

Nemo had tried everything that he could to speak to Gwen that night. But her doors remained locked. No one on board had seen them open all day, nor had the light inside gone out all night. The crew tried to carry on with their duties, but there was a certain hollowness aboard that no one, not even the mages, could seem to fill. Scarbeth had caused little, if any, trouble, but no one was certain if it was because he had been spoken to twice on this journey or because of the encounter with the sirens. He performed his duties as ritualistically as the rest had. Ecks had tried later that night to leave some food out for her, but come morning's light, it remained outside her door untouched.

Nemo couldn't have blamed her sudden seclusion. He had tried washing her blood off his blade as soon as the incident ended and the crew had made their way again. But no matter how many times he ran it through the water or rubbed it with a rag, the scent of her blood would not wash off. Just knowing that his will was not strong enough to endure a siren's grasp was a failure as her second-in-command and as her closest friend. He couldn't imagine what she had been doing in her cabin with nothing to accompany her but her loathing.

He had tried to speak to his captain several times the day before, but she had refused to come out. They were going to reach Carnac soon. He could have waited until then for her to emerge, but when would he get the chance to speak to her again? Would she still be the same captain that had been with all of them or would she be willing to fail just to end everything?

When the knocking failed that morning, he tugged on the doors, futilely hoping they would give. He let out a listless sigh when they did not open. With anxiety filling him, he pulled Zachary away from his duties and asked him to use his set of tools.

"You're not thinking of..." he began, but Nemo had cut him off.

"You know what I'm thinking and you know you cannot sway me. I'll tell her I forced your hand if you're that fearful of her retribution, but I need to get in there, so open those doors now."

A moment's hesitation from Zachary instilled a sense of dread in Nemo. Fortunately, he knelt in front of the lock and worked his own magic. In less than a minute, Nemo heard the click and sent the boy away from him. Nemo looked back towards him to see that everyone on deck was watching him. Though the look of apprehension was evident in their faces, but so was that of understanding. He saw Seamus nod once towards him before heading up towards the crow's nest. With the supposed approval of the crew and a renewed resolve, he opened the doors and went inside.

The cabin was barely lit inside. Still, he could make out the marks Gwen had left three nights ago. The dismal room felt even more chilling than before. He never had fear of entering, but a new trepidation had come over him now. She had always tried to keep the cabin at least remotely organized, but there was new damage to the cabin. Now, there were broken bottles and overturned chairs. The sheets on her bed were almost torn completely off and lay crumpled on the floor. There was new damage to the portraits and the broken mirror now had shards scattered at its base.

The curtains had been drawn, barring all light, but the brightest candle stood on the bureau near the back of the cabin. His captain sat calmly, keeping her eyes on the maps. She hadn't even acknowledged his presence, but she knew he was there. Her breath stilled for the slightest moment.

Despite the dimness in the cabin, Nemo could see that she had not changed her bodice,

nor had she attempted to repair it. The wound was barely closed and left a deep red scar across her abdomen. The stains on her chemise and bodice seemed even darker than before.

“Captain?” he tried to say as humbly as possible. He knew he had some fault in all of this.

“What do you want?” she responded curtly. Nemo flinched a bit. He knew she did not wish to speak, but it had to be done.

“Can we talk?”

Gwen stopped her work and froze for a minute. She never looked up to him. Her eyes never left her maps. He saw her fingers on the quill tighten, turning her knuckles white. When she finally took a breath, she still kept her head lowered, but responded, albeit in a cold, almost inhuman, manner of speaking.

“Make it quick. That encounter might have thrown us off course. I need to ensure we are still on the right path.”

Nemo leaned on the bureau, giving more pause before beginning. “About yesterday...”

“Talis did some fine repair on the sails.” Gwen had cut him off quickly, as if their conversation never happened. He didn’t even think twice about the compliment she paid to a mage. “That should put us back on track. If Skylana can keep the wind up, we should still be able to make it by sunset. We could go into the town and replenish the supplies for the journey home...”

“Captain!”

“If we let her recuperate for a little longer, we could still make it before the moon is at its peak and still have her at full strength to open the gate. We could restock in Carnac the next morning. I want you to keep in touch with Ryder. He knows her best and can tell us if she can start as soon as she awakens. She should have had enough rest already, but I want to ensure she is at her prime...”

“Captain.”

“Of course if we do make it there early, perhaps Talis can have time to analyze the Font. See if we can figure out precisely how it works. I’m going into this blind. I have no idea what to do once we find it. I need to know exactly how it works so that I –.”

“Gwen...”

Her fist slammed down on the inkpot and shattered it at the mention of her name. The black liquid mixed with warm blood spread from her shaking fist, blotting out the maps she was studying so meticulously.

“Don’t...” Her voice shook and her shoulders were tight. Any breaths she took became low growls. “God damnit, Nemo, do you even know that I can still smell my blood on you?”

Nemo recoiled slowly. “I’m sorry Gwen. I thought I was strong enough to...”

He heard the slight breaks in her breath that grew into soft laughter. Her fist clenched and unclenched, soaking it in ink. “You think what happened was your fault? You think that your will was too weak to resist them? Of course it was. All of yours were, but that is no fault of yours. I should have prepared for this. How could I have not prepared everyone for sirens?”

“We’ve never encountered them. You cannot blame yourself for this.”

“We’ve been to so many places around the bloody continent! We’ve heard the lore so many times over! I should have prepared you for this!”

“Don’t you start now!” Nemo almost yelled, slamming his hands down as hard as he

could. Gwen glared at him, taken aback by his sudden outburst. He prowled around the bureau until he was standing over her. "I get it. You hate this curse and all it has done to you. You want this gone more than anything in this world. Do not think for a moment that there is no one who knows this better than I." He leaned in to wrap his fingers tightly around her wrists on the chair, staring her down like a wild animal. She had been avoiding him all day. He would not let her escape him this time.

"But do not dare to take all of this upon yourself. I bloody *promised* I would help you. I would care for you. I would see this through until the end, and for so long, you've let me fulfill my promise, but do not even think for a moment that I am not as responsible as you are! Do not deny me that! I took that responsibility when I made that promise, so let me bear it!"

A fire began to grow in Gwen's eyes. He felt her struggling against him, but he had always been stronger than her. He wondered how long it would take until she lashed out at him, but he had to make her hear this.

"Do you have any idea what you have done for that crew out there? You have saved each and every person out on that deck and they are all thankful for that. They all would die for you! It is because of what you have done for them that they would do anything for you, and right now, they are terrified for you, Gwen. Not 'of you' like you might think. 'For you'. They fear they have lost their captain because of something that's never happened to anyone. But they all have learned from it and now know how to protect themselves from sirens. Your crew is smarter than that and you know it. It is not fair to them that you abandon your duties as captain because you feel sorry for what happened yesterday. You are far better than that!"

His conviction had been so strong that Nemo had not even noticed her wrists were no longer on the arms of the chair. He didn't even realize that she was standing. In fact, he was struggling to keep her pinned while she remained calm and still, her arms now perpendicular to her body. When he finally saw that she had forced herself to a standing position, his strength waned away and he released her.

Her face never wavered.

"Do you understand now?"

Abashed and awed, Nemo could no longer find his words.

"This strength is not mine, Nemo. I may be strong, but even you know I'm not that strong."

"How long?" was all he could think to say.

"Several months... mayhaps longer." Nemo sank down into the chair across from the bureau. "It wouldn't come often, only in extreme cases. I would just get a surge of power and I could lift things I couldn't lift before. I could knock people unconscious if they made me angry."

"Do you know what this is?"

"I told Nais about it in confidence when we brought her and her kin back to Bristol from Venice. She said that it happened with other lycanthropes. Because I'm trying to destroy this curse, the wolf finds it hard to try to assume control, but she's said there have been some instances with others whom have accepted what they were. She likened it to the wolf... coming out..."

It hurt her to say it and it struck him as hard to hear it. "What do you mean 'coming out'?"

"She said that in human form, the wolf will still respond to its surroundings and try to

react. Some humans might mistake this for instinct and, for all intents and purposes, that's exactly what it is. But if they enact, they can perform feats no human could. And it happened yesterday."

Gwen never moved as she spoke and her voice became more sullen.

"When you were all... possessed, I could think of nothing more than keeping you on the ship. The first time was when I entangled you all on the steps. Hands was at the front and all I could think of was getting you all together... I was afraid of losing you to the sirens. I did something that would seem foolish to a rational mind. I used the ship's momentum to leap over you, get the rope around you and pull with all my might. It seems absurd for any human to pull off anything like that, but regardless, I pulled Hands and all of you down the steps. I shouldn't have been able to do that.

"The second time... Seamus, Nicholas and Zachary were climbing up the ratlines. I could have just chased after them, but I knew I had to beat them. So I climbed up on the underside of the ratlines... they were already halfway up the top when I began and I beat them to it. Not even in my prime could I do that."

Nemo's rubbed his eyes and rest his head in his hands. Nothing could have prepared him for this. Now it was him who could not look at her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm enough of a monster as it is, Nemo." Before Nemo could try to protest, she continued. "Being human and proving that I'm still human is what has allowed me to endure all these years. To know that I could repair the damage that the wolf had done while I was myself made it bearable. But now, the wolf is seeping its way into my waking life. It takes over me, and as much as I try to resist it, I do not always succeed. If anyone had discovered that I can no longer control this wolf within me, do you honestly think that the rest of the crew would stay with me? If the wolf began to take over, can you honestly say that they would not leave or try to kill me?"

Nemo had no words to answer. How could he? While the crew was thankful, they were helping her defeat this curse. They knew how to overpower her when she was a wolf. Would it be the same if she were human? It was easier when she was a beast, but could they wrap silver chains around the wrists of their captain?

Yet somehow, he found the will to stand against her once again. His hands cupped themselves around her face and forced her to look at him. Despite the anger, her eyes were red once again. He saw no tears from her; his captain had never cried.

"Gwen," he spoke softly, drawing her close to him, "you are human. You cannot let anyone take that away from you. Not even yourself."

"It's taking over me, Nemo. I want it gone. I cannot let this endure anymore."

"And we're so damn close to the end. We cannot and we will not fall apart anymore. You've endured this curse for so damned long. What's another day compared to that?" The captain's eyes dropped to the cabin floor, catching a glimpse of the scar that he had left her under the sirens' spell. A gentle hand lifted her chin back up to him. "You are Gwendolyn Gwilt. You will make it to the end. One way or the other."

Those words should have been a comfort, but Gwen forced herself to smile. *One way or the other*, she thought.

"Now, can you please do something for me." She would miss his voice if the other came

to pass.

“It depends on what it is,” she replied.

“Rest now. You’ve got a long day ahead. Please... for me, at least.”

She sighed, relieved for that whole conversation to finally be over. It was a relief to finally tell someone on her ship who could understand, but still, she feared what the end of the day would bring. She nodded once, enough to satisfy her first mate. Nemo let out his grin once again and turned to leave the cabin.

She never saw him bite his lip as he turned away. He never heard the sob from her as he left.

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The wind was at their backs again the rest of the day. Skylana was fully rested and offered to expedite the ship even further, but many of the crew decided against that. They wanted her and Talis to be at full strength, so they were forbidden from using any magic on the ship. Despite the restriction, it was good to know that it was for a legitimate and beneficial reason other than fear.

When the evening was preparing to fall, Skylana sat up near the bowsprit, letting the wind caress her hair. She did not mind the spray of the sea. In fact, she had started to enjoy it. It was different than the woods she would roam, but there was a tranquil feeling to it. It was nice to have that sense of peace back on the ship again.

The crew stirred when Nemo had asked Zachary to break into the captain’s cabin. Some even argued amongst themselves if that was a wise decision on his part. They knew better than to disturb the captain, but some argued that it was better for someone to speak to her rather than to let her stay inside, especially when they were so damn close to the Font.

The crew expected to see it at any moment. They had made excellent time this past week with Skylana’s help and everyone on board had a sense of anxiety and excitement about them, even though no one had any idea what was supposed to happen.

Still, Skylana finally took the time to enjoy the peace she had. It was the first time in a week since she had one.

“I see you’re enjoying yourself.”

The elven maiden turned to find Ryder and Talis climbing up to meet her at the ship’s bow. It was good to see that they were more comfortable roaming around the ship as she was

“I never realized how good a sea breeze felt.”

“It’s good to know *someone* is enjoying this sea journey,” Talis replied half-snidely. Skylana could only laugh at him. Despite how much better most of the crew had been treating him, Talis still was not used to the sea. The sickness would come over him sometimes. She was surprised that he was lasting as long as he was out on the deck. Still, all he received from her was a playful smile as the lanterns around the ship began to ignite one by one.

“So we’re almost coming up on it,” Ryder remarked as the three looked out towards the cliff faces they were near. “At any moment, we’re gonna finally see what this Font Garoux is all about.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that,” Talis noticed, catching that cynical demeanor in

his voice.

“Not unhappy,” he defended. “We still are entirely uncertain if our plan to open the Font was the correct way to do it.”

“Unfortunately, this it is the only solution I can think of. In truth, you should know moreso than I.” Skylana looked back towards Talis confused. Defensively, he shrugged and continued. “You have far more experience with the Paragons than I ever did. You had nearly an entire summer. I had, mayhaps, a day or two.”

“So we’re still going with our plan?” Skylana asked. “Just choose a spell that one of the Paragons taught us and we’ll be good?”

“That’s my hypothesis, at least, though if we wish to be safe about this, we should use a large spell. Mayhap something that affects an entire area would work much better. If it affects the environment, it might be better. Do you have one in mind?”

“I think so,” Her nod was quick, yet reassuring. Her chosen spell was one that Nais had taught her back in Bristol before the Dragonborn had even hatched. After she and Ryder were named Guardians of the Egg, Nais and Terranus had begun to reveal some of her magic to those inducted into the Lunar Tribe as Aria and Ignis did for the Order of the Sun mages. “Nais taught me how to master the waves, though Bristol was a poor practice with such a shallow port. I’ve never attempted it in open ocean waters before.”

“Then it seems we shall be making a maelstrom to make even the sirens envy us,” he proudly declared. “I think Aria’s Gale spell will do for this,” he replied. It was a simple spell, but powerful enough to knock a few Draco Disciples out of the way.

“So the female Paragons have the better spells then?” Ryder playfully chided.

“Even if that were the case,” Skylana turned to her companion, “doesn’t it make sense to use the elements already around us and in abundance?”

The men supposed that it did, but before they could continue their conversation, a familiar voice interrupted them.

“The captain wants to speak to you.”

The three turned around to see Nemo halfway up the forecastle steps. His smile was still chillingly absent. Skylana slipped off the bowsprit and onto the deck, fearing she might be doing something she would be warned against.

“Is she well?” she asked.

“She is,” Nemo responded before his gaze turned to Ryder, “but she wants to see you.”

Skylana and Talis exchanged looks between Nemo and Ryder and each other before Ryder replied.

“Just me?”

“Just you,” Nemo echoed.

“What does she want me for?” All he got for a response was a shrug and a quick answer.

“You’ll have to ask her.” After the message was delivered, he descended back down the forecastle, making his way to the helm.

Ryder, Skylana, and Talis each felt their hearts skip a collective beat. No one was talking about Gwen or her mood. A sense of dread came over them when they realized that they only needed two of them and not an extra Lunar mage. They almost feared what she would ask the

spare.

Still, the ranger turned towards the captain's cabin, giving his companions a reassuring nod. Skylana let out a concerned breath while Talis replied with his own nod. As Ryder made his way down the steps, the crew was focusing on their own work, but each of them had glanced down towards him. It did not impede their duties, but knowing that they knew he had been summoned, he was unsure if that really made him more uneasy. When he approached the oaken doors, Ryder knocked only once before hearing her grant him permission to enter.

Inside, he saw Gwen standing next to her bureau in her full regalia. Her bodice had been replaced with one that shimmered yellow-green hues. Her chemise and underskirt were darker than the blackest night, but the overskirt that was hiked up to show off her knee-high leather boots and ebon pantaloons had the same dark maroon hue as her bandana. Her shoulders lay bare, letting the world see the bite marks on her left shoulder and giving a taste of the ones that decorated her back. Her necklace shone bright in the darkness and would have been the sole illumination were it not for the oil lamps in the cabin. On the bureau next to her seemed a plain crate, the contents of which Ryder could not yet see.

"You look much better," Ryder complimented.

"Stick to your sarcasm," she replied half in jest. "It suits you better than simple flattery."

"What do you want from me?" He asked. She gave out a slight smile before leaning on the bureau.

"Your two companions have not been using magic today, have they?"

"No. Your crew's been certain that they don't use any magic. And for once, they're not being asses about it." His arms crossed and he leaned back on the door.

"Good to know," she nodded. With as much elegance as she could possibly carry, she walked around behind the bureau. "We should be nearing the font soon..."

"Look, before you tell me why you really brought me here..." Gwen's eyes darted back to his, "I need to know if you're going to have a clear head going into this." After seeing her eyebrow raise, Ryder walked towards the bureau. He half hoped to see what was in the box, but when he approached, he saw that there was a cloth bundle at the bottom.

"When we found out what you were, you promised us no more secrets. No more lies. I need to know if you're going to let what happened with the sirens is going to affect you. We may not know what kind of danger we're walking into, but I'd like to know that danger will not come from you."

Gwen could have laughed at the audacity of the act. He had grown quite bold on this ship. Her hand went to the edge of the crate and she squeezed it lightly.

"If you promise not to bring up the last thirty-six hours, I can promise you no harm will come from me or my crew."

It was an odd request, but considering how the crew had lightened up after Nemo had talked to her, it was the best he was going to get. His nod allowed her to continue.

"Besides, it is because of tonight that I summoned you here." It was Ryder's turn to raise an eyebrow. "What has Nemo told you about the Font? I was unconscious when he wove that tale."

Ryder remembered when Nemo brought her unconscious body into her cabin as all was revealed that night. He pieced together everything that he remembered being told through that

adrenaline-filled night.

“It was made by the Lord of Light as a healing font and that when you entered it, you would do battle with your wolf. If you won, then the curse would be broken and you’d be completely human again. If you failed...”

“Then the wolf will take over and I will be trapped as a bloodthirsty beast forever,” Gwen completed for him.

“And you told us your crew was ready to carry out that task should the worst happen.”

Gwen let out a small laugh as she took the cloth bundle from the crate. Ryder watched her hands tighten around the material.

“Could you do it to someone you’ve spent most of your life with? Could you ask them to put you out of your misery?”

Ryder was taken aback by the question. The hypothetical simulation of Skylana’s death (though Gwen did not outright name her this time) had come up before and it was giving him a foreboding sensation. “What is this about?” he demanded.

“My crew, as you might have observed, is loyal to a fault. I have brought some of them back from the brink of oblivion and they have sworn their eternal allegiance to me. I thought it would be simple for them to carry out a task that I had given them, but when I truly think on it, I am all they know. To give them the power to destroy that which they have dedicated their lives to, no matter how I rationalize it, it irresponsible and cruel on my part.”

The cloth bundle had been placed on the bureau and casually slid towards Ryder. Hesitantly, he uncovered the contents. He froze when he saw ten arrowheads, their silver sheen glistening in the light.

“So you’re asking me to destroy it?”

Gwen’s fist clenched, as if this was the first time she was accepting this harsh truth. “In essence, aye. That I am.”

Ryder could have burst into laughter at that moment. “You haven’t thought this through, have you?” Normally, Gwen would have given him that fierce gaze he grew accustomed to, but she continued looking downwards. “You say you don’t want them to destroy you because of their loyalty and yet you let a mage, something they have dedicated their lives to hunting and hating, to do it for them? You don’t think that’s going to reaffirm their hatred of us?”

“Do not think I had not thought of that—”

“Then why ask me to do this in the first place?”

Here, Gwen’s gaze returned to him, but there was less ferocity and more stoic determination. “You never answered my question.”

Almost without hesitation, Ryder responded. “I would do what I could to make sure that Sky was a peace.”

“I never said anything about you putting her out of her misery if she needed it,” Gwen reminded. “I asked if you would place that burden upon her to put you out of yours. Could you trust that she would do it and ensure that she would remain the woman she is now?”

Ryder’s speechlessness betrayed whatever confidence he might have had. Never had he encountered a situation where anything like that could happen. As a result, he had never truly given it any thought. If she had put him out of his misery if she needed to, how could he say that Skylana would still be who she is? He had confidence that she would, but how could he truly

know?

“I cannot ask my crew to take on that burden. I cannot take the chance that if they hesitate for a moment that I could kill all of them. I’ve put them in enough danger by letting them on my ship.”

The ranger took one of the arrowheads in his hand. The metal was unscathed and the blade was sharp. With enough power, he could kill her right now if he wished to. But magical prejudice aside, the crew had taken a chance with them and gotten to know the mages, and vice versa. It didn’t seem fair to deny them the choice that he had no right to make to begin with.

“Let them make that choice then.” Gwen blinked. It was rare to catch her off guard. “If they are going to lead a life without you, then they need to be able to make the hard decisions on their own. If that is going to happen, then at least give them the chance to prove that they are still worthy to set foot on your ship. Show them that you trust them enough to do that.”

Gwen looked at him long and hard. She did trust her crew. She had even asked before this quest began if anyone did not think they could do this with mages on their ship that they could freely leave. Yet they all stayed with her. She did not understand it at first, but she was thankful they all did, even Scarbeth. Still, she could not leave it up to chance.

“And if they cannot?”

Silence cut through the cabin like a knife. Ryder folded the arrowheads within the cloth before taking them. “Then you have my word that none of them will pay the ultimate price for their loyalty to you,” Ryder swore. She nodded in unspoken thanks. It was all she could do.

Suddenly, a loud scream of muffled words rang throughout the ship. Gwen’s breath stilled for a moment before they both rushed towards the main deck.

The whole crew was making their way towards the ship’s bow. Ryder and Gwen rushed to see what the commotion was about, though they already knew.

Off on the horizon, the setting sun illuminated a large cliff face. The waves broke upon the rocks, letting the light showcase its full spectrum of colors. While the cliff above was sharp and jutted out towards the sea, its base was more hollowed out and a small cove was carved into the rocks. It was small enough to only allow longboats to enter, but near the back, the dark mouth of a cavern swallowed whatever seawater had made its way over the rocks that protected the cove.

Despite the grim façade of the cove and cliffs, there was a warmth that everyone felt, particularly the mages. Their own power seemed to resonate and vibrate in reaction to this energy. It felt powerful, but it also felt familiar. It was the full, raw, and combined power of the Paragons. This was the magic of the Lord of Light.

The *Fenris* eagerly sailed towards the Font Garoux.