

The Tale of Gwendolyn Gwilt: Chapter 4 – My Body Is A Cage

Carynne Dati

It was hard for Skylana to sleep that night, but when she did, it was hardly pleasant. The cold wasn't too bothersome thanks to the heavy cloak that Gwen had given her. The events of last night had her mind riddled with thoughts before she finally succumbed to sleep. She kept dreaming of how she could conduct herself on the ship. Every scenario either had Ryder pulling his dagger and starting a fight, Talis throwing someone overboard with his telekinesis and starting a fight, someone throwing her overboard and starting a fight or Hands stepping between her and the everyone else and starting a fight. Every solution seemed hopeless. It was a wonder how she made it to morning.

She rose from her hammock and yawned as she stretched her arms out. It was good that the sea was calm at this time so that she didn't fall out of the hammock. Skylana had adapted to her sea legs adequately enough. She could not say the same for Talis. He had looked a little green ever since they left port in London. He kept a bucket near his hammock last night when she told him and Ryder of the events of last night. It didn't make Talis feel any better to know that even the crew was afraid of their captain. Ryder, surprisingly remained silent throughout the night, not saying a word even after he returned from his watch.

Skylana stepped out to a dim morning light, expecting to see the crew bustling to work. Instead, she stepped onto an eerily silent ship. Even the waves didn't dare to produce any sound. As she looked around, all of the crew was looking towards the captain's quarters like a vigil. No one was willing to move or speak until the doors opened and their captain (or someone) emerged from within. The silence itself was hypnotizing, drawing her in. She wanted to open those doors. She wanted to see what was inside...

"Sky!" She jumped at the sound of her own name, waking her a second time. Talis' voice always had a booming quality to him, even when trying to be quiet. She always thought that was just the Order blood within him. She slowly made her way to her companions, not taking her eyes off the captain's quarters.

"What's going on?" she whispered. Even she was afraid of breaking the silence.

"We don't know." Talis replied. "We woke up not too long ago and they were just staring like this. They haven't taken their eyes off those doors in at least a half hour."

Indeed, the men had stared, almost zombie-like, towards those doors. Little, if any sound emerged from it. Skylana looked around the deck, praying that she might be able to find someone who could help. Anyone with any sort of insight...

"The hell are you all lookin' at?" The harsh voice cut the silence like a knife as Nemo emerged from below. Some of the crew flinched, but not everyone's gaze had broken from those doors. Nemo took note of this and smiled again.

"Be lucky you ain't the one in there, gents. Now get back to work!" The whistle cut through the morning air. One would think that was what broke the spell that kept the men looking at the doors to the captain's quarters, but the threat was obvious enough. All three of the mages could see it.

Without warning, Skylana began to weave through the crowd of men making her way towards Nemo, despite Ryder and Talis' protests. They were able to pass through the crew with greater ease than expected. Men who saw them coming stopped what they were doing and backed away. Each of the men's eyes held either fear or contempt, but it was not enough for them to lash out at them. Skylana tried not to look at them. She only focused on her target.

"Nemo!" she called out, almost expecting him to keep walking. Fortunately (or unfortunately depending on perspective), she saw his teeth peering out from under his unkempt mustache.

"Good mornin' my dear," he began in an almost too cheerful tone, as if he didn't just yell at the rest of his crew mates or threaten them. It caused Skylana to pause, giving time for Ryder and Talis to catch up to her. "It's good to see that you are still unharmed. I assume Hands was good to you then?" His sneer would have caused an itch in Ryder's fist had Skylana not explained Hands to him already.

"He was fine, sir. What's going on? Why are all the men so quiet?" The first mate let out a chuckle that only made his smile seem more sinister.

"I told you that our captain made it clear to all of us that you three are not to be touched or harmed in any way. One of our crewmen apparently didn't quite understand the message." *Scarbeth*, she thought to herself. A chill went down her spine. "Our captain is making certain that understanding is not breached again."

"Isn't this a little extreme?" Talis asked. He tried playing the devil's advocate, hoping that Nemo might let something slip. To his disappointment, Nemo shrugged his shoulders and his smile only grew larger.

"Better safe than sorry." Nemo casually looked about the ship to his crew mates as they each performed their duties. With nothing left to tell the three, he gave a polite nod before heading down below, Ryder, looking after him. He noticed that as soon as Nemo passed the crew, they tried to sneak a peak at the doors, still wondering what could possibly happen. From the looks on their faces, they almost didn't expect to see *Scarbeth* again.

"I think this matches what you found out, Sky. They're afraid of her."

"But we still don't know why," she argued. Skylana watched as the men continued to walk about the deck, occasionally glancing at those doors. It should have relieved her to know that he was in trouble and that Gwen did have their well-being in mind (at least that's how it seemed), but she couldn't help but feel guilt rising in her. If there was trouble on the crew, especially with *Scarbeth*, it might as well have been her fault. She almost regretted even going up to the men last night. If she hadn't...

"Then I think it's time we did." Ryder's words snapped her out of her thoughts and caused her to break her gaze with the crew.

"What are you talking about?"

"I mean doing what we're good at. We look for something that might tell us more about Gwen. Hell, more about this entire crew would be nice."

"I agree," Talis chimed in. "If no one is going to tell us what we're getting into, we may as well figure it out ourselves."

However, Skylana was torn. Scarbeth was called because of how he conducted himself to her. She no longer wished to cause any more tension on the ship than she already had done. If they were caught sneaking in places they shouldn't be, all the trust that she had been trying to accumulate could be lost. She considered it luck that Hands had even warmed up to her.

Before Skylana could say a word, a creaking noise rang out above the winds. Every head on the *Fenris* turned towards the captain's quarters, where the sound came from. The door had creaked open and out came a pale, sluggish-looking Scarbeth. Half the crew breathed sighs of relief, happy to see their former crewmate had returned unscathed. Even Hands, who was ready to throw him overboard the night before, seemed pleased to know that he had made it out of the beast's maw safely.

Scarbeth's eyes looked tired and worn, as if he had just stared into Death, itself, and dared not blink. It almost made Skylana pity him. Suddenly, he looked up and caught her gaze. Her elven eyes allowed her to see what Ryder and Talis could not at that distance. She expected him to scowl at her with hatred in his eyes, but something was wrong. There was something about them. Perhaps it was the redness that she saw around the whites of his eyes or the fact that they looked like empty, soulless windows. He just stared at her with a blank expression, as if there was nothing he could do.

It was here that Skylana knew Ryder and Talis were right. Even if the crew feared their captain, no one was going to tell them anything. Not even Hands was willing to comply with her when she asked him last night. These men might be afraid of the power their captain holds, but none of them would dare to speak of it. No. There was no other way. They had to know.

"All right," she sighed. "What do we need to do?"

When night fell, most of the crew had remained within their cabins. After Gwen's little "meeting" with Scarbeth, none of them wished to anger her further. Most of them were happy (although very surprised) that he even emerged unscathed from the encounter with their captain. For Ryder, Skylana and Talis, this came with a slight benefit. Though most of the crew still had some contempt or fear of them, they didn't dare approach the three or even get in their way.

The wind had begun to blow to the east when night fell, so Gwen had asked Skylana to remain awake to help direct the *Fenris* in the proper course. She remained at the stern of the ship concentrating the magic she gained from Aria when she trained with the Paragons. As she cast her spell, she could not help but feel a twinge of sadness. She could have used Aria's cheerfulness right now to make her feel less anxious on the ship.

Her eyes glanced down the deck and towards the cabin quarters. There were not many men on deck this night and Gwen had already retired to her cabin. No one else on the crew would have been able to see it in this dark night, but her eyes saw the crack in the cabin door and a familiar stern face looking back at her, signaling that he was ready. Skylana blinked once to return the signal before muttering an elven spell she learned in Atlea. This spell would only work for a few moments, but if Ryder was half as good as he truly was, a few moments was all he needed.

The night was already dark enough even with the lanterns illuminating the ship. It wasn't long before the small group of crew members noticed a dense cloud heading their way. With the speed that Skylana was making the ship move, the *Fenris* was quickly enveloped in its thick coat, severely limiting their vision. One of the crewmen that Skylana did not recognize approached her in the fog. Her eyes were now illuminated and she spoke before he could ask what was going on.

"I'm trying to get rid of it. It should only take a few moments."

"Well ye'd best hurry. Wouldn't wanna get lost here, now would we?" She gazed at this man with her blank yet brilliant eyes. He stepped back to both stand his ground and distance himself just in case.

"No, sir... we wouldn't."

Ryder had heard some of the men stirring to their posts in a hopeful attempt to navigate through. Once he saw that no man was in sight, Ryder took this opportunity to make his dash for the door to the cargo hold. He knew there wasn't much time, but as long as no one was in his way, he would have no issue. Fortunately, this was the case. He had studied the deck during the day, noting every post the men took, every apparatus that lay on the deck, every barrel that was toppled over. He had studied well.

Ryder found the door to below deck and slipped inside seconds before the fog lifted away. He was somewhat surprised that he was able to sneak past this group so easily. Still, it proved to be more beneficial to him. This way, he could scout the ship and look for clues or possible traps in the ship. Perhaps there was something in this ship that hinted at Gwen's mystery sickness or why the crew was so afraid of a captain they claimed to be loyal to.

Though the waters were not harsh, he could still feel the sway of the sea gently rocking the ship. He was unsure if he felt it more below deck because he felt more comfortable in open air and did not notice or just because he was in a confined space that made him notice the movement more, but it momentarily caught him off balance. Fortunately, he quickly adapted to the rolling

ship and continued his descent towards the cargo hold. It took a moment or two before his eyes had adapted to the low light emitted only by dim lanterns. He had almost wondered how full-blooded humans could find anything in this light. There were times he nearly missed a step or ran into a crate or a wall. Thankfully, his cloak padded the harsh impact the wood would make on him, although the occasional sharp corner of a crate would hint at a later bruise.

As he continued his descent into the hold, he tried to find anything that would be considered unusual cargo for a ship. Vials of strange contents. Boxes with strange markings. Anything out of the ordinary would have sufficed. As Ryder made his way around, he knew he did not have much time left. He knew better than to assume the crew was in any way incompetent. It wouldn't be long before they suspected foul play and went looking for him. Ryder looked around to see if he could find any semblance of oddity. All he saw were more crates, barrels and a wine rack that was almost completely filled. He had to know what was inside them. As he closed his eyes, he whispered a small elven incantation to himself.

"Jhaer ti mi shar air codael shorol."

Upon opening his eyes that burned a bright green, he could now view the contents of each crate and barrel that he looked at. To his dismay, none of the barrels held foreign contents. Food and general supplies was all he saw. Some contained ordinary weapons for the crew, some were ordinary, but others had two metals like he saw before. As unusual as that was, it still wasn't a surprise for him to find more of those weapons. Other than that, there was nothing extraordinary. No strange artifacts, no odd poultices or potions, nothing that even barred his vision from looking into it. Everything seemed in place. There was nothing for him down here that would tell him anything other than this was a normal mariner's ship that was fully prepared for a long voyage.

He knew that he wasn't going to find anything more down here, but it didn't deter his resolve in the least. Ryder turned and made his way back up the ship, hoping to try to find some secret compartments. The more he traveled, the more disappointed he became. This ship was too much like a normal ship. With every solid wall protecting the vessel's contents from the sea, he grew frustrated. With every mundane item he saw, he grew more aggravated. Nothing that he was finding was worth anything.

Suddenly, something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. Ryder stopped moving forward to survey his surroundings and noticed that he was in the brig. As he turned around, he noticed the oddity was in the cell bars. Ryder moved closer to the cells to investigate, running his fingers along the cold metal. He uttered a second incantation to himself. "Tia jhol." A small orb of light illuminated his hand, allowing him to investigate. The edges of the cell bars were already rough and rusted, but it felt rougher in other places. As he ran his fingers along these rougher places, he brought the light up and noticed that the bars were carved with symbols. Not just symbols from one particular set, but many kinds. Norse runes, alchemical symbols, even a druidic script that he barely recognized. But he didn't need to translate any of the symbols to determine their purpose. This was a brig, after all. They were most likely used to disable all magics. To prove his point, he stuck in his hand that contained the light. Once his hand was

completely through the bars, his light was extinguished. He explored the rest of the cells to find they all were inscribed with similar runes.

Then he came across one cell.

This cell was located across from the other cells and stood alone. As he approached, he noticed that the bars were not inscribed in runes but there was something else that attracted his attention. Parts of the bars were stained oddly, almost like it was tarnished, instead of rusted like the other cell bars, indicating that these were not made of iron. His fingers wrapped around the metal and he felt a strange sensation on the interior of the bars. It felt rough and charred like leather that had been left in the sun too long. As he tried to get a look at what he was feeling, he noticed the strange patterns inside the bars. Some parts were metal, but there were other bits of red and black that varied in size and shape and were scattered on the interior side of the cell. He deftly moved around the cell to get a better view of what he was feeling. When he was finally able to see, he noticed the same leathery texture underneath his fingers. The more Ryder investigated the cell, the more he started to notice a faint smell. It was hard to make out at first, but it was slightly unpleasant enough to make his nose wrinkle a bit. The scent had faint traces of something like burned hair.

Suddenly his eyes widened as he put the pieces together. The leathery texture, the red and black charring, the way it stuck to the bars, the smell. This wasn't some decorative pattern on the inside of the cell.

It was skin.

Ryder quickly removed his hand from the bars and began to back away before he felt himself run into something he didn't remember being there. His hand flew to his dagger as he spun around to find Nemo's figure imposing on him. His heart stopped briefly. He thought that Nemo would throw him into the cell he just discovered. *He can try*, he thought to himself. Nemo stepped forward once as Ryder matched his step with a backwards retreat.

"I hope ye weren't planning on staying in one of these cells," he spoke as the two slowly circled each other. His manner unnerved Ryder. He seemed too aloof to want to imprison him, but at the same time, his words had a hint of hostility.

"No," Ryder said quickly. "I hope you were not trying to imprison me. It would not be a smart thing for you to do on your end." Ryder expected to see that grin that often draped across his face. But something was wrong. There was no smile. There was no laughter. Nemo merely nodded once and briskly walked past him towards the lonely cell.

"Yer lucky ye didn't get lost in this ship."

"I'm good at backtracking," he replied a little too quickly.

"I'm sure you are." Ryder was unsure of what Nemo's angle was now, but it confused him. He had assumed that his demeanor when he greeted them on the ship was his default mannerism.

This was a whole different side and too drastic of a shift. Ryder began to wonder his intentions until Nemo slowly stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder that was both comforting and menacing. He began to lead him back up to the main deck. “Next time, for yer own safety, ye might wanna think about an escort.”

Ryder gazed back at Nemo. He was almost positive he had just stumbled onto something he wasn't supposed to see. If that wasn't clear enough, Nemo's face made it crystal clear. His trademark smile was still nowhere to be found on his face. Its absence only made him more uncomfortable and cold. Ryder gave a quick nod before moving away from under his hand to the main deck. Nothing more needed to be said between them and Nemo returned below deck.

A long, exasperated breath escaped from Ryder. His heartbeat was almost erratic with this new information. What was the purpose of that isolated cell? Was it used for torture? He knew that these people were uneasy around magic and their captain was very competent fighting against magic, but just how ruthless were these people? He knew that the crew was still hiding a secret on the ship, but what puzzled him the most is how Nemo subtly explained it to him. At first, it seemed like a covert threat, meant to divert the path in a way without being intimidating. Then he remembered his face. It didn't seem like a man who would kill to keep a secret. His eyes seemed more like he was trying to protect him against some terrible force. It was as if discovering the secret would cause them to turn away, or the secret was even more dangerous than the mission itself. Ryder was unsure of it, but ultimately, he decided he found something worth reporting to Skylana and Talis. That was enough for him.

Perhaps, if they thought the evidence was valid enough, this might even warrant a confrontation.

The third day had come and gone quickly and uneventfully when Talis decided to finally approach Gwen. Despite Talis' urgings, the three of them had taken the day to go over everything they had figured out about Gwen. They knew that even with what they had discovered aboard this vessel, she was shrewd and would somehow find a way to avoid the questions. They had to assess their evidence to ensure that they had proper grounds to ask such questions and find a way to make her answer questions without coming off as a threat. Talis had stewed all of those thoughts in his head, but he had done everything the Lunar Tribe way. It was time for him to do things his way. He had to confront her.

On this night, the sky was filled with blackening clouds, but once again, Skylana was in control of the winds. As long as they stood in her favor, Gwen did not need the stars to aid her at the moment. Talis found her standing at the bow, letting the sea spray her face. He walked up silently behind her, but she had already turned her head sideways to meet his gaze. It unnerved Talis that she could always hear him coming. When she acknowledged his presence, her gaze returned to sea.

“We need to speak,” he began quickly.

“Come have a look at this,” she replied as if she hadn’t heard him. Talis blinked at her audacity.

“Did you not hear me?”

“I heard you, but I want to show you something.” Talis let out a very annoyed sigh and joined Gwen up at the bow. When he arrived next to her, he noticed what it was she was staring at. A lone ship was adrift some distance ahead. Talis eyed Gwen suspiciously.

“Is it unusual to see another ship out at sea?” he mocked.

“It is if it has not moved at all since it was first spotted. You’re supposed to be an intelligent mage. Use your damned eyes and tell me what you really see!” Talis rolled them first before looking a second time. It irritated him no less than it did the first time, but he still took extra time and did notice one peculiar fact.

“I see... nothing...” he breathed.

“Exactly,” Gwen confirmed. “No lights. No movements. No sound. The anchor has not even been dropped and yet it has not moved from that very spot.” Talis ran his eyes along what he could see of the ship. From what he could tell, it looked completely deserted. No signs of life were apparent.

“Was it attacked?” Talis asked, fearing the worst.

“I think not. If so, then the ship would be burning. Instead it looks as if every crew member just vanished.”

“So what do we do?” Talis asked.

“We investigate. See if we can find out what happened.” Talis raised an eyebrow to Gwen. This seemed so uncharacteristic of her as of late. She kept herself away from the mages for the majority of the trip, almost not caring about any other living soul. She even hid herself away from her own crew, only coming out to give a fearsome glare to each of her men, as if she were casting a spell on them.

Gwen turned back to catch his gaze. After a moment, she let out a sigh. “We also might commandeer any unused supplies if the ship is truly deserted,” she said. Every previous thought about Gwen actually having a soul was tossed aboard with that comment. Though she denied it, she was a pirate, albeit a resourceful one. Talis wanted to argue, but even he agreed that if there was something useful on that ship, then it should be put to use.

“You haven’t the slightest suspicion that it could be a trap?”

“If this was a trap, it would be one to use on richer ships to steal gold. Does this look like a rich lord’s vessel to you?” she retorted. “And even if it is a trap, they will regret springing it on

us." Gwen brushed past him to bark more orders at her crew. Talis immediately turned to follow Gwen, still intent on asking her several questions that should have been answered the moment they met.

"I still need to speak with you," he shouted after her. She had already passed Ryder to tell Skylana to cease her spell so that they could board the ship.

"It can wait until after –"

"No!" Talis boomed, grabbing Gwen by the arm and forcing her to stop. "You have avoided us this entire journey and we WILL speak!" He could feel his fire burning and Gwen could see it in his eyes. For once, his ferocity was greater than hers. The crew halted their duties when their captain's arm was snatched. Several hands instantly went to the hilts of their swords, ready to fight for their captain.

Interesting, Talis thought. *They fear their captain, yet they are willing to fight for her?* He began to wonder whether it was out of loyalty or fear that these men were about to draw their arms.

Gwen gave them all a look that stopped them from continuing. Once she made it clear that she was in no danger, they removed their hands from their blades and skulked around them to continue their duties, still keeping a watchful eye on their captain. She relaxed her arm and turned to fully face Talis as the boatswain whistled his commands.

"Fine. Speak," she spat out.

"I hope you understand how much I do not trust this voyage," he began loud enough for her to hear but hushed enough to let others know the intimacy of the conversation. "I have been in dangerous situations before, and nothing is more precarious than being kept in the dark when facing an important mission. All you've told us is where we are going. You've told us nothing about the place—"

"I told you it was magical."

"You never mentioned the sort of magic. For all we know, this magic intends to unleash a terrible force that could destroy the world in the process, but we will never know, will we? You refuse to tell us. You seem make sure that we do not even know what you are sick with." He noticed Gwen make a slight uncomfortable shift as his voice filled with rage. It was as if he had spontaneously inherited Ignis' fervor. He knew he was getting to her and pressed on. "We might have blindingly agreed to this voyage, but do not make the mistake that we are ignorant. We are far more observant than you give us credit for. We know about the cells. We know your crew's blades all have another sort of metal on the edge. Not to mention all the hostility we seem to be receiving from both you and your crew. Oh, and don't think we don't observe how the crew looks at you... how they talk about you." Another uncomfortable shift. For the first time, Talis swore he saw a hint of fear flicker in her eyes. "It's obvious that your crew consists of nothing but mage hunters, but you... you are more than you claim to be."

Gwen's breathing became hard and heavy, as if trying to contain something. "And what of it? You going to make me talk using your charming magic?" Venom filled her voice. She was trying to fight back, but Talis was onto her game.

"No," Talis replied. Gwen's eyebrows raised in surprise. "As you said, I would only be stooping lower than you to get what I needed." He took two steps forward, greatly imposing himself on Gwen. To her credit, she stood unflinching. "But know this: if, at any moment, one of us suspects that you are leading us to our doom because you have not told us what is happening, then we will be forced to defend ourselves, even if that means stopping you by any means necessary."

He leaned in close for Gwen to hear, but paused briefly when he noticed a small trickle of blood running out of her ear. A fine trail had barely reached below her earlobe and was slowly dripping downward. From how thin it was, Talis did not think it to be too urgent at the moment, but he deduced that this was a symptom of Gwen's illness and any sort of bleeding from the head usually told of an underlying physical condition. He began to rethink his opinion of her and started to see how genuinely in need she might be. She may be withholding information from him, but now he knew that this sickness of hers was no rouse.

It almost pained him to say it now that she knew she really needed help, but she was risking too much by her silence. He had to make his point clear to her. Talis had to look out for himself, Ryder and Skylana. "If you lead us to danger we cannot handle, we will leave you to die and I will take that scroll by force. Is that in any way unclear?" He expected Gwen to growl back or strike him. Instead, she slowly leaned back and wiped away at her ear, noticing the crimson blood on her fingertips. Her emerald eyes blinked back to Talis as she somberly nodded.

"I assume then you three are coming with me on this ghost ship?" she asked. Talis slightly cursed, thinking he had persuaded her to speak, but at least the conversation (or rather lecture) was not a complete loss. She knew how serious that ultimatum was. If he was lucky, she would tell them more later.

"I'm not certain this is a trap, but entire crews do not just disappear. There's bound to be some trickery, perhaps even magic."

"I can handle magic," she chided.

"Even so, you need some contingency plan," he responded back. "Besides, we're not letting you out of our sight anymore." He saw Gwen's face twitch into an annoyed smile before Nemo rushed up to her. Ryder and Skylana had also walked up to join Talis.

"The longboats are ready, Captain." Gwen turned her silent gaze to Nemo. Talis took this time to let Ryder and Skylana know that Gwen's silence still remained. That head shake annoyed Ryder, but only made him more stalwart. Gwen placed a hand on Nemo's shoulder and headed over to the longboats, Nemo following beside his weary captain.

"They're not coming along with us, are they?" he worriedly asked.

“Aye”

“Do you know what happened on that ship?”

“Nay.”

“Then why are you letting them come with us? There’s no tellin’ what could happen.”

“They’re not stupid, Nemo,” she sighed. “They know I’m hiding something. I should have expected them to find out before we reached Carnac.” They settled themselves in the longboats quickly and Gwen turned away from Nemo to face the deserted ship. Nemo absorbed the silence before speaking again. “I was hoping to avoid this...”

“So is that why you're bringing the whole crew?” Nemo’s words felt like a heavy load on her shoulders. “You know this is a trap.”

“I am not sure... If not, then there is no harm in leaving the ship unprotected for a short while. But if it is... we could still turn to our advantage, but I do not wish to take any chances.” Gwen turned to face Nemo with a stoic face. “It’s been building up again.” Suddenly the air seemed a bit colder. Even the men who were in the longboat with her seemed to let out a shudder. They knew exactly what she meant.

“If this is a trap, how are you gonna make sure they don't follow you?” Gwen let out another heavy sigh and turned back to watch Talis, Ryder and Skylana make their way to their boat, all of their judging eyes on her. She felt exposed, naked. Something that she hadn’t felt in a long time. They had every right to look at her like that. She thought she was protecting them, but things might have only gotten worse.

“To be honest, I think t’will not be my choice how they find out, but they will soon.” As the trio stepped into the longboat, Hands shouted his orders to lower them into the dark, unknown waters.