

Chapter Twelve – O Tender Creature

As loyal as her crew was, Gwen knew they would not to listen to their captain this time. They only had one goal: to reach the heavenly voices coming from the sea. Ordinarily, treason such as this would have been met with swift, perhaps *violent*, retribution, but these were about a dozen well-trained fighters with only three women, seemingly unaffected, standing in their way.

Nevertheless, she, Skylana and Shade stood their ground on the sterncastle.

Half the crew ascended towards the quarterdeck, leaving Shade and Gwen little time to consider their limited options. The rest remained on the main deck and beat against the magical barrier surrounding the ship, heedless of its constant regeneration.

The sound of unsheathing blades down below was louder than the growing storm. An arrow whistled towards Skylana. Were it not for Shade's swift hand to deflect the oncoming missile, it would have hit her throat.

"Ryder," Skylana pleaded towards her companion, who had recovered quickly after being thrown to the quarterdeck. "It's me."

"Save your breath," Gwen snapped. "He's their thrall now. They all are. They won't stop until they're in the sirens' embrace."

Skylana's heart sank as she watched Talis and Ryder climb up to the sterncastle with hollow eyes. She saw Nemo, Hands, and Crow with the same empty glare, as well as Scarbeth's threatening stare (which, while familiar, was no more encouraging than the rest). Her breath quickened, but only briefly. She had to keep focus.

Scarbeth lunged towards Skylana, but Shade intercepted his arm. In spite of her size, her momentum lent her strength, twisting it enough to make him drop his blade. Before he could reach his dagger, she seized his other hand and entangled it in a short piece of rope. Almost effortlessly, she glided around behind him, snatching his sword arm and bound them both behind his back.

Ryder leapt from behind the men with his bow drawn and aimed towards Skylana again, this time, with nothing in his way. Before he could loose the arrow, a rope looped itself around his neck and dragged him backwards. The force of the pull caused him to release the arrow up into the barrier and his bow fell to the deck.

"No! Don't hurt him!" Skylana pleaded, as Gwen pulled on the rope as hard as she could.

"You *wish* him to shoot you?" The Captain tugged on the rope with all her might, swinging Ryder around by the throat. He collided with Crow, knocking him back down to the quarterdeck as Hands and Nemo avoided the humanoid flail. Gwen pulled him back quickly, noting that he was resisting less. He was about to pass out. She tossed the slack of rope to Shade, who looped it around Scarbeth's bindings.

Skylana watched helplessly as her companion struggled to breathe. Gwen was right to save her from being attacked, but if that rope were not cut soon, Ryder would suffocate. Still, she had the barrier to maintain, and the crew's constant beating kept her magic focused on keeping it in tact rather than lashing out at the woman who was slowly killing her companion.

Shade tugged on the rope around Ryder's neck, throwing him off balance. Before he could tumble down, she tugged on Scarbeth's bindings, forcing the two together. She used the rope slack to wind the bindings around the two. As soon as their hands were secured, she removed the coil around Ryder's neck and tied it to the banister of the sterncastle, throwing them over the side and leaving them to dangle – neutralized, yet (mostly) unharmed.

As Shade worked her brand of magic on the two, Gwen saw Talis' hands conjuring some sort of energy to aim at them. With Ryder now in Shade's hands, she charged the mage, sliding into his legs and tripping him. She clutched onto his clothes and swung him towards Hands and Nemo, who teetered back down the stairs to the quarterdeck. Gwen looked down after them to see the crew on the main deck still trying to destroy the barrier.

"Tell me this magic wall was your doing," she hoped. This was the first time she actually took note of it.

"They were about to leap into the sea!" Skylana confirmed.

"Can you do anything else?"

"If you want it to crack and shatter, then yes, I could!"

Gwen cursed under her breath. She used the blessed moments it took the men to recover to try and formulate a plan. Those on the main deck had finally realized trying to destroy the icy shield was futile and now joined with the others to take out the source. The men divided themselves into two groups: one to come up the starboard stairs, the other group to ascend portside. She and Shade could use the narrow passage of the stairs to funnel and tie the rest of them down one at a time, but they still needed to remove all of their weapons, which would prove difficult.

Her thoughts were broken by a muffled yet haunting song that could somehow be heard through the barrier.

Oh tendere creature with sole heaviness!

The ship suddenly lurched to the left and everyone tumbled as a giant wave crashed against the barrier. Cracks formed along the walls as some crewmen slammed into it. Skylana dropped to a knee as she tried to heal it. The power it took for her to keep the barrier from breaking was taking its toll on her.

"I can't hold it much longer!" Skylana warned as Gwen recovered quickly. *That wave should not have been that powerful, she thought, and the storm should not have swelled so quickly.* Magic swirled all around the *Fenris*. It had to be, and it was trying to lead her to her doom.

"Then don't!"

"What?!" Skylana forced herself to keep concentrating despite the odd (and dangerous) demand from Gwen.

"The sea's trying to guide the ship somewhere! Probably to a nearby cliff! I need you to steer her away from it! Make her go the other way!"

"If I stop concentrating, I can't keep the barrier from shattering!"

"If we can bind them quickly, then it shall not be a problem!"

Skylana was very hesitant on releasing her hold of the barrier. Once she stopped sustaining it, the ice would still hold, but not for long if the crew hacked away at it. If she was going to shift her power to the seas, she had to make sure that the barrier was well fortified. Using as much of her power as she could, the barrier began to glow as a surge of seawater rose and instantly mended the cracks in the ice wall.

"Don't you dare kill them," she called to the others before she relinquished her hold over the barrier.

The moment the barrier stopped glowing, she took a deep breath and focused on the waves. This proved to be a more difficult challenge, for the waves were also being controlled by another force. It had to be the sirens. It was like trying to take a toy away from a persistent child. Their grip on the waves was strong, but Skylana yet found leverage to yank the waves toward the ship, causing it to veer starboard (since the fog did not allow her to tell where the horizon was).

The battle for control of the ship caused it to rock unevenly, with everyone on deck fighting to stay upright. Gwen and Shade had the advantage of being in control of their own will, making them more aware of their surroundings. They adapted quickly while some of the men were too focused on getting to Skylana to worry about balance.

Gwen took the portside staircase while Shade took the other. They had to be careful not to bind the men with weapons in hand, lest they immediately cut themselves free. They were fortunate enough that the men had separated to suit the defender's capabilities. Nemo, Hands, Talis and Seamus – many of whom could be called the best warriors on board – confronted Gwen. Ecks, Crow, Zachary, Nicholas – all more recent additions (still skilled, but lacking their sea legs), were Shade's to deal with.

Ecks, however, took an unanticipated approach. Instead of going up the stairs, where the crew crowded around, he leaped up the center of the quarterdeck with his strong legs and climbed up Ryder and Scarbeth to reach the sterncastle.

Shade delivered a swift kick to Crow, the foremost crewman, sending them tumbling back into the men behind him. She abandoned the stairs and ran towards Ecks and managed to reach him before he could climb over. She took the smallest amount of rope and quickly bound his wrists to the railing. He struggled to get free while she quickly relieved him of his weapons.

She decided to focus on the remaining three and bind them separately on the banister. She had to be incredibly quick to catch them, but speed was her trade. These men focused on power and their compelled minds clouded their senses. This would not be too much trouble for her.

Meanwhile, Gwen had joined the remaining half of the men on the quarterdeck, including Talis. Their blades crossed Gwen's as she tried to force them back towards the main deck. Talis fired a few spells towards her, forgetting about the antimagical coin she always had on her person, which made them useless. She found it almost miraculous that she was able to fend them off, but she was still outnumbered. They forced her to retreat to the sterncastle, but the men had been bottlenecked by the stairs. They struggled to ascend with the swaying of the ship, but continued, nevertheless.

"Hit the aft!" Gwen yelled back to Skylana.

"What?!" The elf was still not used to nautical terms.

"Back of the ship!" She saw a puzzled nod from Skylana, as if she had a slight idea of what she meant. Gwen braced herself at the top of the stairs and readied the ropes between her hands.

A strong wave hit the portside aft instead of hitting straight on. Either way, it helped. Using the force from the wave, Gwen leaped into the air and dropped the rope in front of Hands, who led the charge. She landed gracefully behind them and pulled as hard as she could.

Somehow, she used much more force than she remembered having. The men fell back hard, knocking their heads against each other. Her strength had pulled them all the way to the main mast of the ship. She had hoped just to get the rope around them to entangle them. While it was still helpful to her cause, she did not intend to stun them like this. For a moment, Gwen thought she heard a familiar growl emerge from deep within her.

But her men were coming to. She had to shake it off and finish the job. Gwen returned to the men and twisted the ropes around them to secure the binding. She managed to tie them tightly enough where their arms could not move, and hurriedly relieved them of their weapons before they could think to use them. For added measure, she pulled them as close as she could to the main mast and bound them to it.

She turned back to assist Shade, but her troubles were already taken care of. Each crewmember was tied to either the banister on the stairs or the side of the ship. The girl was just finishing securing the binds on Crow's wrists.

"Good work!" Gwen shouted. "Keep an eye on them! I'll try to steer us out of here!"

But Shade could barely hear her over the sirens singing outside.

Loste shrewe! Loste shrewe!

Somehow it seemed much louder than before.

"IGNITUS!"

Talis' voice suddenly cut through the air. The mage engulfed himself in flames. The crew tried to scramble as the blaze licked their skin and clothes. Each man had his own coin that prevented damage, but the flame snaked its way along the ropes, turning them into ash and setting everyone free. The fire even caught the base of the main mast. Once they were unleashed, the flames receded into Talis' fist.

Without any sense of direction, a jet of flame shot itself out and struck the ice shield. Crazy and desperate to meet the sirens, instead of focusing on that one spot, the fire traveled around the circumference of the shield, hitting other points of the ship: the mastheads, the ratlines and even the ropes of other crewmen, freeing them as well. He even aimed towards the sails, burning holes into them while creating an opening at the top of the ship.

He was out of control.

"Shade!" Gwen shouted.

"On it!" She dashed out towards Talis, ducking and weaving in and out of the men to get to him. Fortunately for her, he was too enraged to even notice her. She got in as close as she needed to in order to stop him. She kept two fingers extended in the next few seconds; she needed to be fast and precise in order for it to work.

The first target began at the base of his torso. That strike gave him pause, yet the fire still continued, albeit at a weaker strength.

Then she struck him just above the navel. His fire began to die down further.

When she hit the solar plexus, it was hard enough to break his concentration and caused his knees to give out.

As he fell, her fingers met the center of his breastbone. At this rate, if he tried to bring back his fire, it would be a small flame.

Shade paused for a split second because the target at the throat was tricky. She had to hit hard enough to disable it, yet not too hard to break his windpipe. She found the adequate force and struck true.

His knees hadn't hit the ground before her sixth strike caught the center of his forehead. The force of the impact caused him to reel backwards.

Before it got out of her range, she landed her final strike on the crown of his head. Talis' eyes went wide as the last of his charkas were closed off and his magic was fully disabled.

The shock of each impact was more than Talis had ever experienced in his life, magical or physical. He became light-headed and collapsed on the deck out cold. Shade let out a breath of relief until she felt the rain on her face. Looking up, she saw the giant hole he made. The ice was thinnest there, which was why the ice on the side had not melted yet, but it was much more brittle.

Only two good things came out of this. First was that the rain was putting out the fire that Talis caused around the ship. Second, once the crew saw the opening and the weakened shield, they abandoned their pursuit of Skylana and scrambled towards the sides to crack it further,

hoping for escape. Shade and Gwen sprung back into action, frustrated that they have to do their work all over again, but without the aid of ropes.

Skylana looked from the sterncastle while still trying to use all of her power to keep the ship away from any nearby rocks. She thought she was doing well, but the rain from the open top of the ice barrier started to impair her vision. She wasn't even certain which direction the ship was headed in anymore.

She cast a quick glance to the main deck seeing Gwen and Shade trying to round up their crew a second time. With the ropes burned beyond use, she had to wonder if it were even possible anymore.

At that moment, an idea blossomed in her mind.

She had to act fast, but if everything went right, it would take little time at all. One exhalation later, her waves calmed as the storm swelled around the ship. Skylana dashed for the entryway to the lower decks.

"What hell are you doing?!" she heard. There was no time for a suitable response. Skylana's mind was already focused on the remaining ropes down in the orlop. The men were too busy trying to escape the ship to worry about her. Gwen angrily watched the elf leap off the sterncastle and rush past the men towards the main deck. She disappeared through the opening to the gun deck.

The captain scowled, but couldn't focus on her for too long. The men were running loose and the barrier was slowly deteriorating because of Talis' fire and the constant beatings around the edge. But as she tried to figure out how to wrangle her men again, she counted only five of her crew plus Ryder at the sides. Three of them were missing. She looked up to see Seamus, Zachary and Nicholas climbing up the ratlines, hoping to escape through the opening up top.

Gwen felt a familiar primal force trying to claw its way out. It didn't emerge often when she was human, but she could feel it stirring. Its hunger began to rouse it from its dormant state within her. She tried to suppress it; the beast could not be unleashed. Not now. But the longer she watched her men climb to the opening, the more she knew she had to beat them to the top.

Her instincts took over.

She charged towards the largest target in sight. While Hands recovered from being entangled, Gwen leapt onto his back and used all of her strength to jump as far up the underside of the ratlines as she could. Thankful that they had not yet snapped from the fire damage, she scaled towards the top, narrowly beating the three men.

Now that she was closer to the opening, the song was much clearer.

Asseyen thyn courage! Asseyen thyn courag!

The rain poured through the opening of the ice shield, making the mast slippery for her to balance on. Still, her focus allowed her to find her footing as her men made for the crow's nest. Nicholas and Seamus approached on the starboard side and Zachary came up on the port side. Their progress on the mast was much slower than Gwen's, though Zachary's lanky figure allowed him more speed than the other two. Out of the three, Seamus' prior ship experience before his time on the *Fenris* yielded him a sense of balance, but the sirens' song would fuel all three them to progress regardless of any danger.

Gwen steeled herself on the mast. As much as she had to stop them, it was a long drop down to the deck. She had to be careful. These were competent men who had helped her faithfully in the past. She couldn't afford to lose them now.

As Gwen battled her men up top, Shade tried to focus on the ones down below. Now that the ropes had been burned, she knew she wouldn't have the time to go down and get more. The crew

was already at the side trying to shatter the icy barrier. She had to go with her contingency plan: their mobility had to be disabled. As much as she did not wish to hurt the men, she had no alternative anymore.

As she had done against Talis, she focused on the points of her crew's bodies that would hamper them the most. Ecks was the nearest target. She punched the vertebrae that were injured during one of their previous missions. As strong as he was, it nearly crippled him when he was struck too hard. She knew it would not last very long, but she had other crewmen to worry about. Hands was next. His fists caused severe cracks in the barrier. With his back turned to her, she drew her sword and struck the back of his head with the hilt. It was the only place she could hit hard enough to affect him, even if it was only to temporarily stun him.

Before she could move onto the next target, she quickly turned to meet a blade coming right for her throat. Her reflex allowed her to duck out of the way just in time, else Ryder's blade would have decapitated her on the spot. Another swung forward and she deftly avoided its slash. Ryder advanced as he sliced at Shade, causing her to retreat towards the edge of the ship.

In the split second his blades were out of the way, she leaned forward, cupped her hands and slammed them into his ears. He dropped instantly, allowing her to move onto the next crewmember. Ryder's ears rang and his head began to spin. He spent several moments discombobulated on one knee, waiting for the dizziness to wear off.

When his vision cleared, he watched the crew fighting to destroy the ice wall around the ship with Shade barely able to stop them. Some crewmen were clutching various parts of their bodies in agony, but others were slowly recovering. Despite this, everything around him was muted. He could see Shade thrust her foot into Crow's kneecap. He saw his mouth open wide to scream, but no sound came out.

Ryder reached out to grab Shade's arm as she passed by. She reeled on him to strike until he spoke.

"Hey! What the hell is going on?!" Shade paused to stare at him. Could he not recall the last few moments? Regardless, he seemed to be of his own mind. He was safe, for now.

"Sirens! We need to –"

"I can't hear you! What's going on?!" Her eyes widened. She had temporarily deafened him, breaking the sirens' hold. Frantically, she searched around the deck, hoping that the crew's recovery time was slow. He would not be deaf for long and she couldn't risk him going under their spell again.

Shade rushed to the nearest lantern on board, tearing off a two small fragments of her skirt as she went. She left the candle within to protect the flame from the rain and poured the wax onto the cloth. Once the wax was solid yet still malleable, she returned to Ryder and placed the cloth into his ears. The wax would seal around, blocking out all sound. She then forced him to look at her while she slowly mouthed an order to him.

"Keep... crew... on... ship," he repeated. Once she confirmed the command, he stood up to assist her.

On the mast, Gwen tried hard to keep the rest of her crew from ascending to the opening at the crow's nest. She focused solely on forcing them to retreat instead of knocking them off, which was a feat in and of itself. Each of these boys was an adequate fighter, even compared to her. Her cutlass sliced through raindrops as she advanced towards Nicholas and Seamus. She heard Zachary unsheathing his blade and spun to meet it with hers. Metal clanged while Seamus began to advance again. She stepped in his direction, keeping a side profile, trying to fend off both men at the same time.

She dealt a hard strike to Zachary, driving him to a momentary retreat before turning to Seamus to intercept his swing. As their blades clanged, she used a glissade to force the blade out of his hand. Though Seamus did not let go, the glissade threw him off balance enough to topple off the mast. Thankfully, he had enough prior experience to grab onto one of the ropes further down, leaving only Zachary and Nicholas left to deal with.

Zachary recovered quickly, but tried to leap for the crow's nest instead of Gwen. She saw the attempt before he could enact it and charged him. She thrust her shoulder into his chest before his feet left the mast. He recoiled from the blow, but fell nevertheless, clutching onto the slippery wood for dear life.

She turned again towards the stout crewman, Nicholas. She had to be careful with this one; his balance wasn't exactly the best, but he knew how to hit hard, especially with a silver blade.

He brought his sword upon her slightly faster than she could react. She was able to block, but he got the blade close enough to slice her cheek. The silver burned her face, but she could not afford to take her eyes off of him. With all her might, she pushed Nicholas off of her and swung only once to force him back.

Nicholas retreated to avoid the blow, but his foot slipped upon the mast and he began to fall. Gwen turned to try to save him, only to be met by Zachary's blade narrowly missing her side. He had quickly climbed back up onto the mast. She froze, her focus pulled away... only to hear Nicholas scream as he fell.

Before he hit the deck, a coil of rope shot out and caught him midair. It wrapped itself tightly so that he could not use his hands to cut himself free. Below him stood Skylana, who emerged from the deck with her arms guiding the coil that held Nicholas in the air.

Suddenly, ropes erupted from below like snakes and made their way to the crew. Hempen coils entwined themselves around the legs and wrists tight enough to prevent escape. She hoped that the problem would be dealt with quickly. Her hands conducted their movements in the air to find their targets at the mast where Gwen was. As she directed the ropes, she made her way back to the sterncastle, where it was high and out of the fray. There, she could move freely without anyone threatening her.

Stinte here woodnessa! Ahhh ahhh ah!

Though she managed to get the majority of the crew, some of them were far more agile than she expected. Zachary had cut himself free of her initial binding and was fending off other attempts fairly well. Hands was strong enough to break the ropes if there were not enough to restrain him. She was so focused on getting the crew secured that she didn't see Scarbeth racing towards her... but suddenly, something darted between them, blocking his path.

Ryder placed himself on the stairs to the sterncastle with wax in his ears and both of his elven blades drawn, staring at the crazed pirate with utter hatred.

"You will not touch her!" he declared. It didn't matter if these were Scarbeth's real actions or not. Skylana was in danger.

With a very twitch from Scarbeth, Ryder reacted. His silver-coated blade clashed with the ranger's elven swords, matching blow for blow. Despite his emotional instability, Scarbeth was an adept fighter and he never let up with Ryder.

But Ryder's resolve was renewed now that his will was his own. He had watched the ropes coming to entangle the possessed crew and he had to find a way to trap Scarbeth in its embrace. Their blades met in the pouring rain with the sway of the sea threatening to throw them off balance. Ryder adapted to the rocking as best as he could, but Scarbeth lived on the seas. He had the advantage, but Ryder refused to let him advance any closer.

Skylana was relieved to see that Ryder had snapped out of the trance, but still concentrated on keeping the crew restrained. Shade was still trying to disable the rest of them and while she was doing well, she still needed help. The elf was so thoroughly focused on the crew below that she did not notice something from behind her with a blade drawn.

Ryder was too busy keeping Scarbeth away from her and Talis was unconscious.

The blade raised as it flashed behind her in the lightning.

The sound of metal on metal caused her to spin around. Gwen stood between her and Nemo with their swords crossed. With a grunting heave, she pushed Nemo as far away as she could from the elf.

“Go below and help Shade,” the captain coldly ordered over the tempest.

“But...”

“Now!”

Every instinct in Skylana screamed to stay with her. Though this was her underling, he was possessed and these men were anything but ordinary. But so was Gwen.

Gwen should be able to handle her crew one-on-one, right? she asked herself. She looked down briefly to see that there were still other men she needed to secure. Her talents would be more useful there. With one final concerned look, she went down below to help Shade and Ryder while Gwen glared at her first mate.

Me rewe sore this vileine vaht le n'ah, tu le vahn!

Nemo righted himself up to chase after Skylana. Gwen's blade pointed towards his throat, halting him on the spot. He responded by swinging his sword as hard as he could to hers, hoping to throw her off balance. She let the momentum spin her sword around, but it soon found its place back at his neck. Their eyes met for only a brief moment.

In that moment, Gwen could no longer see any trace of her first mate. Whatever this thing was, Nemo was nowhere to be found. All she saw was a puppet reduced to its base instincts. It took everything for her to keep her composure. There was still hope. She just had to get them out of the range of the sirens.

His sword batted hers away and the clashing resumed. As much as this person fighting her was nothing like Nemo, he was exactly like him. Nemo was the only crewmember who stood a remote chance of taking on Gwen alone. He knew her every move, but she knew all of his. He knew exactly which step she would take. She knew which way his blade would cut. He knew how to counter her attacks. She knew how to block all of his movements.

The two pirates danced in the rain with Nemo trying to advance and Gwen never letting him. She couldn't allow him even an inch of ground, for his sake, more than any other's.

The next few moments happened slowly, as if in a dream. As they battled, Gwen watched three torrents of water fall from the above out of the corner of her eye. There was something off about these columns of water as they descended from the opening.

Perhaps it was the fact that they were singing as they came down.

When they splashed onto the deck, three feminine figures were left in the wake of each pillar. The only difference between the three was their figures. Otherwise, all three had dark markings on their faces, yet their skin shimmered like the sea. Their clothing seemed to consist of threads of blues and violets. The center being lifted herself up and her eyes gave a haunting stare that caught Gwen's eye.

That one glance from her proved to be fatal.

Suddenly, a sharp burning pain struck her in her abdomen. Her scream almost overpowered the thunder. She looked down to see Nemo's blade embedded just below her heart. The silver

edge burned within her, forcing her to her knees. Nemo let go of his sword, but left it inside of his Captain. Gwen collapsed on her side, trying to pull the blade out. Her screams echoed louder when the silver on the hilt burned her hands.

Her vision began to haze over, but she could see the shell of her first mate walk towards the woman who was singing a sweet melody. Gwen could barely make out the silhouettes of the other two beings that had now stood beside the first. One was taller and more lithe than the center woman, and the other was smaller with blazing red hair. They stood on either side of the first one and that haunting song was louder and clearer than before. The song might as well have been screeching.

Oh tendere creature!

Finally, Gwen pulled the sword out of her gut, but the pain left her immobilized. She could do nothing more than watch her first mate walk into the embrace of the siren.

Oh tendere creature!

“No,” she tried to command, but her word sounded more like a grunt. Nemo wouldn’t have listened either way. The siren’s voice had him completely enthralled. She welcomed him like a lover while the voices of the other two echoed her own. Nemo wrapped his arms around the siren as her docile hands caressed his face.

Oh tendere creature!

“Nemo... no...” Gwen tried again, crawling towards the pair. Blood garbled her voice and her arms refused to carry her. Soon, her vision began to darken and she felt like a force was compelling her to lie down on the deck. She tried to fight against it, but she felt her will and fortitude slowly being sapped away. Whatever it was, it was cruel enough to force her to watch Nemo lean into the woman and kiss her tenderly.

Sustane!

The waves around the *Fenris* crashed against her, rocking her to and fro, as if to personify the ecstasy the siren was feeling. Gwen watched her pull Nemo further into a lustful embrace, but something else was happening to the siren. It seemed like there were times when she seemed solid and other times where she seemed to be water. When she was in an aquatic form, Gwen saw her pull away for a brief moment.

Sustane!

The siren made a welcoming gesture as a dark wisp flew out of Nemo’s mouth. The other two sirens stepped forwards and collected the wisp almost gluttonously. The first one returned her lips to Nemo’s, and suddenly, he began to twitch like he was suddenly choking. Gwen watched his eyes opened frighteningly wide.

Sustane!

For the first time in several years, without the influence of a transformation, Gwen screamed. “GET AWAY FROM HIM!”

The screaming echoed throughout the storm long after she spent the last of her energy to do so. Through cloudy vision, the woman was now covered in... something... it was hard to make out. She felt someone tugging her and forcing her on her back. Warmth spread throughout her wound and enveloped her entire body. She briefly wondered if this was what it was like to die.

“Gwen, can you hear me?” someone shouted. Soon, her vision became clearer and she saw Shade and Skylana looking down at her. She looked back toward the horrific scene, only to find Ryder with an arrow nocked and pointing towards the two sirens who clung to each other amidst a fit of wailing. The one that had taken Nemo was now frozen in a block of ice with an arrow sticking out of her chest.

Nemo lay lifeless on the deck at her feet.

“We meant to pass through here peacefully,” said Ryder in a sylvan tongue. “Your presence is unwelcome on this ship. Return what you have taken and leave us be. You can take your sister whole or in pieces. Your choice.”

The sirens cast a wicked glare towards him and let out a sickened scream similar to a banshee’s, yet nowhere near as lethal. It seemed like a defiant command, yet Ryder never lowered his bow. His glare towards them was much darker than theirs. Finally, the taller siren took the black wisp and walked over to Nemo’s body, opened his mouth and let the wisp return to its home. His body swelled as if taking a deep breath to confirm that he received it.

Ryder turned the bow towards the barrier and loosed an arrow against the ice. Upon impact, a booming sound shattered the ice wall into tiny pieces that were blown away by the storm, giving the sirens the freedom to leave. An angry wave crashed down on the ship, enveloping the three sirens within, then receded back into the ocean like the tentacle of a great leviathan.

The skies calmed into a light rain and the seas quelled into a gentle rocking. The fog lifted, unveiling to the crew how incredibly near they were to the shore. Skylana was thankful she mastered the waves long enough to keep them away from the rocks. Gwen staggered up and rushed to her first mate still lying on the deck. Skylana embraced her own companion tightly.

“I’m sorry Sky,” he began before Skylana hushed him.

“Don’t be... You couldn’t help it,” she replied with a soft smile. “We’re safe now. That’s what matters.”

“Nemo? Nemo!”

The elven couple turned to find Gwen back on her knees shaking Nemo in her arms. He had not opened his eyes yet.

“What’s wrong?” Ryder asked.

“Nemo’s still unconscious,” Shade quickly replied. Ryder and Skylana looked to Gwen, surprised that she could move with how serious her wound was. Skylana had barely finished healing it before she went to her first mate.

“She gave him back his soul! Why isn’t he waking up?!” she cried. She looked up to Ryder and Skylana, hoping they could answer her. The two remained silent. They could say nothing to help her. Even if they had never encountered sirens before, they could guess what was wrong. They knew it was too late.

“They’re gone, Nemo!” she tried to coax her fallen comrade. “Wake up! I’m ordering you to wake up! You need to get back to work!”

Slowly, the rest of the crew was making their way up towards the helm, wondering who was screaming. When they arrived only to find their Captain slapping her first mate in an attempt to rouse him, none of them dared come closer. It wasn’t that they didn’t want to get anywhere near their Captain.

They had never seen her in hysterics before. They had no idea what to do.

“Please, Nemo... She gave you back your soul... You can’t leave me now...”

“WAKE UP!”