

Being underwater was always a strange feeling for Gwen. Her movement was awkward and she could not move as quickly as she wanted to. And that was when she submerged herself willingly.

In her hypnotic state, she was swallowed by the Font Garoux. Her eyes remained open, staring up at the now fading moonlight, but her body could not move. The intent was there, but the actions never came. Her breath remained stilled, but she wasn't sure if it was because she was trying to hold her breath or she could not have taken one even if she tried.

The weightlessness against her immobilized body felt strange to her. Somehow, she knew she was still sinking, but the pool was much deeper than it had originally seemed. Her mind screamed at herself to swim upwards. Even though it would be incredibly difficult with her clothes, she knew she had the strength to surface had she the capability. But she didn't know how to interpret what was happening to her as she struggled for air that was rapidly running out.

All she could do was gaze at the treacherous moon that led her into a trap. As she sank deeper and deeper, she knew that she needed new breath, but it would not come. Her chest burned as they tried to expel the air. She wondered if it would be this painful were she drowning in water instead of air. It was somewhat frightening, but the moon, strangely, gave her comfort. It was almost satisfying knowing that if she died tonight, at least it would be in her own mind, not that of the beast.

Just then, the moonlight grew more and more brilliantly. It seemed as if the moon had descended into the Font, itself. Gwen found this light to be a slight comfort. Even if she was dying, at least it wasn't in darkness.

Before long, she felt like her very skin was beginning to shed off of her. Her clothing, her weapons, even the necklace she wore felt like nothing to her, as if they had just melted away. She no longer felt the weight of her own body holding her down. With her breath almost expired, she swam as quickly as she could up to where she could breathe again. She didn't even notice that she was swimming faster than possible, or that it seemed more like she was floating rather than swimming. It didn't even occur to her that her chest felt no pain anymore.

When she broke the surface, her arms flailed for a brief moment to keep her body afloat. Gwen opened her eyes and looked around. Somehow, she knew that she was still in the Font Garoux, but she was surrounded in bright white light. There were no barriers. No rock. No one from her crew remained. All she could see was the pool that she was emerging out of.

It was when she looked down at her hands that she slowly began to understand.

The water still shimmered brightly, but felt a firm surface with her hands. It flowed over her fingers occasionally, but they would never be submerged. She didn't feel ice (nor any sort of temperature for that matter), but the surface definitely felt solid to her. She pulled herself out of the water and sat herself down, expecting to go back under, but she remained above. Somehow the water kept solid under her weight. When she fully emerged from the pool, her feet would not go back under. They stood perfectly flat on the surface.

She reached for her cutlass to see if she could penetrate the surface, only to find it missing. In fact, everything was gone. She stood in the Font, naked and vulnerable, her hair dangling in front of her face. But she felt no cold. Even in the cave, she could feel the chill of November's wind, but now, she felt absolutely nothing.

Then, it hit her. She looked back down into the waters hoping to find something, but it

grew darker and darker the further down it went. She wasn't even sure how far down she was before she got out, but Gwen was almost certain that somewhere down below, her body lay down there somewhere.

It made sense, in a way. In order for her spirit to do what it needed, her body had to release it. She had heard of others who were able to place themselves into a deep, meditative state and will their spirits to roam outside of their body for a short time. However, being one of no inherent magical talents, she never learned how to do this. The only way her spirit would be released would be if her body had died.

Somewhere in that water was her dead body.

Now, her spirit roamed the Font Garoux unhindered and alone. The solitude was disorienting; there were not that many times in her life when she felt this isolated. Of course, there were times when she locked herself in her cabin on the *Ferris*, but she always knew that her crew was nearby. Perhaps she was too used to having them around, but knowing that she was on her own was incredibly disquieting. Part of her wanted to call out for them, even though she knew that there would be no answer. This was the first time in, perhaps, a very, very long time that she was truly and utterly alone.

Suddenly, she felt... something. Her senses didn't work like they did before. She relied on her sight, hearing, or scent to become aware of her surroundings. This "sensation" superceded all of those. Everything seemed like a sensation to her, but not a tangible one. It was just "a feeling".

She had "felt" another presence that had manifested in the Font with her. It was behind her. It wasn't waiting for her before. Perhaps it had just sprung up; she wasn't quite sure. But she already knew what it was. For so long, she had waited for this very moment. The primal force that waited behind her was the only thing standing between her and freedom. She only wished that she had kept her effects. *Figures*, she thought. If their souls were fighting, why would she use an earthly possession?

Now was the time. There was no more room for delay. She took one deep breath and turned to face the wolf.

Gwen had heard stories about when she had turned. She never liked hearing them because of the horrible deeds that she did as that thing, but each one was the same as the last. They saw her as a hulking behemoth of a wolf-monster that prowled on all four legs. It ran with incredible speed and dwarfed the size of any wolf that stood next to it. Its teeth were like scythes that could tear through metal. Its fur was the same color as her dark chestnut hair, but was matted and often stained with blood. If someone survived long enough, all one would see is bloodlust and hunger in its terrible eyes. It was, for all intents and purposes, the very definition of a monster.

This was not the creature that appeared before her spirit.

A lonely wolf sat on the opposite side of the Font Garoux, watching her. It was the size of a normal wolf one would see in the woods. Its fur was decorated with brown and white with splashes of gray. The eyes were round like the full moon, but shined the color of honey and were not full of the animalistic rage that she heard others tell about.

It just sat there. Watching her.

*This can't be real*, she thought to herself. *This is it? This is what I must subdue?* Gwen

looked around, wondering if this was nothing more than a sick joke of the gods. Was this part of the trial? This could not possibly be her wolf. Her wolf was a horrifying creature that killed so many people indiscriminately. What was this little thing doing here?

She nearly let out a chuckle of disbelief. If this was her wolf, then perhaps this would be much easier than she had anticipated. There would be little to no struggle. Part of her felt it was strange that all she had to do was kill a normal animal. It almost seemed slightly unfair; at least if it were monstrous, it would actually feel like a challenge. But she wanted the curse to be gone. She had to be free of it, whatever the cost.

Gwen advanced towards the wolf, anticipating a charge. She dropped into an aggressive stance and took heavy steps in its direction. The wolf stood up, but instead of charging her, like she expected it to, it tried to retreat.

She paused, confused by this. Why would it do such a thing? There was no reason for it not to try to attack her. This was the manifestation of her affliction. This wolf... this curse... had caused so much misery. Why would it not try to take over her? That's what monsters did, right? They dominated their prey. What reason did it have to fear her?

Or perhaps this is another trick to let her guard down. She would see an innocent animal and when her defenses were lowered, it would attack her. Gwen shook the innocent act from her mind and steeled herself again, nearing the wolf, but still it retreated.

The white void around them gave no discernable barriers. She wasn't sure how long she would have to do this, but it wore thin very quickly. If she kept pressing, it would shy away forever if it could. She had to try something else.

Though the very notion seemed odd, Gwen started to entertain the notion that this was just an animal. Her aggressive stance might have been putting the creature off (though she was baffled as to why it would do so in the first place). Her form relaxed slightly, allowing her to stand in a more natural pose. She rolled her shoulders back, opening up her posture to the wolf. Finally, she crouched down on the balls of her feet, making herself seem as small as she could.

It took note of the change in size and stature and seemed to relax a little bit more. She extended her hand out, hoping to entice it. Deception was something that humans mastered very well, and she was an expert in the art. To her, looking demure and helpless was something she excelled and she had deceived many others, leading them to their deaths.

Her ruse fooled the wolf and it neared her slowly. It sniffed in her direction, trying to weed out any hint of malice within her. But Gwen kept calm and relaxed every muscle in her body. Finally, it got close enough to sniff her hand.

This was the moment; she seized it swiftly.

With both hands, she clutched the wolf's neck as tight as she could and forced her weight upon the beast. She could either strangle this beast to death or she could snap its neck. Either way, whether she waited or acted, it would be over. The curse would be lifted. Everything would be safe again, like it was before.

Gwen tried to ignore the cries the wolf made as its breath was being taken away. She tried to hold on tight as it attempted to escape her deadly clutch. She didn't care that it wasn't even trying to hurt her to escape. It just kept wiggling in her grasp. It kept whimpering as much as it could.

*Don't let go*, she kept telling herself. Freedom was so close.

The wolf's cries were growing fainter. Its breath was almost gone.

*You've almost got it. Kill this beast!*

Its struggling became weaker.

*You're human. Prove that you're still human!*

The wolf opened its eyes weakly and Gwen became caught in its gaze. She expected to see a monster trying to fight against her. She tried to block out the cries and struggle, but those eyes revealed everything. She didn't see a beast fighting for dominance. Only a scared, defenseless creature, silently begging her to let it live.

She didn't understand. It was supposed to fight back. It was supposed to be a beast. Why was it just lying there waiting for it to die? Why was it pleading with her?

The more those whimpers rang through her ears, the more she tried to squeeze tighter around its neck. *This is a trick*, she told herself. *It has to be. It's only trying to make me feel sympathy for it so I'll let go and it can kill me.*

But those eyes... She knew those eyes all too well. She had them once before; they were there the moment she was turned. They were there when she had first met Nais. It was always there when the fear of the monster was present. The monster that she became.

The monster that she...

Her grip loosened upon the wolf and it slowly brought itself out from under her before bolting away. Gwen froze, staring after it.

"Damnit," she breathed. "Damnit! Damnit!" She stared wide-eyed and confused. "You are nothing but a beast. This should have been easy!"

The wolf turned to her as she began to ramble. The moment their eyes met once again, her speech halted. Despite her rage, the calmness in its eyes finally made her see.

And she laughed.

Her laughter reverberated throughout the cavern. The haunting echo of her mad cackle flew across the void, making it seem even more hollow. The more she laughed, the more unsettling it seemed. Even the wolf began to cower further away from her.

But she couldn't help it. The greatest irony of them all had just slapped her across the face. She had spent the better part of twenty years trying to kill this monster. Despite everything she did to suppress it, it only tried to take over when she had delayed the change too much and had to let it out. Otherwise, it never tried to control her in her waking life and yet she did everything in her power to cage it. The silver cage and the whistle were all her idea. Even teaching her crew how to take her down was all part of her plans. Her heart had hardened so much over the years, filled with anger and hatred for mages and the creature she became that she barely remembered what she was like before it all started. She could not remember a time when she wasn't angry about something. Her emotions always remained hidden from the surface, but they always stirred deep within her. Her anguish and despair drove her to keep fighting. In the end, it was all she knew how to do.

That's why the wolf was afraid. It made sense now. This was no ruse of the gods. This was not a diversion. She had been trying to kill this animal for so long and now she forced it into a confrontation. It had every reason to be afraid of her.

"It's not fair," she declared through her laughter. "You were supposed to be the monster." She lifted her gaze towards the wolf, which soon became clouded by angry tears, the first time

they had flowed in so long. Her voice began soft before slowly building up to a roar.

“You killed my mother... my father... countless innocent people. You are the reason my crew fears me. You are the reason that I had to be sealed away every month. Every scar I have on my body is because of you. You have been the sole cause of my misery for almost twenty years! I have tried to live my life as normally as I could, but you were always there. You destroyed me every single month! You made it *impossible* to go back to my life! I cannot love as I wish because they would be dead the next morning and I would be covered in their blood *because of you! I live in fear of you!* It should not be the other way around! It’s because of you that I am this way! *You* made me into what I am now! Why shouldn’t I hate you? Why can’t I kill you?!”

Furiously, Gwen splashed the water from the pool towards the wolf, who retreated further back. Gwen collapsed on the ground, burying her red face in her hands. Her tears freely flowed, dropping into the water beneath her. Her sobs echoed as much as her laughter and her screams did, but hearing it reverberating only added to her sorrow, making it more real.

“Why must I be the monster?”

She sat in the sound of her own sadness surrounding her, begging for an answer that would not come.

In her grief, she nearly missed the wolf slowly approaching her. The shadow underneath its front paws caused her to look up to the wolf. Again, it flinched when their eyes met. This time, Gwen could feel its anxiety. It was afraid to come close to her, yet there was something compelling it to do so regardless.

Gwen stared at the wolf for what seemed like ages. As long as their eyes remained upon each other, a sense of empathy enveloped her. It was foreign to her to feel anything else for others, let alone an animal. It didn’t need to speak and she knew exactly what it would say.

“We’ve been together for too long,” she sobbed, “haven’t we?” It merely gazed back at her, almost asking to elaborate. “I should have known when Nais told me about the merging that I would fail. The moment I started using your strengths... your speed... your senses... I knew. I was becoming you more than I was willing to admit. In truth, it started long before I told Nais. I was too damn proud to tell her otherwise... but I think she already knew.

“I tried to use your abilities for good. I would not use it to kill innocents; only to protect others... my crew... but I thought I would lose myself if I surrendered to your instincts. I would lose everything that made me who I am. I am Gwendolyn Gwilt, the most feared woman on the seven seas. No one, not even a wolf, would take that from me.

“But the little girl I once was died a long time ago. She died when she was attacked by those... And no matter what I do, no matter what I say, she will never come back. She’s gone... forever... Lost to the curse... as I am.”

Her body relaxed, staring down at her darkened expression in the pool beneath her. The ripples from her tears obscured her reflection. She waited, yielding to the animal by opening her arms, giving a clear shot at her.

“Do it...” she whispered, waiting for the inevitable.

She sat for forever, but the wolf didn’t move. It stood straight in front of Gwen. Her reddened eyes lifted up. Red-stained and watery, she silently asked it.

*Why? Why will you not kill me?*

She watched as the animal extended a leg out, bowing its head towards her. She stared back, hollow and lost. The wolf never took its eyes away from her, but the fear it once had was gone. In its place was deference.

It did not want to fight anymore. It never did.

For some reason, there was a sense of admiration that grew within her. Despite what she might have been to it, the wolf no longer showed any apprehension. It was as if her admission made her less of a threat.

She had embraced the power of fear among her enemies that she thought it to be better than admired. Even among her own crew, she believed their loyalty was out of fear and was not true devotion. She knew that she was a monster, yet others continued to follow her. No doubt her crew awaited her once this outcome was decided, but even though they told her countless times why they did, she still did not understand.

Tired from the strain, her arms dropped to her side. The wolf straightened itself up and took cautious steps towards her. She watched with anxious curiosity, wondering if this was the final moment.

A soft nudge came to her cheek as the wolf's nose sniffed her. Gwen stiffened, but relaxed when its chin rested on her shoulder.

Her eyes went wide, confused as ever. But soon, that wariness ebbed away. Her mind ceased all logic and her heart flowed freely. She closed her eyes, gently placing an arm around the wolf's neck. She kept it loose enough to not be a threat, but tight enough to beg it to stay. Her face became buried in its soft, warm fur and her tears poured down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry."

The wolf lifted its head and howled with pride. Somehow, that howl gave her strength again, like a clarion rousing its troops, filling them with courage to face the dawn. She hugged the animal tighter, nuzzling its neck.

The Font Garoux began to brighten around her until the light was blinding. Gwendolyn Gwilt clung to her wolf, who was still howling when the light enveloped them both.

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It was almost too bright for anyone to keep looking at it. Everyone shielded their eyes as the image before them faded away into white. After several moments of sheer brilliance, the light quickly faded into the dark cavern, letting only the moon illuminate it once again.

When the crew and the mages looked about the cavern, they no longer saw Gwen before them, nor the wolf that stood before her in the dark waters.

"What happened?" Ryder asked.

"Did it work?" Crow tugged at Talis' shoulder.

"I... I'm not sure. Wasn't she supposed to kill it?"

"Where the hell did they go?"

Nemo stepped forward, assuring himself that it was over, but praying that this was not the end of his captain.

"Gwen?!" he called out. All he heard was the sound of his own voice. The waters remained still and the light still shined down upon the pool. Still, his eyes kept towards the Font.

This could not have been it. It couldn't have.

Suddenly, bubbles preceded the eruption in the center of the Font followed quickly by a loud gasp for air that rang throughout the cavern. The crew saw their captain rise from the surface of the water before her head bobbed in and out of sight, struggling to remain afloat.

Nemo dove into the waters for her. Her heavy clothes and effects were weighing her down. Swiftly, he sliced through the waters towards his captain, grabbing her from behind and pulling her back to shore. When her head was above the water, she coughed hard, her entire body seizing with each one.

He got her to the edge of the pool where the crew swarmed around her to see if she was all right. Even the mages gathered into the fray.

"Are you all right?" Skylana asked among others who began with similar statements. But Gwen ignored them all. On all fours, she coughed up water that she was choking on, staring at the luminescent stone. Her hair stuck to her face, but it took some time before she wiped it away.

Every voice around her had been muted. She didn't look up to her crew; she was still feebly attempting to understand what had just happened. She did not kill the spirit of the wolf, yet it did not kill her. What did this mean? Did she fail? Did it just agree to leave? Nothing made sense anymore.

"Gwen?" Nemo's soft voice finally broke through to her. Slowly, she turned to face him, his emerald eyes hoping for answers. "What happened in there?"

Her body shivered now that it was able to feel the cold again. She turned to everyone around her, all waiting patiently for the answer to the same question. Gwen looked down to her hands, almost surprised to see herself.

"I'm... I'm still here?" she gasped.

"Aye, yer still here," Hands assured, "But... Captain? What happened?"

Moments went by before she could even conceive a possible response. She was just as much at a loss as they were.

"I... I met... my wolf..."

"We know," Ryder interrupted. "We could see you." Gwen knew that she should have been shocked, but she wasn't sure if she had the energy to convey any more emotions.

"Could... could you..."

"Hear you?" Talis finished for her. "Every word."

Gwen could not bring herself to even look up at her men. Shame washed over her like a tidal wave. In her grief, she had let them all down. They finally saw her for what she was.

"Then you already know the answer. You saw it... I was..."

"Cap'n..." Scarbeth tried to reassure, "tha's not true."

"You'd think that... You've seen the misery I've caused. I've taught you all to fight against mages, but it was fueled by my own hatred. My anger turned you all angry... and I cannot do it anymore. I'm tired of fighting..."

No one knew what to do or say. None of them had seen their captain so vulnerable.

"So... if no one was killed, what does that mean?"

Skylana's question snapped most of them out of their bewilderment. "We knew what would happen if one of them was killed, but she left it alive. And the wolf didn't seem like it

wanted to fight either. So what happens now?”

Everyone stirred, looking to one another now that the question they were all thinking was said aloud. Gwen opened her mouth to try to give a response, but no words came forth. Only a small shrug from her shoulders served as an appropriate response.

“Was this even supposed to happen?” Ryder asked, almost indignantly.

“Actually, yes.”

The strange voice caused everyone to spin around. Before anyone could register what had even happened, it seemed as if a giant, unseen hand swept half of the crew and Skylana to one side of the cavern. Her staff tumbled on the cavern floor as she flew. They hit the wall hard and some of the men let out a roar of agony as their bodies slammed against protrusions on the cavern wall. All of them were pinned several feet off the ground by some force.

The other half didn't get a chance to see what hit them as Scarbeth shouted a warning quick enough for them to dodge away from the jet of black fire that rushed towards them. Talis looked towards where the flame originated, but among the chaos, he failed to notice the flintlock that was pointed towards him, but Ryder did. He pushed Talis out of the way just in time, intercepting the bullet in his left bicep. The black flame encircled the group and began to slowly shrink, trapping them all within.

Gwen remained in front of the pool, frozen in the suddenness of the event. Perhaps her emotional state caused her senses to fail her, but for the first time, she felt helpless to defend her crew.

Finally, her eyes turned to the entrance to the Font, where a group of men slowly started to emerge. There was a sense of familiarity among these men, but it was the woman in the center of them all that drew her attention. Dressed in commoner's clothes, she had one hand extended towards each side of the cavern. Her left hand curled into a claw-like shape while the other had a black flame floating above her palm. The same black flame that surrounded her crew. Her ruby lips curled into a sinister grin while her cat-like eyes glared at her.

Standing proudly next to her with an equally vile grin was a young man pointing a smoking flintlock towards the group surrounded by flame. His demeanor bore a hint of serpentine deadliness as he stood in dirtied red and black. His ice blue eyes pierced through the cavern. Gwen thought she heard Skylana gasp and Ryder's pained voice cry out an exclamation of surprise, but she couldn't hear the word he used. The man's smile grew even wider, and his voice dripped with venom as he spoke.

“Congratulations, Gwilt. And thanks for letting us in.”