

Once they were dressed, they made their way back to the training grounds, where the other first-year students had already gathered in a circle around the instructor. Gwyn and Adrienne joined the circle, taking their places among the other students, while Amari moved off to the side where... another knight was standing.

Gwyn's eyes narrowed as she searched around the group where she quickly found her quarry. Prince Aran stood toward the front of the group with crossed arms and a smug look.

I want to wipe that smug look off his face. The jerk.

A big telv man stepped forward. She immediately pegged him as the instructor.

The instructor was a tall, muscular man with a commanding presence. His voice boomed across the training grounds as he addressed the students.

"Good morning, students. I am Master Rygar, your Combat Fundamentals instructor," he said, his voice deep and authoritative.

He had a stern look on his face as he surveyed the group of students before him.

"I will be evaluating your capabilities today, so I expect nothing but your best effort. We will be sparring under the direction and observation of myself and some of our upper-classmen. Remember, this is not a competition, but a test of your abilities."

As he spoke, his eyes seemed to bore into each student, assessing their readiness and determination.

She couldn't help but be excited. She'd been training sporadically before arriving in the capital. Since then, however, Gwyn had been training with Raafe's Legacy at least three to four times a week.

Amari and Taenya were excellent instructors. In fact, Taenya had become so good during her own training with the paladin, that she found herself almost matching the highly skilled warrior.

A fact that had impressed the sun elf to no end. She had gushed all night the first time Taenya had beat her in a spar.

Gwyn couldn't help but be proud of her knight.

Master Rygar began pairing up the students for the sparring sessions, and she had no idea what method the man was using to determine partners. Gwyn felt a nervous flutter in her stomach as she waited to see who she would be paired with.

When Master Rygar called out her name alongside Prince Aran's, she couldn't help but groan inwardly.

Ugh! Come on world... Just my luck.

The prince scowled at her, and she narrowed her eyes in response.

She glanced over at Amari who was covering her face with a hand.

With the student pairs determined, Master Rygar motioned for everyone to gather their weapons and move to the designated sparring circles. She walked to a series of racks where a series of training weapons were set up. Gwyn quickly searched for what she was looking for and grabbed the blade that was similar to hers with its slightly curving blade.

The circles were marked out on the ground, each with enough space for the two combatants to maneuver.

She couldn't help but scowl the entire way to her circle, where the prince joined her.

"Well, if it isn't the landless princess," he snarked.

Gwyn scoffed. "If it isn't the rude prince."

The jerk chuckled. "It is quite unfortunate that you got paired against me. I have been training my entire life. I am going to be king, and a king must be good with the blade," he said.

She raised a brow. "Do you just like hearing yourself speak? If so, do you even listen to yourself? You sound like a prat."

The prince's eyes narrowed. "What would you know? You may as well be an orphan. I hear that your mother is nowhere to be found, despite my father's people searching for her."

"Why is your father searching for my mom?" she asked carefully.

He swung his sword from side to side in a figure-eight pattern. He smirked. "Why else? A foreign *queen* arrives in our section of the world? *Everyone* is looking for her. When she is found, your little House loses legitimacy."

She sighed. "What is with all of you and your little delusions of power."

"Delusion?" he scoffed again.

"Yes. Because what I heard was that you aren't even the heir. In fact, it appears your sister has a better chance than you."

"I will—"

Master Rygar called out and raised his hand to signal the start of the first sparring session. Before doing so, he reminded the students to fight with control and use only enough force to subdue their opponent.

The prince narrowed his eyes. "I am going to enjoy this."

She laughed. "Sure, bud."

With a final nod, he signaled for the start of the first bout, and the students began to engage in combat.

Prince Aran charged towards Gwyn as soon as the sparring began, his sword held high. Gwyn braced herself and brought up her sword to block his attack. The sound of metal against metal echoed through the training grounds as the two clashed their swords again and again. As their blades collided, it felt as if the elf boy was holding back, purposely putting in less strength to not injure her.

The act surprised her. Was everything he said just for show? To get a rise out of her?

Gwyn knew that Aran was an experienced fighter, Amari had warned her of such when they spoke of the twin royals. Gwyn had been determined to hold her own, but now she hesitated. She wondered why the prince would speak the way he had but then take it easy on her during the actual fight.

She moved quickly, dodging his attacks and countering with her own. Her mind was whirling with the reasons, looking for the angle. There had to be one. Nobles in Avira didn't just act nicely without an ulterior motive. Roslyn was an exception; all of the Tilorals were.

As the spar continued, her mind raced and it affected her reactions, it quickly became clear that Aran was a skilled opponent as he managed to get in several hits.

Gwyn grunted as she felt the impact of his sword against her shoulder, but she didn't let it slow her down. They barely stung. The boy was technically very good.

But why are his movements so... slow? They're deliberate, weak. Why?

As they continued to fight, Gwyn couldn't help but notice Aran's cocky grin. He seemed to be enjoying the spar, almost as if he was toying with her. Gwyn gritted her teeth and focused on her movements, trying to anticipate his next move.

Ignore the head games. That's all it is.

Finally, she saw an opening and lunged forward, hoping to catch Aran off guard, but not hurt him. To her surprise, he dodged her attack and circled around her, coming up behind her. Before she could react, he delivered a swift blow to her back, causing her to stumble forward.

Darn it!

Gwyn quickly regained her footing and turned to face Aran once again. She felt a surge of frustration and anger, but she pushed it aside, focusing on the task at hand. She knew that she had to stay focused and not let her emotions get the better of her.

“Just as I expected. Weak,” he sneered.

Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you acting like this?”

He lunged and she barely dodged it. “Like what? I must say, I am surprised you are not on the ground weeping with all the hits I have scored. You really are no better than some commoner, do not worry. I am sure the beginner class will teach you,” he patronized.

That's it.

She drew on the mana around them, **Focusing**. She let her **Frozen Heart** settle into her, and activated her **Mana Sight**.

Gwyn was done playing.

He moved.

And she saw it. Something so obvious that she had completely missed it.

He barely has any mana flowing through him... he's not holding back... he's just so... slow. So...weak.

She almost laughed.

Gwyn and Prince Aran launched into a furious fight, each strike from their dulled blades ringing out in the training grounds. Despite Aran's initial confidence, Gwyn's anticipation of his every move allowed her to quickly gain the upper hand. Every blow of her blade made the boy wince at her strength.

She no longer held back, the gulf between them was too vast, and she would prove to the smug jerk how much he was outclassed.

She blocked his strikes with ease and retaliated with a series of swift counterattacks, leaving the prince off balance and struggling to keep up. Gwyn's moves were fluid and precise, and she felt a surge of exhilaration as she landed hit after hit on her opponent.

Aran was clearly taken aback by Gwyn's skill, and his frustration began to show in his attacks. He became sloppy, and Gwyn quickly took advantage of the openings he left.

She was toying with him, letting him realize how futile his struggle was. Sweat was forming all over the boy's forehead as he was battered by her attacks.

Gwyn could feel the eyes of the other students and instructors on her, watching in surprise as the terran princess not only held her own but dominated the prince of their nation.

She struck out, but the prince dodged and cried out as he tried to lunge at her in what may as well have been slow motion. With a swift step to the side, she lashed out in response.

Aran moved to parry the blow but misjudged the distance. Gwyn's training blade struck his wrist with a sharp crack, causing him to yelp in pain and drop his weapon. Gwyn immediately stepped back, dropping all of her spells, horrified by what had happened.

She turned and searched for her friend. "Adrienne!"

The yard went silent as instructors and the prince's knight rushed over, Amari right behind him.

Adrienne was at her side in a moment.

"Heal him!" Gwyn cried out. "His wrist, I think I broke it."

The girl nodded immediately and moved to the boy, reaching for his arm. Aran tried to stop her, and Gwyn heard the royal knight yell out, but she saw Amari holding him back out of the corner of her eye.

Adrienne's magic rushed from her hands and into the boy and after a small *pop* that caused him to cry out, she backed away.

The knight yanked away from Amari's grip and rushed to his liege's side. "Your Highness!" The man turned toward Adrienne. "How dare you use magic against the prince. I will—"

"She *healed* him," Gwyn snapped.

The man jerked his head toward her. "What?"

Aran was flexing his wrist. "S-She is correct. The Blighter healed my arm with her magic. I *felt* it break."

The prince looked up, suddenly aware of all those gathered around. His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. His knight was holding on to him and looking down with a concerned expression.

Aran shook his head. "Master Rygar—"

The telv man waved a hand. "Say no more, Mister Moreth. Have the physician's office check you over. I am impressed by the showing, I will see you in my advanced class starting next week."

The elf boy nodded as his knight moved to guide the prince away. The prince gave her one last scowl before turning and walking with his knight off of the training grounds.

Master Rygar turned and looked at everyone. "Alright! The show's over. I will post the results after conferring with your observers. You may review them tonight. Class times and schedules will be posted as well. Dismissed!"

Gwyn started to turn but the man pointed at her. "You."

She froze. "Me?"

The telv's eyes narrowed. "You. Come here," he said, pointing to the ground in front of him.

Gwyn stepped to the man and hesitantly stood in front of him. Amari moved protectively beside her, but the instructor ignored the paladin.

"What happened?"

She took a deep breath. She had to show confidence. Regretful that he got hurt, but not admit any fault of her own. In short, act like a stuck-up princess.

Easy.

"I got into my head and thought he was toying with me. When I realized he wasn't, I stopped holding back. It is apparent that my advances from the Flash were too much for him. Although, I regret that he was injured, he is not a suitable sparring partner for me in the future," she said firmly. "I would also like to add that I appreciate you informing him which class he would be in."

The man raised an eyebrow. "Why would you appreciate that?"

Her brow furrowed with confusion as she met his gaze. "Surely you see my point," she said, her voice tinged with building frustration. "I emerged victorious in the duel, and if he is deemed skilled enough to enter the advanced class, then I am as well."

Master Rygar looked at Gwyn for a long moment before nodding slowly. "You have a point. Very well, you will be in the advanced class as well. However, I will not tolerate any reckless behavior in the future. You are a princess, but in this yard, you are a student like any other. Understood?"

Gwyn nodded, her cheeks turning pink with embarrassment. "Yes, sir."

"Good. You may go."

She quickly turned and followed Adrienne, who was already walking towards the exit. Amari stayed close, her hand on Gwyn's shoulder.

"That was close," Adrienne whispered as they left the training yard.

Gwyn sighed relief flooding through her. "Too close. I did not mean to hurt him, despite how much I dislike him."

Amari squeezed her shoulder. "It was an accident, Gwyn. You did not mean for it to happen. We will train more, I will help you learn to work around your strength. How to train in a way that benefits you, while working with someone weaker and slower."

She knew she had to be more careful in the future, no matter how confident she felt in her abilities.

Yet, as they made their way to the baths to change back into their robes, she couldn't stop shaking the feeling of satisfaction she felt at winning.

For exerting her dominance.

Now all Gwyn had to do was verify if what the prince had said about his father was true. Anger boiled inside her, fueled by the possibility that the Crown Prince might be searching for and intending to harm her mother. Because if the Crown Prince was trying to find and harm her mom, a broken wrist wouldn't—

She closed her eyes.

No, those thoughts are dangerous.

With a deep breath, she let the mana that had been coursing through her dissipate. It was time to focus on more important things. When the last bit of red... and black returned to where it belonged, she nodded. It was time to change and head off campus for the weekend.

The second week of school had ended, and Gwyn and her friends had settled into a routine. Deviating from that could risk everything, so her focus had to be on her studies. Getting out of Class Fourteen was her top priority now.

Burning a palace to the ground can wait.

Besides, Gwyn was confident that her mother could handle herself. She imagined her mom as a master of magic, armed with all sorts of gadgets and maybe even an army. The thought made her smile, and she couldn't help but picture the Crown Prince's face when he realized he couldn't touch her mom.

With that image in mind, Gwyn set aside her anger and set out to get ready to leave campus for the weekend. The dangerous thoughts would have to wait.