

Chapter Thirteen – Drowning In Sorrow

Icy raindrops stirred Talis from unconsciousness. When he finally opened his eyes, it took some time before his foggy vision became clear. His head spun so terribly he thought he would be sick. He rolled over onto his front and stood on all fours until the dizziness wore off.

Slowly, he pushed himself up to stand. The last of his lightheadedness faded and he finally noticed he was not in the place he remembered being. He stood on the quarterdeck watching some of Gwen's crew untangle themselves from ropes. They seemed to be suffering the same confusion, but they seemed nowhere near as ailed as he did.

He tried to call forth some healing magic to ease his weariness, but nothing came through. His hand did not glow the same soothing light that he would usually summon. He checked himself to see if there was anything like the coin that debilitated his magic, but found nothing. Panic settled in. Why was nothing happening?

He took his first step towards the nearest crewmember, one whose name he did not recognize.

"Hey!" he called out. The stout crewman turned towards him as he shook the last of his coils off of him. "Do you know what the hell happened?"

"Sirens," he huffed. "Caught us all off guard. The girls managed to snap us out." Bewilderment covered Talis' face. He knew of the sirens' power, but could they take away magic as well? In the midst of his panicking, he felt a dull pain along his body. It would have gone unnoticed if the focus points were not perfectly aligned up his body.

"Why do my charkas hurt?"

"Sounds like Shade." Talis' eyes widened at the thought of one of Gwen's own crew possessing this ability. Noticing his face going pale, the crewman shook Talis' shoulder. "Don't worry. S'only temporary. Give it a bit o' time and you'll have your magic back."

"Why was it taken away in the first place?" he asked, highly annoyed that there was yet another way to disable his magic (and this method was much more painful). The crewman shrugged, angering Talis further. He spun the stout boy around, clutching his doublet. "Answer me!"

The boy's hand flung to Talis' wrist and trapped it in a vice-like grip. His eyes caught a glimpse of something above him, causing his hand to relax. He even let out a chuckle and pointed above him. "Probably 'cause of that."

Talis looked up to where the crewman pointed to see gaping holes burned into the sails. The edges were charred and some embers still flared on the sides. Even part of the mast had some cinders in the wood. It was a miracle they were still intact.

Humiliation spread across Talis' face. Out of the three mages, he was the only one that could have commanded fire with that much destructive force. With such damage to the sails, their progress would be greatly impeded if they were not repaired and he was unsure how much magic was used this morning between the three.

Before he could apologize, they heard screaming from the sterncastle.

"WAKE UP!" Talis turned quickly towards the voice.

"The hell?" he asked. He failed to see the crewman go white.

"Captain..."

"What?" The crewman didn't bother to clarify. He bolted straight for the stairs. "What is it?" Talis quickly followed him and found the crew gathered around something. The wailing was coming from within that group somewhere. Ryder and Skylana stood outside the gathering in a

tight embrace. Skylana had her hand covering her mouth; she looked as if she would burst into tears at any second.

He made his way through the crowd and saw something he never expected to see: Gwendolyn Gwilt, red-faced and nearly in tears, shaking and slapping Nemo, who lay limp in her arms.

“What happened?” he asked the two mages.

“Siren’s kiss,” Ryder replied solemnly.

“You mean..?”

“They returned the soul, but not before they poured their breath into him.”

Talis’ face turned grim as he looked towards a lifeless Nemo. “Sky, why haven’t you pulled the water out?”

Skylana shook her head as she tried to hold back her own tears. “I’ve used too much magic in this short time. By the time I’ve recovered...”

The alchemechanical gazed towards Gwen and the rest of the crew. Many of them had removed their bandanas while others remained frozen on the deck. Gwen’s attempts to awaken him began to slow. She soon grew exhausted and now stared at Nemo with hollow eyes (Talis had also noticed the red stain on her chest). It was apparent that she did not wish to give up on Nemo, but there was a growing feeling that there was nothing she could do anymore.

Talis might not have been able to use his magic, but perhaps he could still help.

“Move!” Talis ordered as he shoved the crew to the side and made his way towards the captain. He slid on the wet deck as he knelt beside the two and reached for Nemo. “Give him to me!”

“No!” Gwen pulled her first mate away from Talis, her vigor somehow renewed. Talis kept reaching for him despite her protests. “Don’t touch him!”

“I can save him!”

“Keep away from him!”

“Cap’n, I took his magic away,” Shade interrupted. Talis was grateful that someone was willing to accept help, but Gwen’s knuckles were turning white. She needed to give him up soon.

“I do not need magic to save him!” Gwen glared at him with reddening eyes. He could see the conflict she was struggling with, but he could not afford anymore pause. Nemo’s time was running out. He reached again for Nemo, regardless of her reservations. When she pulled away again, he huffed in anger. “Listen to me! I don’t care what you think of me or my magic, but if you want him to be saved, we can argue about the subject some more later! Until then, I need him right now!”

To his surprise, Hands placed an arm on her shoulder and a hand on hers. Ecks did the same on her right. They forced her to release her hold on Nemo and pulled her away. Gwen struggled against them, not wanting to leave Nemo’s side.

“No! Let me go!” she ordered. Other crewmen approached her to keep her away, including Crow and Shade.

“Cap’n,” Hands shushed. “There’s nothin’ we can do now.”

Talis could not focus on her drastic change of character when a life was slowly ebbing away. He adjusted Nemo’s position on the deck, laying him flat on his back and placing his arms at his side.

“Everyone stay back! I need space!” The men that tried to keep Gwen back obliged while the rest gathered as closely as they were allowed to observe.

Talis delicately lifted Nemo's chin and placed an ear near his mouth. Two of his fingers went to his neck, looking for something that showed life. No breath, he thought, and his heart is faint. The beating in his fingers gave him hope, but very little. There was still time, but it was running out fast.

He pinched Nemo's nose and opened his mouth as wide as he could, while still keeping his head tilted. Talis heard uncomfortable moans behind him as he poured his own breath into Nemo. His eyes focused on the first mate's chest, which failed to rise. His lungs aren't receiving the air. Though this was what he suspected, it was good that there were no other ailments to note.

Talis shifted again to Nemo's chest. He firmly placed both hands on top of his heart with their fingers laced together and his elbows locked. Using as much might as he could muster, he pressed down on Nemo's chest in a rhythmic fashion. Again. And again. And again, counting silently to himself.

After about fifteen compressions, he went back to Nemo's mouth and gave him more breath. When his chest failed to rise again, he went back to his chest and gave him another round of compressions.

Again. And again. And again. Still no signs of life.

Another breath administered. Still no rising.

Another fifteen compressions. Again. And again. And again.

Somewhere around his seventh set of compressions, he felt something like a rib cracking underneath his weight. He heard the men stirring behind them, trying to restrain their captain. She fought against them, saying that he was hurting him(he was far too focused to make out her words anymore). Talis couldn't let it stop him. With how hard he was pressing to keep his heart beating while trying to force the water out of him, a snapped rib was to be expected. He could be healed later. This injury only told him he was doing it correctly.

The elven couple and the grave crew watched Talis perform his ritual. Gwen eventually stopped screaming, but still kept her eyes on Nemo. Everything she had tried was powerless to save her first mate. Numbly, she watched Talis give Nemo another breath and return to the chest compressions.

After several more rounds, Talis saw no improvement in vitals.

"Come on, you bastard," he muttered under his breath just before releasing it into Nemo. "You're really going to end this here?"

Talis felt himself growing exhausted. He could not keep it up forever, but there was still no sign of life. One more bout of chest compressions, he thought. If nothing happens after this...

One... two... three... no movement.

The crew who had removed their bandanas placed them over their hearts.

Seven... eight... nine... still nothing.

Skylana buried her face in Ryder's chest, unable to watch anymore.

Thirteen... fourteen...

Suddenly, Nemo's body violently jerked and water sprang forth from his mouth, nearly hitting Talis in the face. He gagged and coughed as the mage turned him over on his side to let the rest of the contents leave his body safely. Talis wiped away the bile from his face and rubbed Nemo's back, coaxing the rest of the water out of his system. He finally took a deep breath of his own.

The crew stood abashed.

"The... hell happened?" Seamus demanded.

"Shade?" Zachary asked. "I thought you said you blocked his magic."

“I did!”

Nemo turned onto all fours, vomiting on the deck. Talis kept his hands upon him, waiting until he was finished. Skylana wiped her eyes as she and Ryder ran over towards Talis.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Skylana asked.

“I told you,” Talis panted, “I didn’t need magic to save him.”

“Is he gonna be all right?” Ryder stood on Nemo’s other side to help him up.

“One of his ribs is cracked, but that can be easily healed.” Talis turned towards the crew, still stunned at his resurrection. Talis let out a smile and enunciated his words. “He is going to be fine.”

When the realization that Nemo was not going to die finally crossed the crew’s minds, they rushed over to him to help him up. Nemo staggered, still coughing up water and bile onto the deck, but eventually stood tall. Dazed, he looked about his comrades as they praised his restored life.

“God, man! We though’ it was it!”

“Were there any pearly gates or sommat like that?”

“Don’ ever do that again!”

Nemo was still bewildered for a moment and could not process all the comments and questions being thrown at him (especially not all at the same time). He looked around at the ship’s damage, trying to understand what had happened. How did he go from steering the ship to nearly drowning?

Then his eyes met Gwen’s.

He had not seen that look on her face in ages. It was the look of a near-crippling loss, but instead of feeling happy that his death was averted, her face told little and remained cold. It felt like a knife twisting inside of him to have her stare at him like that. Whatever had just happened, it had just gone horribly wrong.

The crew’s celebration died down and the ship became quiet again. Gwen kept staring at him with stoic eyes. Perhaps her exhaustion of wrangling and fighting the crew and mourning over Nemo’s supposed death had made it too troublesome for her to emote anything. She wasn’t sure.

But she couldn’t look at him anymore. Her stomach turned worse and worse the more she did.

“Everyone...” she finally spoke, turning her face away, “back to your post... We’ve still got a ways to go.”

The crew looked confused. As she turned towards the main deck to her cabin, Hands stepped forward.

“Wha’ about the sails, Cap’n? ‘Ow are we s’posed to...”

“I care not,” she almost whispered with her back still turned to her crew. It seemed more threatening than when she barked at them. “Talis can fix his mistake if he has the energy for it. Just do it quickly.”

Without allowing another word in, she descended the steps, leaving a stunned crew on the sterncastle. Even the mages could not move to stop her. They remained frozen on the deck, staring after their solemn captain. The door to her cabin slammed shut and every crewmember flinched in some way.

“Well,” Talis sighed. “So much for a ‘thank you’.”

“She called you by your first name.” Talis turned towards Nemo’s monotonous voice, still staring after his captain like he did on the Deimos. His face was hard as stone. “That’s the closest you’ll get to one.”

The crew looked to Nemo, still as confused as when they saw him unconscious. There was a part of them that hoped he could bring some levity to the situation. But he failed to even turn to them.

“You heard her, boys. Get the oars out and keep us moving forward. We’ve still got a ways to go.” Everyone made their way solemnly towards the gun deck while the mages could only watch the event. It almost startled them when Nemo began speaking directly to them. “I suggest you rest, little elf. The wind’s at our back now. Not that it matters until that sail’s fixed.”

Skylana could barely speak. Mentally, emotionally and physically, she was exhausted, but she still wished to stay on to ensure that everything would be taken care of. Ryder squeezed her hand, hinting that perhaps his suggestion was for the best.

“How long until my magic comes back?” Talis quietly asked.

“An hour, but that’ll be some weaker spells. As the day goes on, your more powerful spells will come back. How long until you can fix our sail?”

Talis grew more and more uncomfortable as Nemo kept speaking in that dull voice. It was as if this was not the Nemo he had brought back to life. As the first mate went towards the helm, he picked up a blood-stained sword where Gwen had been laying. He stared at it for a moment before wiping the blade clean and sheathing it. Talis could not see the sickened expression on his face.

“An hour.” A nod from Nemo was all it took. The three mages made their way towards their cabin, careful to keep out of the way of the crew preparing to descend below. Before they closed the door to their cabin, they saw Nemo’s face, still stoic and cold as his captain’s. His smile would not return that day.

After an hour, Talis’ charkas had healed and his magic was useable again, though it fluctuated at times. Still, the need to set sail was urgent. He spent the majority of whatever magic he had left mending the sails, but could only use one spell at a time.

He decided to focus on the Mending spell, but since it required contact with the damaged material, Talis had to climb up to them. For some reason, he felt more uncomfortable with heights when he could not fly than when he could. Perhaps it was the ability to control his own movement that made it easier.

Seamus and Ecks had to pull him up the ratlines for him to make any progress and secured the ropes tightly for him to make the necessary repairs on the sails. The process was tedious and took far longer than it should have, but by sunset, the sails were fully restored.

Skylana spent the entire day resting to regain her magic. She would not awaken until sometime after nightfall if she were to guide the ship in the right direction. The previous battle had drained more magic than she was used to using. Ryder kept vigil over her the entire day, ensuring that she was comfortable and undisturbed.

It was not until sunset when he went to obtain food for the three. Against his better judgment, Talis accompanied him, provided they locked the cabin behind them. The two shut the doors quietly and tiptoed towards the entrance to the gun deck. Talis prepared his force magic to quietly open the door.

“Oi! You two!” The two mages froze on the spot before they could reach the stairs to down below. Ryder disdainfully turned to the speaker.

He saw the one they called Zachary motion for the two of them to advance to the crew that remained outside during the night. When he saw Hands, Shade and Crow amongst them, he and Talis approached the shady crew.

“What do you want?” he asked with a barbed voice.

“Have some o’ this.” Zachary tossed a bottle towards Talis quickly. Ryder’s reflexes kept the bottle away from his face.

“Do you people never give proper warning?” Talis angrily asked. A shrug from Zachary was the only response. Ryder rolled his eyes to examine the bottle, which held a dark liquid within. He uncorked it and sniffed the contents. The sweet smell filled his nostrils. “You sure you wish to drink that?” Talis asked warily.

“Don’ worry, boyo,” Hands assured. “We’ve no reason to poison ye, unless ye think we want Cap’n Gwilt down our throats.”

The threat of their captain’s wrath did surprising little to quell Talis’ concerns. Ryder, however, took a careful sip of the dark liquid.

“Ice wine?”

“Yer girl said she liked it,” Zachary confirmed. “It’s for savin’ our sorry asses.”

Talis turned towards the crew shocked. “You’re... thanking us?”

“Well, yeah. She was the one who kept our ship from sinkin’,” Crow clarified, and then motioned towards Ryder and Talis respectively. “Then you drove the sirens away an’ you brought Nemo back. Dunno how you did it without magic, but... yeah.”

The rest of the crew nodded in agreement. None of them dared to speak their gratitude, but the gesture alone was enough. Ryder looked back to the bottle. “I’m sure she’ll be very thankful,” Ryder responded before he motioned for him and Talis to leave.

“You’re not staying with us?” Shade’s tiny voice perked up, halting the two. “We’ve got some stronger spirits if you prefer.”

Both mages simultaneously turned towards the young pirate, their eyebrows heavily raised. The two gave a brief, wary glance towards each other, speaking a silent conversation about the validity of her offer.

“Thank you for the offer,” Talis began, “but we just needed to get something to eat.”

Seamus immediately turned around and produced three platefuls of some sort of slop. “Got some for ye right here.” His thick Irish accent made the offer seem jovial somehow. “Sides, Scarbeth’s down there. Don’t wanna make it awkward for ye when ye hafta pass him on the gun deck.”

“Why are you being kind to us so suddenly?” Ryder asked with suspicion.

“S long overdue, don’ ye think?” Hands replied. “We’re stuck together for a while... an’ yer helping us out. May as well get to know each other.”

The slightest hint of hesitation had Crow digging through the bottle crate and pulled out another green bottle, this time, with amber liquid inside. “Perhaps some Irish whiskey will do the trick. Bottle’s all yours if ye want. Got plenty more in here.”

Quicker than a spark created by flint and steel, Talis turned around and eyed the bottle. It had been ages since he had a drop of any alcohol, and his alchemechanical mind was taking a toll on him.

“Well,” he began turning towards Ryder, “if it is poisoned, I always carry antitoxin with me. If something happens, we can just ingest that.”

Ryder sighed heavily and looked at the wine bottle still in his hand. “I’ll just make sure Sky gets some when she wakes up.”

“Atta boy,” Hands commended, welcoming the two into the fold. Shade took Talis’ hand and bade him to sit next to her while Ryder took a seat between Hands and Crow, the two crewmen who he seemed to trust the most.

The more Talis and Ryder remained with the crew, the more their uneasiness wore away (although some of that may have been attributed to the wine and whiskey). The night crew entertained the mages with stories of the sea while Talis and Ryder told them of far away places. They paid particular attention to Ryder’s accounts of Altea, where his people lived in safety.

They had barely noticed how much time had passed. The sun had set hours ago, yet they still exchanged stories with the crew, who had already finished at least one bottle and had become much more open about their lives.

Shade was the youngest and greenest member of the crew. Her parents were killed by bandits long ago and she ran away from her home town. During her travels, she befriended a monk from the Silk Road who taught her how to fight using precision techniques. They were so effective that by the time she had met Gwen, she had her try the new technique on a mage they had recently captured. When they found out he couldn’t cast spells after Shade was done with them, she was instantly recruited.

Crow had grown up in the streets of London, but he was always fascinated with the occult. He studied it and learned many secrets. One day, a mage killed three young boys and pinned it on him, sentencing him to be hanged. Gwen heard that he claimed to know who really killed the boys and she asked him to lead her to him. He told her about the magic he used to kill them and what he might be capable of, so she brought him along after the real murderer was disposed of.

Zachary was the son of the master thief, Aleena Thorpe, who was better known as the Shadow of Scarborough (who acted like the Robin Hood of her town). She taught her son everything she knew, but she trifled with the wrong person. Using the skills his mother taught him, he was able to assassinate this mage, who was also a powerful lord. He’s still wanted in Scarborough, but Gwen found him, amazed at his skill. He’s been “on the run” ever since.

Seamus was part of a merchant crew whose ship was destroyed in a storm. Gwen passed this ship by and managed to save his life and a few other members of his crew. Once they discovered her secret, the majority of the crew left, but Seamus never forgot how she saved his life and had stayed with her.

Hands used to be a bodyguard for a crime syndicate in London. His master was cruel and vicious, and would torture his subjects if they failed him. He only failed once and learned that his master was another powerful mage, but he was also one of Gwen’s marks. He grew impressed with her ability to fell him so quickly that he swore his allegiance to Gwen. She needed some muscle on her ship anyways. He’s one of the crew that’s been on the ship the longest.

The more the mages talked with the crew, the less they spoke of their captain with fear. They always talked of her with reverence and gratitude for finding them and teaching them how to fight mages. Considering all of the horrors that they had been through, Gwen still showed them a world they could adapt to and live in, and they were grateful for that.

She showed them a certain kindness that neither of the two mages had ever seen from her before.

Ryder cast a glance towards the captain’s cabin, with soft candlelight as the only illumination in the windows.

“Is she going to be all right?”

“She jus’ needs a night. She’ll be right as rain tomorrow,” Zachary attempted to reassure. But the response came after too long of a pause to yield any comfort. No one around him even

attempted to back up his statement with so much as a nod of agreement. Just shifty eyes and long gulps from their bottles

“What about you?” Each of the pirates looked up to Talis confused.

“Wha’ about us?”

“You all seemed... you looked like you didn’t know what to do when she thought Nemo was dead. Have you never seen her like that before?”

The crew fell silent and looked at each other. Their fear of speaking about the captain in her absence was still present within them. The events of this morning may have given them the privilege of trust, but none of them desired to speak first. It was only hesitantly that Hands leaned forward to speak.

“Ye need to understand tha’ most of us ain’ part o’ the original crew. Even I came on only a few years ago. Some had left of their own accord. Others... didn’t.

“She killed them?” Talis inquired.

“Well, she didn’t.” Talis felt a shiver as he pulled his cloak around him tighter and took another drink of whisky as Seamus continued on. “But Nemo’s the only one out of all of us who’s from her original crew.”

“Are they... lovers?”

The crew glanced at each other before letting out small chuckles.

“Cap’n ain’t got time for sommat like,” Crow laughed. “Jus’ gets in the way o’ things.”

“Do you know how they met?” Ryder asked out of curiosity.

It took the crew a moment for them to speak, not because they were unsure of whether to tell them or not. They were trying to recall how the two met.

“Apparently,” Shade began, “Nemo’s family were hunters. Nothing special, just normal game. One full moon, he and the captain crossed paths. He could not kill her because his family was poor. No silver to use. So he avoided her the whole night. It takes a special kind of person to outrun a wolf. When she changed back and told him the story, Nemo agreed to help her. Been with her ever since.”

“S’not what I heard!” Seamus interrupted, seizing the focus of the crowd. “I heard she thought he was a mage sympathizer and hunted him down. When she learned the truth, she found he was a mage slave and took him away with her and created the whole mage-hunting party.”

“Nah! That’s not right!” Zachary shouted. “He was a mage slave, but so was she. They helped each other escape.”

The rest of the crew told his own tale of how Nemo and Gwen met, each one different from the last one in some degree.

“So... you’re telling me that Nemo and Gwen have been together for so long, no one even knows how they met?” Talis’ question was legitimate, but the crew believed otherwise.

“Don’ matter,” Crow responded. “He’s her favorite.”

“I dunno if ye’dcall him her ‘favorite’, but she’s known him the longest,” Zachary added.

“I would say something like that matters.” A raised eyebrow from Hands asked him to clarify. “The way you meet someone affects your perception of them. You would treat a person who was honest towards you and selfless in their actions from the beginning much better than, say, someone who tried to stab you in the back.”

Hands nodded and pointed his bottle towards Ryder. “Tha’s a good point, boyo. But think about it this way for a sec: yer elven girl. Ye’ve been together for a long time, right? ‘Ow would ye react if... Skylana’s her name? What if she died in yer arms? ‘Ow would ye react?”

Ryder paused, thinking about the events of the morning. He didn't bother to ask Skylana exactly what happened, but the implications were there. If something had gone wrong in that encounter...

"I suppose... I wouldn't react any differently than Gwen did."

"An' if ye met under different circumstances, would ye still react as such?"

The silence from the ranger told Hands everything. He took a smiling sip from his bottle.

"An' if ye need further proof, look at us. Day one, we all had swords pointed at yer throats while ye were ready to light our 'eads on fire. An' where are we now? Six days later, drinkin' under the stars like we've been travelin' together for ages."

Ryder and Talis started to realize just how surreal that scenario was. Never would they have believed they would be in this situation under the circumstances.

"It don't matter nothin' how Nemo an' the Cap'n met. They've got a bond that cannae be severed."

"I'm not saying I don't understand her pain. Not at all. I'm just..." For some reason, the next words seemed foreign to Ryder as he spoke "... concerned for her."

"Like I said: give her a day. She'll come around."

Out of the corner of their eyes, they all saw a tall figure walking across the deck. The light from their lanterns showed Nemo's face as he passed them by. His Cheshire grin was still nowhere to be seen on his face as he went towards the captain's cabin. Nemo didn't even bother giving the crew a passing glance.

"What about him?" Talis asked.

None of the crew could speak for him, but each took a swig from their respective bottles.