Chapter I

[title]

I was out picking mushrooms beside the path up the Ridgetekes ruins when it started to rain. Not the kind of rain that seems to smack you and insult you, and that makes you run for cover, but the kind that pit-patter-splashes off the leaves and gently cools your cheeks, and sings the song of spring. I tucked another mushroom into my pocket and turned my head to smile up at the sky. It was a beautiful shade of grey, with little sunbeams peeking out between the clouds. I always loved watching the silvery raindrops fall, and one bounced off my nose as I kept my face tilted upwards.

I sighed and turned back to my work. I had a stew I needed to start cooking as soon as possible, and I had yet to find sufficient silver acorns. Just as I turned to go, I noticed a movement under one of the larger mushrooms and stooped back down to see. There was a tiny owl, about twice the size of my fist, huddled out of the rain. The owl was wet and miserable-looking, and glared at me as I spoke to it.

[1]"*Greetings, friend. You look sadly uncomfortable. Shall you allow me to comfort and warm you in my house?*"

The owl, whom I quickly perceived to be a he, clicked his beak indignantly and said,

"*I look it, do I? I feel it as well, human-child. And what would seem to be the cause of my state? That would be you, I believe. Gwendolyn Mock, a midwife of 26 and a sixty-fifth ages. Well, pick me up and tuck me into one of those pockets out of this dratted cold and I'll tell you my mission*."

I will admit I was a bit startled. I wasn't used to random owls, or random anybodies, knowing my name, profession, and age, but it wasn't uncommon for animals to show up with summons or letters from other cities and regions. I didn't question it, and did as the owl asked. I carefully tucked him into an empty pocket of the front of my cloak.

"*Are these left-over scone crumbs?*" The owl's muffled, yet delighted voice came from the pocket. I guess I just thought it was empty.

"*I still have a few things to gather from the woods before I return to my house. Shall you accompany me, or shall you prefer to wait for me under some dry log?*"

[1] The following conversation has been translated from Owlish.

The owl popped his head up and stared at me. "*I came all this way to ask you for help for my family. I am not leaving you this quickly*."

I just nodded and continued up the path, scanning the forest floor for the rare variety of acorn I needed, wondering what sort of help this odd little fellow would ask me for, and what predicament his family was in to send for me to help. I tried to think if I knew any owls that would know me, but failed. The last owl I spoke to was on her death-bed and asked me to translate her will to the Common Tongue so her cousin's nephew's granddaughter could read it.

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By the time I finished gathering the rest of the ingredients for the stew and got back to my house, the rain had cleared up and it was nearing sunset. The owl had fallen asleep in my pocket, and I tried not to wake him as I set my things down and stoked the fire. He woke anyway, and poked his head out.

"*Do we seem to be back now? Do you have any things to eat here that I might have?"*

I nodded. "*I have more scones, and-*" I got no further. The owl fluttered out of my pocket and perched on the back of a chair, eyeing the covered plate in the center of the table.

"*Scones shall do nicely. I thank and remember you for your kindness, Lady Mock.*"

I shifted uncomfortably. I really didn't want any favors, and most times someone says they'll remember you, you end up being roped into some crazy scheme to save the world or something. I also didn't like being called "Lady Mock".

"*That's quite all right. You do not have to repay me*," I said, setting a scone down beside the owl. "*And if you please, call me just Gwen*."

The owl nodded and began eating his scone, and I busied myself by the fire making my stew. After a few minutes, the owl said,

"*Forgive me. I never introduced myself to you. My name is Werrley. And my errand is this: My family is in trouble. They have been accused of taking human children from a nearby city. No, do not shake your head at me. The people of this city have always looked down on owls. They do not trust us. Many of them see us as demons. And with this view, their suspicions are justified though they are wrong. I have been sent to ask you to come dissuade the people and help my family. My family has heard of you from humans talking in the streets. Yes, you have a good name there. That is why I was sent to you. The people respect you for the things you have helped others with, especially it seems your work as a helper to human women with child. Therefore, I humbly ask that you help us.*"

I was, as you might imagine, shocked by Werrley's request. It was true that many people respected me for my work as a midwife, but I wasn't a hero by any means, and I felt that another would be better suited for this. Someone with experience talking to people. A lawyer type, perhaps. Not a girl

barely past twenty. But looking at the face of the small owl, and seeing the hope there, I knew I couldn't refuse.

Werrley must have seen the resolve in my eyes because he fluttered up into the air and did a delighted loop-the-loop above my head. He landed back on chair, and said something in Owlish that I couldn't understand. It sounded like it could be a prayer of thanks to [the owls' god-figure].

"*I can not thank you to the extent I do wish. Please if you shall, let me call you by a name of respect. Lady Mock*."

I sighed. It looked like there wasn't any way to get out of this one. "*Of course. I'm happy to help you and your family any way I can. How much time do we have? I can be ready to leave within the hour.*"

"*Within the hour would be best, yes. When I left two days ago, the people had plans to hunt down my family in a fortnight. My family is in hiding, but they can not hide forever. Many of them have hatchlings.*"

I nodded, and grabbed my pack from where it was hung by the door. I packed bread and scones, apples, a change of clothes. My knife hung at my belt like always. My cloak pockets were filled with other assorted items that I'd found useful in the past. I grabbed a book of spells, and went to fill two water flasks with water from the well. Once back inside, I took a last longing glance at the half-made stew that I wouldn't get to eat. I would finish it and take it to Stilton Payworthe, the bard, on my way through town.

The stew finished, and myself finally packed, I redid my braid and tied it with the bit of ribbon I always used, double-knotting it tightly, and looked around to find Werrley. He'd flown over to my desk and was inspecting a couple maps. He looked up at my approach.

"*We shall need this one,"* he said, tapping it with his talon. *"And this other one can also easily come in useful*."

I took the two he'd pointed out and rolled them up and tied them with a leather strap, sticking them in my pack along with a compass and small hourglass.

"*Are you ready to leave*?" I asked.

Werrley nodded, and flew up to perch on my shoulder. I grabbed the pot of stew and we started down the path towards town.

Along the way, I stopped a couple times to pick a couple medicinal herbs, and again to pick a handful of flowers for Stilton. The poor man had lost his wife and their unborn child about five years ago, and I liked bringing him little things to cheer him up.

As we neared the town, Werrley fluttered down and hid in one of my pockets.

"*There may be people from the city here. I do not wish them to see me. It would make both our jobs harder*."

I nodded and shifted the stew to my other hip, turning onto Crikkidor Lane. I waved at a couple children playing in the street and waved to their mothers hanging out the wash. Their fathers would be at the market at the town center today, trading and bartering with others who had come from surrounding towns, bringing their sheep and cloth and grain and other goods.

When I reached the corner where Crikkidor Lane and Drundle Street met, I turned aside and started down a stone path towards the small, two-room cottage where Stilton lived. Rose bushes lined the front walk, and other varieties of flowers were planted along the sides of the house, and herbs in the window boxes. I knocked on the door and waited, hearing his lyre in the back room.

I heard him finish the measure and come to the door. He opened it and pretended to not see me, looking over my head. I rolled my eyes.

"Stilton... We've already established the fact that you're a head and a half taller than I. I came to give you some stew, but I can always eat it myself..." I made as if to turn around, but he grabbed the pot from under my arm.

"I'll take this, thank you! Come in and sit down for a bit! Or are you busy?" Stilton held open the door as I walked in.

"I am actually on an errand, but I can stay for a minute."

Stilton nodded, and set the pot down on the table, peering under the lid. "I see you're packed to go somewhere. Midwifing again?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm-" I stopped. I trusted Stilton, but I also honored Werrley's wishes not to be seen and our errand not to be known. "Well, it's a secret. I promised – well, I didn't promise actually – that I wouldn't tell anybody."

Stilton smiled, his eyes twinkling. "It's fine. I'll expect you to tell me when you get back, if that doesn't go against any rules."

I smiled back, an unwanted fuzzy feeling in my chest. "I think I could get away with that. Now..." I stood and adjusted my pack so it hung more comfortably. "I really need to be going. This is rather time-sensitive."

Stilton beat me to the door and opened it for me. "Good luck! I look forward to your next visit."

"Likewise." I started down the path, but realized I still held the flowers. I turned back around, meaning to catch the door before Stilton closed it, but smacked into him, since he was standing right in the path behind me. He caught my arm as I started to fall, and pulled me back upright.

“Careful! Did you forget something?”

I tried to calm my racing heartbeat, which was difficult. We were only inches apart, and he still held my wrist. Blue eyes stared down into mine. Had he always smelled like rosemary? I shook my head, clearing my thoughts.

“No! I mean, yes. I picked these on my way here.” I handed him the bunch of flowers. “I thought they’d look nice in the windowsill.”

Stilton’s face lit up, and my heart did another somersault. “Thank you! I have a vase that the butcher’s wife gave me a few months ago that has sat empty for too long.” He finally released my wrist, and took the flowers.

As he turned back to the cottage, I asked,

“One more thing. Do you always stand directly behind your visitors as they leave, to startle them if they turn around?”

Stilton paused in the doorway. He turned to look over his shoulder at me, eyes twinkling again. “No. Only the times you visit, to watch you walk back down the road. Be safe.”

My heart did another flip-flop-thump.

Hang him, and his soft puppy eyes, and that smirk!

My face surely flaming, I waved and started off back to town. After I was out of earshot, Werrley spoke up.

“Well then.”

My eyes narrowed. “How much of that did you understand?” I asked, not bothering to speak in Owlish, since he seemed to understand the Common speech.

“Oh, some of it.”

I sighed. “He’s still getting over his wife’s death. He’s not looking for anything right now.”

“Heartbreak is often times the driving force behind love, you know.”

“Shut up or I’m turning around and sticking you right back under that mushroom.”

Werrley “harrumphed”, or at least as close as an owl can get to harrumphing. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?”

Werrley popped back into my pocket, muttering to himself.

"I'm not done," I said, tapping the pocket. "How do you know the Common Tongue? Most birds don't."

Werrley fluttered up and landed on my shoulder, steadying himself with my braid. "I taught myself, mostly. I often sat in the rafters of the schoolhouse and church and listened to it be read. I've found it a useful skill to have."

"That would explain how you knew what the people of the city were planning, then."

I felt him nod. "Yes. Speaking of that, when we get across town, I need to look at one of those maps. There's a path through the forest that we can take that will shorten our journey by quite a large number of miles. If we can find it."

I'd had plenty of experience with those forest paths that shorten your journey, and only one was pleasant. But I kept my mouth shut.

Werrley flew back down to my pocket as we came to a street corner. I waved at an elderly man sitting in his yard, and he waved back. A couple children bounced up to me and one asked,

"Do you have any sweets?"

I smiled. I always kept a few in my pockets for times such as this. It made me about a dozen friends among the village children. I closed my left hand over a few sweets in my pocket. Then I reached both hands up in the air, being careful not to show I was holding something, and clapped them together as though I was catching something invisible from the breeze. I pulled both hands back down and presented them open to the children, displaying the sweets. Their eyes widened. As I handed each one a sweet, one asked,

"How'd you do that?!"

I grinned. "Magic."

I waved at them as I started back off down the street toward the town center. At the last minute, I changed my mind, opting to go around the side of town rather than right through the middle of it. The crowds would slow me down, and there were always beggars and pickpockets to deal with. The beggars were usually pretty nice, but sometimes they'd get grouchy or they'd want you to sit and talk for an hour, and I simply didn't have time.

I reached the edge of the town, and waved to the gatekeeper as I walked out the gate.

"Not going to the market today?"

I shook my head as I kept walking. “Nope! Plans elsewhere! I’ll be gone a while, so tell anyone looking for me that I’m out.”

The gatekeeper voiced his assent, and turned back to converse with some guy with his hair greased back and way too many rings on his fingers.

I got far enough into the trees to be out of eyesight, and tapped Werrley.

“You can come out now. I’ll get out the maps.”

“Scones, too. Did you bring scones?”

I sat down on the ground by a tree, rummaging through my pack, and I found a scone and the maps. I gave half the scone to Werrley, and stuffed the other half into my mouth, unrolling the maps and spreading them out in my lap.

“Which one did you want to look at? Which forest has the path you mentioned?”

Werrley, crumbs sticking to his beak, hopped up on my shoulder and peered at the maps.

“The top one. See that oak marked on it? The path starts right there.”

I brushed crumbs off the map and frowned. There wasn’t a path marked on the map, and I had made this map myself. I was pretty sure I would have seen the path if there was one. Unless it was made after I drew up the map, but that wasn’t very likely.

“That tree is right there.” I pointed to a clearing in the trees about two hundred yards off.

Werrley shook his head. No. We aren’t that close to it. We can’t be.”

“This... this isn’t right. Something’s off.” I glanced around, and jumped up when I realized something.

“Werrley? We... aren’t where we just were...”

We stood in a clearing not unlike the one we were just in, except we couldn’t see the road behind us that we had just stepped off of. We should have been able to see it still. There were just thick trees, growing close together, as far as the eye could see in all directions.

Werrley and I looked at each other uneasily.

“I’ll fly up and see if I can see anything above the treetops,” he said.

Werrley took off, and was soon out of sight among the branches over my head. He was gone barely three minutes before he all but dove back down, bouncing off the branches before finally landing on my shoulder, breathing heavily.

"What did you see?" I asked. "Are we anywhere close to the road?"

Werrley shook his head, still trying to catch his breath. "Give... me a... minute..." He took a deep breath. "We aren't close to anything but more trees. I would've flown around a little bit more, but there were Dolvani everywhere."

I drew in a sharp breath. Dolvani were seen as an omen of evil, and as a general rule were very irritable when crossed. Werrley was lucky to have made it back with his life. The thick trees saved him; the Dolvani couldn't get through them. If I strained my ears, I could just hear their cries hundreds of feet above us. I shuddered.

"We need to get out of here. How long before dark?"

Werrley shifted his weight back and forth on his feet. "A couple hours. But we can't ignore the fact that the forest... moved us. Or moved itself. Or both. It could be dangerous to go anywhere."

"Werrley, I'm a Witche. Witches fear Dolvani above nearly everything. Those things are bad omens. We need to move. We *must*."

I couldn't possibly stress enough how much we fear them. Death itself we would almost prefer than knowing there were Dolvani nearby. There is a reason we see them as bad omens, but it is bad luck to talk about it.

I cleared the thoughts from my mind and grabbed my pack, slinging it back over my shoulder, and the maps.

"Let's go find the path by the oak. That'll be as good a place as any to start from, and then at least we'd know where we are."

Werrley shook his head, and grabbed the end of my braid to stop me. "No. If we were that close to it, I could have seen the road from above. That's a different clearing."

I looked down at the map I was in the middle of rolling up. He was right. The oak was close enough to the road that if we could see the oak from here, we could also see the road.

"So what now?" asked Werrley.

I gave him a sidelong glance. "I was hoping you could tell me. After all, you flew here, didn't you? We'll just walk until we get to somewhere you recognize, then follow the maps."

Werrley shook his head again. “Look. The forest moved us. Or whatever. For all we know, we could be on the island of Pavv!”

“But we aren’t,” I argued. “If we were, we could hear the voices and smell the sea.” I got his point, but after knowing that there were Dolvani everywhere, my nerves were on end and I was in the mood to be contrary.

Werrley sighed. “Let me go up again and-”

“No.” I cut him off. “If they see you again... It will just pinpoint our location. Besides, you’d be an easy target for one that hasn’t eaten in days. They can fly faster and turn with more accuracy than you’d think.”

Werrley was silent for a moment. “You’re right. But it would be foolishness to walk aimlessly until we come to somewhere we recognize, because we could be anywhere. Anywhere at all. I propose we-”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by an unearthly shriek from somewhere nearer than preferred. We both froze, only our eyes moving as they darted around, seeking the source of the sound.

Chapter II

[title]

Werrley and I stood there, hardly breathing, for what seemed like hours without hearing another sound. Finally, I had to move. I twisted my neck back and forth and arched my stomach out, my back popping.

"What are you doing?" Werrley hissed. "Can't you hear that?"

I stiffened again, my hand creeping towards my knife. I *could* hear it now. Labored breathing, about fifteen yards to our left. It sounded fairly human, but there were plenty of things in the woods that were masters at replicating different sounds. One could never be too careful.

I quietly unsheathed my knife, my movements almost imperceptible as I pulled my hand around to the front of my body. Werrley, perched on my right shoulder, nudged me with his foot.

"Turn so we're facing it," he whispered.

I did as he asked, breathing out of my mouth in case my breath whistled out my nose. I caught a movement between the trees, and clenched and unclenched my fingers around my knife, trying not to get a cramp in my wrist. My eyes probed the growing shadows, searching for another movement to indicate where the creature was.

After what seemed like a lifetime, Werrley tightened his grip on my shirt. I glanced to my right, where we had been facing before I turned, and saw a figure crouched on the ground. I couldn't make out what it was exactly. Though it wasn't huge, that didn't mean a thing. Sometimes the smallest creatures are the most dangerous.

I carefully turned back to face the figure. It was still about fifteen or twenty yards away, but it was coming closer. And closer. I remembered the Dolvani and their bad omens, and I felt my heartbeat speed up. Some things could smell Witches. Some things could smell fear. Some could smell sweat. And I'm pretty sure I smelled like all of those.

The figure stopped about ten yards away. It had come towards us slowly, with a broken gait, like it had a limp. It looked to have taken on a human-like form, but I couldn't tell for sure in the dark woods, and it was standing in front of a tree. A slight breeze wafted a smell towards me. I frowned. I knew I'd smelled it before recently, but what was it? Rosemary. Rosemary?

I knew I shouldn't. But I did anyway. "Stilton?" I called.

Werrley pecked my ear. "Shut up shut up *shutup!*" he hissed.

A voice from the darkness said, “Gwendolyn? Is that you? I twisted my ankle...”

I took a step towards him, but then stopped. Something wasn’t right.

Werrley was making furious little sounds in Owlish, telling me to turn and run. But if it *was* Stilton... I couldn’t leave him.

As if reading my thoughts, Werrley whisper-yelled, “What if it’s not Stilton? What if it’s a [thing]? You’ll be killed!”

I hesitated, torn between rushing to help Stilton, if it was Stilton, and running for my life. Why would Stilton be here? My brain asked. Because he followed you, my brain answered. That’s nonsense. Why would he follow you? Because he.. I don’t know. My brain said.

I looked up from my feet and jumped. The Stilton figure had come closer and was now only four yards away. The smart side of my brain took over, and I turned and ran. Werrley was taken off guard and grabbed onto my braid as I took off at a full sprint. Stilton’s voice stopped me in my tracks, however, when I heard him say,

“Wait! Gwendolyn!”

That was it! Stilton never called my Gwendolyn. It was always Gwen. I took off again, hearing shuffling steps getting closer. I wanted to look over my shoulder, but I figured dodging trees at the same time was probably a bad idea, so I just ran faster, my heart thumping in my chest. I didn’t know where I was headed, and I almost tripped several times, but I didn’t care. Something that could shapeshift was on my trail. I heard the shuffles fade from hearing, and decided I had to stop and catch my breath. I turned to look behind me as I did, and could just see the figure off about fifteen yards still. Broken ankle, my foot.

The thing was still calling out to me, begging me to come help it walk to the nearest village, which was ridiculous, because there was no village for miles based on Werrley’s earlier report.

“Gwendolyn! I know you’re still there! Please come back and help me! I can’t walk!”

That’s a load of fungi, I thought.

“Gwendolyn... Please! I love you!”

I think my heart stopped for a moment. Despite knowing this wasn’t Stilton, I felt my face flush and my heart rate go up again. I started to call out, saying that was stupid, Stilton just lost his wife recently, but Werrley shushed me with his wing, and I realized how stupid I would be to say anything. It would be like waving a torch around, yelling “Here I am! Come eat me!”

So instead, I focused on calming my heartbeat and not making a sound. I knew it would be a futile effort, since I probably smelled like sweat now as well as a lot of other things. I wracked my brain, trying to think of anything to use as a distraction. Wait. My knife. My hands found empty air where my

scabbard used to be. I flicked my eyes back and forth until my gaze fell on my scabbard and knife about ten feet away. Right between me and the.. thing. I mouthed a curse. I had to have my knife. It might cost me my life to get it, but I had to try. I took a deep breath.

"Brace yourself," I whispered. Whether to Werrley or myself I didn't know. Before Werrley could stop me, I dashed out from behind our tree, covered the ten feet easily, and scooped up my knife and scabbard, dashing back the way I came, leaping over a fallen log and dodging a sapling in my path. I heard a cry of rage from the creature as it abandoned the pretense of being Stilton. Something in the back of my mind nagged at me, begging me to realize something, but I was too occupied trying not to trip that I couldn't afford to use up energy thinking.

I felt Werrley let go of my braid and shirt.

"What are you doing?" I managed to say in between gasps. He flew alongside me long enough to say,

"Scouting ahead! Be right back," and flew off in front of me.

I felt a stab of anger at being left alone, but immediately regretted it. He was being helpful, and we could use all the help we could get right now. I kept running, around trees, over logs, even though I was getting a nasty stitch in my side, growing worse by the second.

I didn't know where Werrley was, and I could hear the thing getting closer, breathing heavily as well. But I had a bad feeling that it was just mad at being tricked, not tiring from running like I was. I had to stop soon, I knew. I had been running past my top speed at my top time for about ten minutes now, and I really needed to stop. I was gasping for air, and the stitch in my side felt like a million knives trying to dig my ribs out one by one. I was seeing through blurry eyes, and more than once, low branches whipped across my face and arms.

I tripped on something and went down. I expected to hit the ground and be pounced on by the creature, but I passed ground level and kept going. I didn't care right then, because I was blacking out. Right as my vision went dark I heard Werrley's voice from somewhere above me, calling my name, but I couldn't respond.

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I was somewhere floating around in the air, it felt like. I really didn't care. Something bumped my arm, and a sharp pain shot through it. I groaned. A shaft of light flickered through my eyelids, and I closed them tighter.

"Lady Gwen?"

Who was that? Oh. Werrley. I opened my eyes and winced. The light hurt. I tried to sit up. And a wave of nausea hit me. I looked around for something to throw up into. Werrley nudged a paper sack to my feet, and perched on something out of the way as I all but dove to the sack.

When my stomach calmed down, I felt a little better, but I had a pounding headache, and my arm hurt like crazy. I looked around me, trying to sort out the shapes and colors into recognizable objects. I was in a cave, and I could smell salt. The ocean. A cave by the ocean. I was sitting on the edge of a pallet made out of branches and oak leaves, with my cloak spread over it, and there was my pack and knife and scabbard on the floor. Werrley was perched on a little shelf carved into the wall of the cave, and had... dried blood? On his beak?

I tried to say, "Werrley, what's on your beak?" but my tongue was dry now and my throat sore from stomach acid, so I only managed to croak out something like "Unhu hn uhu hee?"

Werrley fluttered down from the shelf and grabbed a canteen with his beak, and lugged it over to me.

"Have a drink. You've been out for about ten hours now."

I glugged half the canteen without stopping for breath, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. The water did wonders for my head, and I felt better immediately.

I tried again. "What happened to your beak?"

Werrley looked sheepish. "I may or may not have found some berries outside the cave earlier. I meant to save some for you, but my stomach had other plans."

I managed a slight smile. "Ok, but what happened last night? I remember falling, blacking out, then nothing."

Werrley nodded. "About that... The forest moved again. It was odd seeing it happen. It was like my vision blurred and swirled for a moment, then cleared and we were here. I've seen no sign of any life here yet, though the cave clearly shows someone has been here fairly recently. There was no dust on the shelf."

I pushed myself to my feet, holding onto the wall for support, and immediately regretted putting weight on my arm. I flopped back onto the pallet.

"What happened to my arm?"

"The creature grabbed hold of it right before the forest moved. I heard the bone snap." Werrley looked apologetic. "I've been looking for [herb] in the forest outside, but haven't found any yet. I also looked in the herbs you brought, and didn't see any." His expression changed to embarrassed. "And... I'm an owl. I can't set a bone."

I leaned against the cave wall and closed my eyes, thinking. If Werrley was correct in assuming someone besides us had been here recently, our only hope was to wait and hope he'd come back soon. If that didn't happen... I sighed and opened my eyes again. Werrley was hopping on one foot, then the other, muttering in Owlish.

"Alright," I said. "I have a plan, of sorts."

Werrley stopped hopping and looked up at me hopefully.

"First, I need a scone, if there are any left."

Werrley nodded and drug my pack over to me. "There's two."

I munched on one while I arranged my thoughts.

"Second..." I stared off at the sand and trees outside the cave. "What does it look like outside? Anything like the maps?"

Werrley shook his head. "Maybe. I can't tell. There are beaches on the maps, but none of them are detailed enough."

I had expected that, but it was still disappointing. "Ok. Now then. The next order of business is to try to figure out how long ago our hopefully friendly human was here, and whether or not he'll likely come back soon."

Werrley frowned. "There aren't any belongings here that I can tell. There aren't any signs of a fire having been built and put out, either. And no footprints. Make of that what you will."

It was my turn to frown. That didn't make sense. If there hadn't been anyone here lately, there should have been dust on the shelf.

Werrley saw me struggling with this, and said, "Well, there's no use in sitting here. We can think just as well outside, and maybe we'll come across something."

"I'm going to have to set my arm first. As it is, I can't support it, and I can't move it. Luckily, it feels like the break isn't at a joint."

Werrley grimaced. "You can set your own arm?"

I smiled grimly. "I guess we're about to find out."

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After many yelps and grimaces and tears, I had my arm set nearly as well as a healer could have done. At the very least, I wouldn't have to worry about manually supporting it. I had made a sling out of the leftover bandages and wrapped them around my shoulder, so my arm wasn't going anywhere.

I managed to get to my feet, strap my scabbard on, and get my pack over my good shoulder with minimum help from Werrley. I bent down one last time for my cloak, and had a moment of panic when I thought I'd have to take my sling off to put my cloak on, but realized that wasn't necessary.

With Werrley perched on my good shoulder, holding onto my braid, I started out into the mid-morning sunlight. Outside, I looked around at my surroundings. I was standing on a beach, with the cave at my back at the tree line. The breeze came in from the sea, blowing little waves up on the shore. A few birds circled overhead, and for a moment, I panicked, thinking they were Dolvani, but they were just seagulls. There were a few rocks along the sand, but mainly it was soft and smooth, with a few shells here and there. I pulled a map out, and quickly scanned it for any landmarks marked on it. I saw none that looked very hopeful, except there was an inkblot that may have been on purpose. It didn't look like anything much, so it was probably not important, but I didn't often make inkblots, so I figured that was as good a place to start as any. I turned the map this way and that, trying to make sense of the blot.

Frustrated, I turned the map upside down and looked through the back of it, holding it up to the sun. The sun filtered through little bits of the blot that weren't filled in, making the outline of a [thing]. Excited, but only slightly hopeful, I scanned the beach for anything similar. Werrley had leaned in to see the map as well, and he took to the air to look from above. I walked up and down the beach for several hundred yards in each direction, not seeing anything. Finally, Werrley swooped back down, crying, "I saw something! This way!" He took off again, and I jogged to keep up. He flew about fifty yards beyond where I stopped, and landed on a bit of rock jutting up from the sand.

"From above," he said, "These rocks look like that drawing."

I looked around and saw a little hill among the trees, and a lone oak standing there. I looked back at the map, and frowned.

"I would have marked that tree on here somewhere, unless..." I trailed off, and looked back at the tree. I started towards it, and Werrley shrugged and followed. I reached the tree, and my suspicions were confirmed. The tree had been planted, and recently. The dirt around it was still fresh.

Werrley and I looked at each other. Why the [word] would somebody plant one random tree right here? Werrley took a breath to say something, but a cough from behind us made me whip around, knife at the ready.

A little old man stood at the foot of the hill. He had a shovel in his hand, and a bag in the other.

"I see you found my memorial tree," he said.

I narrowed my eyes. He didn't seem like another shapeshifter, but I had a broken arm as a result of not running from the one last night as soon as I should have, and I wasn't taking chances.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" I asked warily.

"I could ask you the same question, Miss Mock."

I jerked back a few inches. Everyone seemed to know my name around here lately. I composed myself and said,

"Excuse me?"

The old man seemed to smile. I couldn't tell exactly, because his cloak covered his face. I also couldn't tell his exact age.

"No. Don't try to hide it from me. Your name is Gwendolyn Mock, and your owl friend is Werrley. You should be thanking me and my friends for rescuing you."

I dropped the pretense, and snapped, "What do you mean?"

"The forest, my child. The shapeshifter not making mince-meat out of you both. You waking up in the cave. That was all my doing."

I kept my knife raised as the old man continued to stand there. This made no sense. Nothing made sense. My head started to throb again. My arm ached. And I was hungry.

"Look, old man. I don't know who you are, or what you are. I'm tired and sore, and I just had my arm broken by a shape-shifter not twelve hours ago who pretended to be one of my friends, so I don't trust you any more than I'd trust a Dolvan with a Sorcerer's degree."

The man smiled. "That's justified. I see you set your arm. I was going to do that for you later."

I shook my head. "No offense, but you aren't coming anywhere near my arm. Or me. I just said a shapeshifter that was pretending to be my friend almost ate me. How do I know you aren't one?"

It struck me that I might have finished having my bad luck brought by the Dolvani earlier. But since I came out of the deal with just a broken arm and a splitting headache, there might be more to come. Marvelous.

The old man sighed, as one might sigh after his child just asked for a unicorn. "Look. If I was going to harm you, I would've done it already instead of jabbering on for five minutes. My name is Greyl. If you'll let the owl come get these herbs, they'll really help your arm. If you won't let me touch you, that's the most I can do to help."

I saw Werrley ruffle his feathers, and said, “The owl does what he likes. He doesn’t need my permission.”

The man dipped his head. “That is true. My apologies.” He held out his hand, palm up and open, where a handful of plants sat. He also dropped his shovel, which I appreciated.

Werrley and I glanced at each other, and he nodded slightly then flew to the man and picked up the herbs in his beak. He flew back to me and perched on my shoulder again after depositing the herbs in my pack.

The man kept his hands in front of him, clasped together. I waited for him to speak, because it seemed like he was about to, but he was silent. The silence was just about to get awkward when he spoke up.

“So. You’re headed to Ikarial, eh?”

My hand went back to my knife where I had re-sheathed it. “Maybe,” I said cautiously. “If we are?”

“If you are, I can show you where you are on your maps.”

“What if we already know where we are?” Werrley asked.

“And what if you don’t?” countered Greyl with a smile.

“We just figured out a landmark,” I said. “But thank you all the same.”

Greyl shook his head. “If you’re talking about those rocks, they don’t mean a thing. I can tell you, you’re nowhere near where you think you are. But you’re closer to where you want to be than you hope you are.”

My already stressed brain struggled to understand that jumble of words. I gave up and said, “Well, then where are we?”

Greyl smiled again. A smile that clearly said he knew something we didn’t. “I thought you knew. After all, you figured out a landmark, didn’t you? And since you don’t trust me, what if I tell you completely wrong?”

“Look,” I said between clenched teeth. “We don’t seem to have any other choice than to trust you. If we plan on using those herbs, we’ve got to trust they aren’t toxic. I need to go sit down. I’m heading back to the cave. You can come, since I suppose it’s your cave, and show us on the maps where we actually are.”

I turned to go back down the hill, but Greyl stopped me with his next words. “The cave is the other way.”

I turned. He was right. I was going deeper into the woods. “I know that,” I snapped.

Greyl smiled sadly at me as I passed him, and in a kind voice, said, “Don’t feel bad about it. You’ve had a rough couple of days.”

That nearly broke the dam holding back my tears, but I blinked them back and didn’t let them fall. “Thanks,” I mumbled.

We got back to the cave and Greyl had me get out the maps.

“Here,” he said, “is where you think you are.” He pointed to the ink blot. “And here,” he pointed to a spot much further down the map, “is where you hope you are. But here,” he pointed to another spot on the map, “is where you actually are.”

Werrley and I stared at where he was pointing. His finger was in the middle of the ocean, on a little speck of ink no bigger than a pinpoint.

“You’re kidding.” I stared at Greyl. “You’ve got to be kidding,.”

He shook his head. “This was the safest place I could bring you. I can get you back to where you want to hope you are, however, it will be dangerous.”

I tried to let this sink in, but my brain was having none of it. “Hold on, wait, back up. You,” I enunciated my words carefully, accentuating them with a tap of my finger on my knee. “You... Brought us here. Over this water. In less than an hour. Without us knowing. And you plan to get us back over all that water.”

Greyl nodded. “I can’t explain it all right now. If you trust me, I’ll write an explanation in a note and send it with you for you to read at your convenience. As I understand, you’re under a bit of a time crunch, and you still have the bad omen of the Dolvan over your heads.”

I jerked my head up. “The Dolvani? Then it’s not just a myth? They really do bring bad omens to people? And mine hasn’t run out yet?”

Greyl nodded again. “I knew your ancestor who first brought the curse upon your heads. She knew what she had done, and felt terrible, but she had a reason for doing it. I would recommend that you get some rest first, and I’ll wake you up in a few hours. Then I’ll give you some provisions and send you on your way. Sadly, I can only send you so far. I wish I could send you further, but that would be pushing my limits, and messing with Fate is most times a bad idea.”

I sat there, still trying to comprehend this man. He bustled around the cave, making a fire and setting about roasting a bird he caught somewhere. After his fire was blazing cheerfully and the bird was on a

spit, he rummaged through his bag and found a piece of parchment and a quill and set about writing the note he said he'd write.

Werrley had gone to sleep in my lap, and my own eyelids felt heavy, but my stomach growled. Greyl looked up from his paper and smiled.

"Go ahead and eat something from your pack. I have things to send with you, so don't worry about using your things all up."

I did as he said and, after my stomach was full, felt much sleepier. I took a sip of water from a canteen and faded into sleep.

Chapter III

[title]

The next morning, I awoke to the smell of roasted gull and toasted bread. I rolled over onto my side, being careful not to jostle my arm.

Greyl was out, and Werrley sat eating a bit of bread crust. I stood and went to sit by him.

“Good morning!” he said cheerfully.

I groaned. “So you say. I’m not looking forward to trekking through the forest more. And we’ve wasted two days now. We can only hope your family is safe.”

Werrley winced, and I got the feeling he had almost forgotten about our errand. “Yes. We should,” he said, “still have a couple days. But if this happens again...” He shook his head. “Well, we can only hope, like you say.”

I nodded and took a piece of gull and chewed on it, trying to ignore my arm, which felt like it had swelled overnight.

Greyl came walking into the cave after a few minutes. He was holding his shovel, and his bag in his other hand.

“Good morning!” he said, also cheerfully. “Ready for today?”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m ready or not,” I mumbled. I was beginning to wish I’d never agreed to help Werrley, but then I remembered, it wasn’t just for him. His whole family would be captured and probably killed if I didn’t try to help.

“Cheer up. It could be worse,” said Werrley. “You could be dead.”

“Thanks for the motivation.”

Greyl smiled. “I made some bread for you to take. Yours was a bit stale, so I threw it out. I also replenished your supply of apples, and gave you some herbs. And there are some other gifts in your pack as well. My letter is with your maps.” He paused, thinking. “Oh! Speaking of maps. Let me show you where you’ll end up.” He pulled his own map from his bag and unrolled it on the floor. It was a near replica of mine, but more detailed. “Here is where we are now.” Greyl tapped a spot of land in the ocean. “And here’s where you’ll be later.”

Werrley and I leaned in to study where he pointed to. It was in a forest, near a river. There were a couple landmarks nearby, including a rock formation not unlike the one on the beach here. A village was

marked on the map not too far off from the spot we would be, and I was happy for that. A good night's sleep, or even a nap, in a real bed would be greatly appreciated. And if the village was big enough, there might even be a healer.

"Do you know anything about the village?" I asked.

Greyl frowned. "No, only what I've heard from others. Some people say to stay away from the inn, and you'll be fine, others say to stay out of the whole village, and some people say it's totally fine. I might not risk it, especially in your condition. There's this one further up the road, about another day or two's journey."

I looked where he pointed and saw a larger village marked on the map. That one would be more likely to have a healer. I sighed. "Alright then. We'll stop by the smaller one only if necessary to restock food." I remembered the shape-shifters and said, "Is there anything else we should know about the section of forest we'll be in? Anything to watch out for?"

Greyl nodded. "Yes. There will be more Dolvani." He saw my pained expression, and went on, "I know how you feel about them, and if I could at all help it, I would set you down elsewhere. But as it is, I cannot. They can't get under the treetops, so as long as you stay out of sight along the roads, you should be fine. There aren't any shapeshifters that I know of, so you should be fine on that point." He stopped, thinking. "I wish I had my scrolls of notes. They would tell me more precisely."

I took a deep breath. "Ok. We can do this." I shifted slightly and my broken arm protested. I winced.

Greyl noticed this, and made a questioning motion at my arm. "May I?"

I nodded. He padded over beside me after grabbing his bag. He gently unwrapped the bandages, and when he exposed my arm, he suppressed a gasp. I didn't want to look, but I figured since it was my arm, I probably should. It had turned an awful purple-blue color, and had swelled up quite a bit. I grimaced as Greyl gently prodded it where it had broken, and tested my elbow to see if it would bend. I gasped as he bent my elbow, and he stopped, and said apologetically,

"Sorry. I needed to make sure you haven't lost use of it. You haven't, but the nerves and muscles have been stressed to the point that you might as well not be able to move it. It'll heal fine I think, but you'll have to use that elbow some each day to keep it from cramping and losing use of it completely." He saw me about to protest, and said, "It'll hurt. But if you want to be able to use that arm again, you'll have to grin and bear it. You don't have to move it much, just as much as you're able. Each day, maybe twice a day."

Greyl made a poultice from herbs and a few oils and spread it on my arm, then wrapped it back up and tied it to my shoulder again. "I'm sending these oils with you as well. You saw how much I used. Each night, unwrap your arm and change the poultice. Then stretch the elbow and sleep with it

unwrapped, if you can. Don't bother seeing a healer. He'd do just as much or less as I just did, and he'll charge you a ridiculous price for it, too."

Greyl stood and stretched, then clapped his hands together and said briskly, "Well! We're sitting here wasting the day! Get your things together and off we go!"

"You're coming with us?" asked Werrley.

"Part of the way. I have to at least come as far as the forest. I'll come father if I can, but I may be called off on an errand of my own. We'll see."

Greyl helped me stand and put my pack on my shoulder and my cloak on. Werrley fluttered up to his usual spot by my braid. I took another deep breath and let it out.

Greyl handed me the vials of oil, which I put in my pack, and the rest of the roast gull wrapped in paper. "Ready?" he asked.

"*As I'll ever be*," muttered Werrley, in Owlish.

Greyl smiled. "I speak the language of owls as well, my friend. Make sure you don't insult me in Owlish someday." He led us out of the cave and a little ways into the forest. He asked us to turn around so as to not see him. I heard him chant something in a tongue I didn't recognize, and my vision blurred. It was an altogether unpleasant feeling, like it felt when I was blacking out earlier. When it cleared, we were standing in a forest- big surprise - and Greyl was nowhere to be seen.

"I thought he was coming with us." Werrley looked around.

"And he is," said Greyl's voice from behind us. He seemed to step out of a tree and smiled at my confused expression. "I explain in that letter. Now." He pulled his map out. There was a red dot on it where he had shown us we were going to end up.

"Is that a tracking map?" Werrley sounded awed. "I haven't seen one of those in... a while."

Greyl nodded. "There are few left. I have two, and I believe there are only three others besides mine. It has come in quite useful to me in the past." He turned the map so the compass at the top was facing to our left. It lit up red when he faced the same direction.

I had never seen a tracking map before, though I had heard of them. They would be very dangerous if someone was to have all of them. Even having two of them would make people look at you funny. But I trusted Greyl with them, which was odd because he still hadn't given us a reason he was helping us. But he seemed genuine, and his poultice sure helped my arm.

"We should head this direction," said Greyl, nodding ahead of us. "We can probably miss the bandit path."

"The bandit path?" asked Werrley.

Greyl nodded. "There's a group of bandits that come through this part of the forest regularly. They don't usually bother me by myself, but if they saw I had friends with me, they'd know we'd be more likely to have coin."

I frowned. "I've never heard of a bandit group here before. Are they fairly new to the area?"

"Relatively. They came through first about a month or so ago. They ride this trail about once a day."

I sighed. Bandits. I hated bandits. They once came through Asterdgen when it was smaller, and ransacked my cottage. I was just about to comment on this when Werrley put a wing over my mouth.

"I hear them," he whispered. "Listen."

Greyl and I strained our ears, but heard nothing. I knew by now that Werrley had better ears than me, so I put my hand out to stop Greyl when he was about to speak.

"Werrley knows what he's talking about," I mouthed.

Greyl nodded, and pulled his knife from his bag. I noticed he didn't have his shovel with him, but figured that he probably had a way to hide it in a tree somewhere for his use at some point in time. The thought made a laugh bubble up inside of me, and I smothered it frantically as I saw a movement in the road up ahead.

"That's Rubert Brodie," whispered Greyl. "Thinks he's a big-shot because he can down six tankards of ale in one night without passing out. He's the leader of the gang."

So he was one of those guys, I thought to myself. "Probably popular with the ladies, too, huh?" I muttered back.

"Yes. He has a good face and knows it."

I scowled. I wanted to take a whack at his good face and break that nose of his. Werrley must have sensed these thoughts, because he said,

"You've got a broken arm. Can't go hitting people like that."

I kept scowling. "Too bad."

Greyl smiled at us. "Come along. We'll probably meet up with the rest of the gang if we don't get a move on. Brodie would probably spare a pretty young lady with a broken arm, but Werrley and I wouldn't get off so easily."

We kept walking north, and soon came to a road. Greyl consulted his map and led us to the right. We walked just off the road in the trees, for the sake of not angering any Dolvani that might be flying about. Werrley was getting antsy, hopping from one foot to the other on my shoulder. He couldn't fly right now; we were moving too slow for that. Finally, he burst out,

"I've got to stretch my wings. I can't keep sitting like this."

"I'm afraid that would be too dangerous, my friend. I know you need to stretch, but keep in mind the circumstances we're in right now. There could be Dolvani out there in the sky, waiting for a meal. You could be shot down by a hunter's bow. We could be captured and you not know where we went. For now, my friend, stay with us. When we get to the village you can stretch. But not now." Greyl smiled at Werrley kindly, and said, "We're actually reaching a clearing up ahead soon. You can do a couple laps around it to tide you over until we get to the village."

Werrley nodded, and went back to hopping from one foot to the other. I took a swig of water from a canteen and took a deep breath. I missed my cottage, and I wished I had brought some stew with me. I didn't have anything to put it in, though, so that wasn't ideal I supposed. I sighed, and stepped over a log. A small branch slapped my hurt arm, and I bit my lip. Greyl looked back at me and frowned. "Your face is pale. Is your arm all right?"

I nodded. "I just hit it on a twig. I'm fine."

"That's not what I meant." Greyl stopped walking and waited for me to catch up. He sat me down on a stump and felt my forehead. He "hmmd" and began unwrapping the bandages again. "You have the beginning of a fever. I'm worried that your arm may be infected. That would throw a forked stick in our business."

I groaned as he peeled back the fabric that had stuck to my arm. Werrley looked on anxiously, and winced as my arm was exposed. Between the time that we had left the island cave and walked here, it had turned a sickly green and the skin had cracked in one spot and was oozing a foul-smelling goop. Greyl frowned, and muttered to himself in the same language I assumed he had used earlier.

"Gwendolyn... We need to get you to a village. We have no choice but to take the road. We may get lucky and pass a farm on the way and rent a horse or two."

"Is it just infected?" I asked. "Because if it's just infected, I can treat it with some things I have in my pack and wait until we walk to the nearest village. I've dealt with infections before."

Greyl shook his head. "It's infected, yes. But I think you're also having an allergic reaction to something I used in the poultice. Let me have the vials I gave you earlier. Don't use them."

I handed him the vials and he put them back in his own bag. "You're not going anywhere," he said. "Werrley and I are taking the road on up to find a horse."

Werrley frowned. “I’m not leaving her alone. One of us stays here.”

Greyl smiled. “I know you feel that way, but I need you to scout ahead in the sky. I’d send you yourself, but I think you’d probably have a hard time convincing a farmer to loan you his horse.”

“It’s alright, Werrley. I’ll be fine.”

“You will not be fine, Lady Gwen. You have a broken arm, that is now infected and reacting funny to the medicine.”

“And the longer we stand here arguing, the worse my arm will get.”

Werrley frowned. I could tell he still didn’t like it, but he said, “Fine. But if we don’t find anything within thirty minutes, I’m coming right back here and you, old man, can keep looking on your own.”

Greyl smiled again. “Thank you. Come along now, but be careful in the sky.”

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I had been sitting there for at least twenty minutes now. It was cold under the shade of the trees, and I shivered even under the warmth of my cloak. My arm was throbbing, and it hurt worse than it had ten minutes ago. I tried not to look at it, but my eyes kept wandering back to the bruise and pus. I should have felt something for myself, fear maybe, but I felt only dread for Werrley’s family. If I was stuck here with a broken arm, how was I supposed to help them? Broken bones don’t heal in a month, much less a matter of a couple days. And if I wasn’t supposed to move fast enough to walk somewhere, not supposed to get my heart rate up, how was I supposed to get to Ikarial unless I had a horse? And even then, what if I was too late?

I bowed my head and tried not to cry. Crying wouldn’t help anything. Where were Greyl and Werrley? Why weren’t they back yet? What if something happened to them? What if the farmer didn’t give them a horse, and they had to keep going to the nearest village? They wouldn’t be back until nightfall.

This was all my fault. I gave up trying not to cry, and let the tears fall. If only I hadn’t stopped when the shape shifter came. If only I had run. I wouldn’t have a broken arm, we wouldn’t have had to stop here for a horse. I sobbed freely, not caring that I was being too loud. If something came to eat me, let it. Werrley and Greyl could take up the errand, and they’d move faster with one less person anyway. My kind was cursed, too. So if we ran into any more Dolvani, that would slow us down even more. Why did Werrley have to be sent to me? Why not someone else? I felt miserable. I was cold and stiff, my arm

hurt, and I was crying and getting a headache from it all. I took a shuddering breath and managed to choke down my sobs to a quieter level.

I heard something from the road, and huddled further behind the bush I was in. It didn't sound like Werrley and Greyl, or even one of them alone. I wanted to hold my breath, but knew that if I did, I would have to take a breath sometime and that would be louder than just breathing, so I breathed quietly out of my mouth, my ears straining. I was facing the road, thank goodness, so I could see who or whatever it was when it came to the stretch of road in front of me.

I heard whistling, and a "gittup!" A horse and wagon, driven by an old farmer, came into sight. I stretched my neck up to see the wagon as it stopped. I heard someone jump out of the wagon, and Greyl called,

"Gwendolyn?"

I nearly started crying again when Greyl and Werrley came into sight. Werrley noticed my tear-stained cheeks and fluttered over to me.

"Lady Gwen? What happened? Are you all right?"

I sniffed and nodded. "I was just cold and hurting. I'm glad you're back."

"The farmer said he'll take us in his wagon to the village. He was going anyway and said it would be faster to give us a lift than let us borrow his horse." Greyl helped me to my feet and out to the road.

I hoped there weren't any Dolvani nearby, but I didn't have the strength to look and check. The farmer came over to help me into the wagon, and saw my arm. He gasped.

"Why, lil' lady! They tol' me your arm wuz hurt, but they didn't tol me how bad it wuz! Wut happen' to et?"

I grimaced as they helped me to sit against the wagon side. "I'll let Greyl tell you about it on the way."

The farmer nodded vigorously and spat out his piece of straw.

"All right. Iffen you need ta stop along the way, you jist holler up to meh and Ah'll stop this here wagon. Mah name's Wiggins, jist so you'll know."

The farmer shambled back to his seat and Greyl hopped up beside him. Werrley resumed his spot on my shoulder, and the farmer turned the horse and wagon around and set them off at a brisk trot down the road. I leaned against a sack of flour and a sack of potatoes and tried to ignore the pain that shot through my arm every time we went over a bump in the road. Werrley winced along with me, sharing my pain.

***

By the time we reached the village, silent tears were running down my cheeks. I had my head leaned back against the wagon side, and my eyes were shut tight. My fist was clenched, but other than that, I was relaxed. My arm had resided to a dull ache, which I knew to be a bad sign. It had also stopped oozing, and just resorted to turning colors. Greyl had the farmer stop a couple times, and he came back and washed my arm with water from his canteen, which felt good but only gave me temporary relief. Werrley was perched on my knee now, and was watching my face.

I heard the farmer "woah girl" his horse and felt the wagon stop. I heard people talking inside a nearby building that I assumed to be an inn. Greyl and the farmer came over to me, and Greyl shook my leg.

"We're here. We need you to stand and get inside the inn. Werrley is going to hide in my bag for the time being, and the farmer is keeping his mouth shut about him. Can you walk?"

I shook my head numbly. "I don't know," I whispered. I wished I could just curl up into a little ball and sleep and never wake up. "I don't want to move."

"You must." Greyl slipped an arm under mine, and the other arm under my knees, and carried me into the inn. He occasionally jostled my shoulder, but it was numbing and it didn't hurt. I heard people stop talking and knew they were staring at my arm, but I didn't care. A man I assumed was the bartender snapped at them to quit their gawking and give the girl space. The farmer and the bartender discussed a price for the night and Greyl carried me upstairs and set me on a bed. Tears were still falling from my eyes, but they were tears of frustration and fatigue, not physical pain. I heard Greyl close the door behind him, and then all was silent but my breathing. I was soon asleep.

***

The next morning, I remember nothing but waking up occasionally and being fed a warm broth that tasted like chicken. Occasionally, my arm would hurt some, but I was too groggy to care. I don't know how much time went by. It could have been weeks. Or days. Or years. I just wanted to sleep. Finally, I woke up enough to hear voices.

"They sent a message this morning." That was Werrley talking.

"What did they say? Are they all right?" Greyl's voice.

A pause, then Werrley must have made a non-verbal reply. Greyl's voice was pained as he said,

"I'm sorry."

"It was the fledglings." Werrley whispered it and I almost didn't hear.

Greyl caught his breath and whispered, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” There was a pause for a moment, then, “All of them?”

“Yes.” Werrley took a shuddering breath. “They... thought that doing away with the young ones would keep them from growing more powerful. And that the older ones would be slowed down with the... bodies. And not want to leave them behind. Which is true. But they have no choice. The elders are trying to get the mothers to move. They all have to leave. If any of them stay, they’ll be killed. They have to move.”

There was silence then, and my brain tried to piece together what they meant. Fledglings. Gone. Mothers. They killed the fledglings. I wanted to gasp, or anything. But I couldn’t. I was hearing, but I wasn’t there. It was just my body there. My mind had no control of it. I was still asleep. Hearing but not being there. It was torture. And knowing that it was all my fault. I wanted to cry. To scream. To yell anything. But I couldn’t. I wasn’t there. I was just observing. And it was torture.

It was my fault. All my fault. I somehow summoned enough strength to open my eyes. I blinked a couple times in the dim candlelight, and then my lungs caught up. I started crying. I was wailing. I was sobbing. But it couldn’t wash away the hurt and shame. It was my fault. My fault the babies died.

Werrley and Greyl rushed to my side when I started crying. Greyl checked my arm, thinking it hurt. Now that I thought about it, it did hurt. But my heart hurt more. I kept sobbing. Werrley landed on my knee and hopped from one foot to the other, as he did when he was anxious.

“What hurts?” Greyl gently prodded my arm and daggers shot through it. But I didn’t flinch.

“Lady Gwen, what’s the matter?” Werrley was almost in tears now, seeing me cry.

I took a sobbing breath and managed to croak out, “It’s my fault. All my fault.”

“What is? Your arm?” Werrley was still hopping.

“No!” I resorted to hiccups. “The fledglings.”

Greyl shook his head. “No. Werrley and I already discussed it. It isn’t. It happened two days ago. You had no way to have prevented it.”

“No! You don’t...” I hiccupped. “Don’t understand. If I hadn’t taken the errand, I would have never been stopped by the shape shifter, and if I hadn’t run into the shape shifter, I wouldn’t have a broken arm, and if I didn’t have a broken arm, it wouldn’t be infected, and—” I took a breath, and Werrley took the opportunity to jump in,

“No, Lady Gwen, listen. Nobody’s blaming you. The owls wanted me to tell you that they don’t blame you. If you hadn’t agreed to help, I would have had to go back with nobody. They only want help from you. You’re doing as much as you possibly can be, and it is *not* your fault.”

I kept shaking my head and hiccupping. Greyl washed my arm again with warm water and put some sort of poultice on it. He saw me watching and said,

"It seems to be helping."

I sniffed and hiccupped again. "How long have I been sleeping?"

Greyl and Werrley exchanged looks. "It doesn't matter. What matters right now is that you get your rest and let your arm heal." Werrley patted my knee with his wing.

I frowned at the both of them. "What? No. I know what you're about to say, and *no*."

Greyl smiled. "And what are we about to say?"

"You're about to say that I'm staying here while you two go off and help the owls."

Werrley shook his head. "No. We weren't going to tell you. We were going to head off while you slept."

Greyl nudged Werrley. "Not helping, my friend." He smiled kindly at me. "Look, Gwendolyn. I understand you want to help. You were the ones the owls called for help. But at the moment you can't. You have to accept that. Your arm is in no shape to help. Even if you feel like riding a horse, what are you going to do if we have to fight someone? You can't fight with a broken arm. Sure, you can hold a dagger with your other hand, but someone will see you have a hurt arm and use that to their advantage. It's too dangerous."

I was shaking my head through all this. "I understand all that," I said. "But I'm coming with you."

Werrley was frowning. "Look. Why don't we ask the innkeeper if he'll lend us a couple horses. We can ride on to the next village and see if Gwen still feels like coming. If she does, we rest there and continue. If she ends up needing to stop, she can ride back to the nearest village and stay there."

I nodded. "That would work."

Greyl was still shaking his head. "With your arm you need to keep your heart rate down. Which you can't do on a horse, even if you aren't expending any energy. The adrenaline is still there."

I sighed. "Look. We're wasting time. I feel fine right now. If it makes you feel any better, we can go at a trot for the first bit. But I'm gathering that I've been out for a while now, and we're going to be too late to save the rest of the owls if we don't get a move on."

"Lady Gwen is right, Greyl. We have to move. We only have a day left."

I choked. "A day? That's it? Why didn't you wake me?"

"Gwendolyn... You were close to death," said Greyl gently. "We couldn't wake you. Finally you would wake enough to drink. But we had to stay by your side at all times. You would thrash in your sleep and I had to hold your arm down. You nearly threw yourself off the bed once. Your face was white as snow and you've lost weight."

He paused to let that sink in before making his point clear again. "You almost died. Gwendolyn. That poultice nearly killed you. That's another reason I want to leave you here. You don't have the strength to go on. Even if you think you do, your body can't handle it."

My eyes widened, and then I closed them tight. I almost died. Why? Because I didn't run from the shape shifter. It was my own fault. Why didn't I run? Tears started to run down my cheeks again, and I started sobbing again.

"Lady Gwen, it's all right. You didn't die." Werrley hopped up onto my shoulder.

I shook my head, "It's not that. It's my fault. I should have run from the shape shifter right then. But I didn't. It's my fault."

"*NO*!" Greyl snapped. I jerked my head up and stared at him through blurry eyes, startled. "I said no. Stop blaming yourself. It isn't your fault. You thought it was your friend. You wanted to help your friend. That was good."

I took a deep breath. "Greyl, I understand. But it is my –"

"If you say "it's my fault" one more time..." Greyl left his threat empty, but I got his point.

"Look, Greyl. I won't say it any more. But I can't help but feel and think it. I have to make it up. I have to come with you. I have to try."

Greyl and Werrley looked at each other and sighed.

"You know the risks involved?" asked Greyl.

I nodded. "I think so, unless there's something else you guys aren't telling me"

Werrley and Greyl exchanged looks. "Actually yes. There were two Dolvani circling outside yesterday."

I nearly whimpered. No, I did whimper. They keep finding me. What did they want? "Ok." My voice was small. "Ok. I can deal with it. Anything else?"

Werrley and Greyl shook their heads. "No. Just that." Greyl washed my arm again and put more poultice on it, then wrapped it up and tied it to my shoulder. "Here you go. Hopefully that will help the swelling go down. Now, if we're all packed, we need to go. The Dolvani don't fly at night."

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and immediately felt nauseated. I reached for the wash basin on the table next to me and hung my head over it. Nothing came up, and that just made me feel worse. I wanted to vomit. I needed to vomit. I went to gag myself but Greyl stopped me.

"No. You need to keep that in your stomach. You need the nutrition. You'll feel better soon."

I groaned, but pushed the wash basin away and stood up with the help of Greyl. I looked around for my cloak and saw it with my pack draped over a chair. Greyl went to get it for me, but I stopped him.

"Let me. I need to walk." I took a couple steps and my legs shook with the strain. I stretched them a bit and felt them loosen up. I walked the rest of the way and put my pack over my shoulder, then my cloak on with the help of Greyl. I took a deep breath.

"I'm ready." I said.

Werrley perched on my shoulder and we began to go downstairs. We were stopped in the hall by a woman who was in the room next to us.

"I heard you felt bad this week," she said. "I'm glad to see you up and around. What ailed you?"

I smiled at her. "I have a broken arm. It got infected and had an allergic reaction to some herbs we used on it. I'm much better now. We're heading back home now."

"I'm so glad," she said. She reached out to touch my arm, but I pulled it back. "Oh, I'm sorry! I just though since you were up and around it was probably healed."

I shook my head. "No, it's still broken. If you'll excuse us, we really need to get going."

"Oh, of course! I'm sorry! I hope you get better soon!" The woman hurried off back into her room and we continued down the stairs.

After we got out of earshot, I whispered, "She felt wrong somehow. Not shapeshifter wrong, but... wrong."

Greyl nodded. "Telling her we were going home was good. I think she's probably a spy of some sort."

"From whom? Who would care about what we're doing?" asked Werrley.

"I don't know, and that's the trouble. Nobody from Ikarial would know we're coming, and I can't think of anybody else who would care." Greyl was frowning thoughtfully. "This is nice."

I sighed. "Probably just some lady looking for gossip. Though I don't know why she would have tried to touch my arm."

"And that's why I'm worried. If it wasn't for that..." Greyl glanced back upstairs. "We should go. Now."

We hurried downstairs and greeted the innkeeper, who saw our hurry and expressed his well-wishes and let us buy a horse from him.

"Just take him for half price. You folks look like nice people, and the lady needs to get home soon," was his parting remark.

We were soon on the road, me sitting in front of Greyl, with him holding the reins and Werrley snuggled into my pack. I glanced back once and saw three horses and riders coming along fast. I mentioned this to Greyl, who said nothing but set his mouth in a hard line and sped up our horse a bit as we went around a curve in the road. There was a fork on the other side, and he took the left one, that continued away from the next village. He pulled our horse to a stop and dismounted us quickly, pulling us all into the bushes.

"Stay still and quiet," he whispered. "They'll be expecting us to take the other fork, and with any luck we can get around them this way. I know who they are, and I'll explain later."

He held his hand over the horse's nose to quiet the whinny it let out. Greyl's eyes were wide and searching as he stared into the night behind us where we just came from, looking for the riders.

My arm began to cramp. My bad arm. I stifled a whimper and leaned on Greyl to try and relieve any pressure I could from that side. He glanced at me worriedly. I heard hoofbeats as the riders came around the bend, and I heard them take the right fork, like Greyl predicted. He made us wait for five more minutes before leading us back onto the road, mounting again, and off we went at a canter. He said in my ear,

"This will buy us a little time at least. At some point they'll realize they were tricked and come this way. We have to be on our guard. And there are three of them."

We kept going through the night and well into the morning. The horse was tiring and so were we. I was nodding off and my arm hurt. I nudged Greyl with my elbow and he nodded.

"We're stopping soon. Up here is a grove of oaks. We'll rest there."

He tended to prefer oaks over any other tree. I guessed that was because of his race, whatever that may have been, but that wasn't the first thing on my mind right now. Right now, what I cared about was sleep. And food. Food first, and then a change of poultice, fresh air for my arm, then sleep.

We finally stopped and Greyl changed the herbs on my arm and rolled up his own cloak for me to rest my head on. I was asleep in minutes.

Chapter IV

[title]

“Wake up, Lady Gwen.” Werrley poked me with a wing. “Greyl wants us moving as quickly as possible. He says that by now, our followers have turned around.”

I groaned and sat up, carefully moving my arm around at the elbow to stretch it like I was supposed to.

“Where is Greyl?” I asked. I didn’t see him anywhere.

“He’s out on the other side of the road looking for something. I don’t know when he’ll be back. He has the horse.”

I nodded and got up with the help of a tree nearby. My cloak and pack were hanging on a branch, and I put them on carefully. Werrley was sitting next to the remains of our campfire and nudged a couple apples over to me.

“These were set out for us. I don’t like apples, so you can have them both.”

I picked them up and munched on one and put the other in my pack. We heard someone with a horse clip-clop over to us, and Greyl and the horse poked their heads through the shrubs.

“Ready to go? We really need to be at the village before nightfall. I have a friend there who can help us.”

I took a deep breath, which I seemed to be doing a lot nowadays, and let Greyl help me up. Werrley poked himself down into my pack and Greyl mounted behind me.

“I went to find water for the horse,” he said, as he led the horse into a gallop. “And also to send a message to my friend. She’ll be watching for us later.”

I winced as my arm bounced up and down. Greyl noticed me favoring it and said,

“I’m sorry I couldn’t treat it this morning, but we needed to be on the road as soon as possible. We can stop later and rest and I’ll rewrap it and all.”

I nodded and held onto the horse’s neck with my good hand. I knew I wouldn’t fall off because Greyl had his arms on each side of me, on the reins, but I still felt the rocking of the horse as it stumbled on a rock.

We rode on and on, occasionally stopping for a drink or a quick rest, but we never stopped for more than a couple minutes before Greyl would urge us on again. Our stops got less frequent as the day went on, and Greyl pushed the horse faster. Once, when we had stopped for a break, he said,

"They're making good timing. I can only hope we don't come to a distraction."

By "distraction", I knew he meant the Dolvani. I hoped we didn't run into one, too. Those things were evil, and we would make a good target, right there on the road. No sooner had those thoughts crossed my mind, however, we heard a shriek from far above us. I jerked my head up and searched through the treetops for the source of it. I knew what it was. It was a Dolvan. I began to wonder if thinking about them sent up a beacon or something, but Greyl muttered a curse under his breath and said,

"They're sending them after us now. They know we can't take the roads with the Dolvani above us, and if we go through the woods, we have to leave the horse."

I whimpered. "Just leave me. You go on. They want me, not you."

Werrley spoke up from my knee. "Lady Gwen, make up your mind! One minute you want us to leave you, the next minute you're begging us to take you because you're the one the owls called, and then you're saying leave you! We are not leaving you."

"Gwendolyn, please make this easy. We have no time to waste sitting here arguing about whether or not you're coming or not. You're coming." Greyl said. "Now. We need a plan. Right now." He scanned the area and his gaze lit on something a ways off in the woods. His eyes lit up. "Perfect. We just need a raft."

Werrley and I looked in the direction he was looking. There was a creek, but it was flowing opposite the direction we wanted to go. We'd have to first make a raft, then we'd have to take turns with a pole and push it. Greyl saw my apprehensive look and said,

"Look, it's our only shot. Unless you want to run and alert every one of our position."

"But we'd have to cut down a tree or two, tie them all together with something, and then pole it up the creek! That isn't efficient at all!"

"Would you rather run?" asked Greyl.

"Yes." I stared back at him solemnly.

Greyl took a breath. "Well then. We'll take a vote. All in favor of using a raft?" He put his own hand in the air. Werrley and I did not. "All in favor of running?"

Werrley put his wing up and I put my hand up. Greyl did not look pleased.

"Werrley, would you mind telling me why you're against a raft?" he asked.

“I can’t help build it or push it. I’m an owl. A small owl. I would have to sit back and watch while you two did all the work, and that’s not happening,” Werrley reasoned.

Greyl still didn’t look happy, but nodded. “Fine then. We run.” He took off down the creek, and Werrley ducked into my bag, then thought better of it and perched on my shoulder holding my braid, as I hurried to catch up. For a small man like Greyl, I was a bit surprised by how fast he could run.

“Greyl, what about the horse?” I asked, huffing along beside him.

“We leave it.”

“And let them use him?” Werrley asked.

“They won’t want a farm horse.” Greyl took a sharp right turn with the creek, and I had to slow down to make it.

“All right then,” was my reply.

We ran for a while, and finally Greyl called for a stop.

“Look. We can’t do this. We can’t keep running and expect to outrun a horse. We have to do something else!”

I was all for that, but I knew, and knew he knew, that we had no time to do anything else now. He must have seen the look on my face, because he said,

“I know, I know. But we must try to think of something. And I apologize for earlier. I was frustrated and not thinking clearly. A raft would not have been reasonable.” He was quiet for a few minutes, then pulled out his map and spread it out in front of us. The red dot showed us in the middle of the forest, like we didn’t know that already, but Greyl traced the creek with a finger until it ran out into a bay.

“We could try to float down the creek to here, then cut along the shoreline to the village. If we had a raft.”

I frowned. “Weren’t we running upstream?”

“Yes. But there’s a place we passed where there was a natural spring. At that point, the creek splits and runs two different ways. We’re now running downstream.”

I nodded. I had been too busy running to pay much attention, but now that I thought about it, I did remember seeing something like that. “So now what? We can’t just magically make a raft appear, and we don’t have time to build one.”

Greyl looked around. “That’s the problem. I think I’m going to have to hide us.”

“Hide us? Where is there to hide us?” I motioned around at all the trees. It was open under the treetops, and you could see for a ways in each direction. There were no caves, no rocks. No little hills. There was the creek, but it wasn’t deep enough to have an outcropping eroded away.

“Hush. I’m thinking.” Greyl had his eyes closed, and he began muttering something in that strange tongue again. After a moment, his eyes popped open and he smiled. “I have it. There are oak roots nearby. If we can make it closer to them, they can help.”

I didn’t quite understand, but by now, it was pretty obvious he shared some bond with oak trees in particular. And right now, I would take any help I could get.

Werrley piped up from my shoulder. “We need to hurry. Horses are close.”

Greyl didn’t question this, and he consulted his map once more, looked up and to his right, then took off with us close behind. I began to wonder if he was as old as he looked. He looked to be around ninety, but he sure didn’t run like a ninety year-old. He was running faster than a twenty-three year-old.

We ran for about five more minutes, then Greyl skidded to a halt. “Here,” he panted. “See that oak? Her roots reach to here. She will help us.” He paused long enough to catch his breath, then sat me on the ground and closed his eyes and began muttering again.

I closed my eyes, as not to get dizzy if the forest moved us again. It didn’t, and when I opened my eyes, there was a huge root... no, a tangle of roots, covering me. There was light shining through from above, but I couldn’t see out. Then I realized that I could indeed see out. There was a hole beside me, big enough to fit a medium-sized warhorse through, and plenty big enough to be seen from the direction the riders would come from. Greyl hopped down from somewhere above me and squeezed himself in the small indention in the ground, beside me.

“This is the best she can do. I’ll have to do something about the size of the hole myself. The problem is, I don’t know if I can.”

I was shaking, tired of being tensed up so as not to lean on my arm. “Please try.”

Greyl was already muttering under his breath, and I closed my eyes tight again, begging whatever he was doing to work. I could hear hoofbeats in the distance, and I could feel the ground shake as they got closer. I knew Greyl could hear them, too, because he sped up his mutters, and his voice became strained. It was draining his energy, whatever he was doing.

Finally, just as it felt as though if we waited any longer we would be caught, Greyl finished muttering and leaned back against me. But then he jumped back, and turned towards me, his eyes wide.

“Oh, good. Making sure I wasn’t leaning on your bad arm.” He took a breath. He had a bead of sweat on his upper lip, and he was breathing a bit heavily. “We’ll see how long this deters them. Meanwhile, we need to be thinking about what we’re doing when we have a chance to get out of here.”

I looked around him and saw the hole was closed over with ivy. It didn’t quite fit with the oak roots, but unless you looked closely, there wasn’t really anything noticeable.

“Do they know you can... do that?” I nodded at the ivy.

“I don’t think–” Greyl stopped. “Where’s Werrley?”

I sucked in a breath. He wasn’t in my pocket, or my pack. He had been on my shoulder the last time I saw him, before Greyl did the thing, or before the oak did the thing, with the roots.

Greyl saw my terrified face, and said quickly, “It’s ok. He’s an owl. He can hide easily. Besides, I don’t think they’re looking for just an owl. They’ll be looking for two people running through the woods. Now hush.”

The hoofbeats had faded while we were talking, and now they came back into hearing distance.

“That was them rounding that curve in the road,” Greyl whispered.

I nodded. Maybe they would come from the other direction, and just see the back of the roots and not the ivy. We heard another shriek from the air above the trees, and then another. That made at least two Dolvani up there. I fought back a shudder. Greyl had twisted so his back was to the ivy, and he was leaning on his arms instead of my side. I was still tensed, trying to keep my weight off my left arm. Greyl made a motion that I didn’t understand.

“Twist around so you’re on your back. That way you can stay still for longer, should you need to,” he whispered.

I nodded, and did as he said. If they were to come right up close to us, and my arm was to give out, or if I had to shift, they would hear. Better to do it now. I let out a quiet breath from my mouth, and tried not to think about Werrley getting caught. Without him, I wouldn’t know where to go or what to do. He was the one who knew the extent of the matter with the owls, and where exactly they were. Not to mention the fact that I had grown incredibly fond of the little owl.

The hoofbeats drew closer, and my thoughts wandered to questions I wanted to ask Greyl. Who were these people? What did they want with us? How did they know us? What would they do to us if they found us? My heartbeat began to speed up until it matched the pace of the hoofbeats, ever drawing closer. They must be off the road now. The ground began to shake more, and I could feel the vibrations in my arm. It started to throb, and my head along with it. Hang these headaches! I closed my eyes, trying to will the pain away. Wishing Greyl could rinse my arm with cold water and rewrap the bandages, give it a chance to breathe. Wishing I had never gotten into this mess.

There we go again, I thought. I sighed internally. There I go again, wishing I had never been called for by the owls. Werrley would smack me if he heard me thinking like this. That thought got me thinking about him again and within a few seconds I was shivering with anxiety over what they'd do to him if they found him and found out he was with me and Greyl. Which brought me back to the questions I wanted to ask Greyl.

I stifled a whimper and pressed my good arm closer to Greyl's hand. He moved his hand over mine and I found a surprising amount of comfort in the simple gesture. I listened to the hoofbeats get closer, right over our heads almost. Then they stopped, and I knew the riders had reigned the horse in. All was silent for a moment, except for the panting of the horses. Then one rider spoke up.

"What if we can't find them?" His voice was surprisingly regal, yet rough.

Another one answered, "The commander will be mad, that's what."

The first man spoke up again. "I know that, Kylian. But what will be the consequence?"

"I dunno and I don't want to know."

A third voice said, "Stop your jabbering and take your rest."

I heard stirrups jingle and light footsteps as the men dismounted. Then the roots above us creaked as someone sat down. I was barely breathing and I felt Greyl stiffen more. All it would take was a little close inspection of the roots to see that there was a space underneath, and then a curious inspection of the back side would disclose the vines, then- *No. Stop it, Gwendolyn. Don't think that way. They're on their way to find a couple people on foot, not about to take a close look at some random roots.*

The first man spoke again.

"What does Boss want with Greyl, anyhow?"

"Hanged if I know," said the second, Kylian. "It doesn't matter to us, though, does it?"

"I was just curious." The first man's voice was tinged with a bit of anger. "He never tells us anything, and it's boring just tromping the woods with no clue why."

Kylian replied, "Well, he doesn't have to tell us every little thing. Maybe it's personal. Maybe it's not. It's none of our business, anyhow."

The third man spoke up and said, "Are you two done with your break? We're wasting time."

"Wait, Captain. I heard something," the first man hissed.

They were silent for a few minutes, and I was paranoid that maybe Greyl or I had made some noise. But then the second man said,

"What's that? On that tree branch?" I heard leather on leather as Kylian presumably gestured upwards.

"It's just an owl," said the first man.

I felt my heartbeat speed up. *They saw Werrley!*

The third man, the captain, snapped, "Like I said, wasting time. Let's go. Boss wanted us back yesterday, and wasn't happy when I sent that messenger saying we hadn't found the guy yet. The longer we wait, the madder he'll get."

"Fine, fine." I heard the roots creak as the first man got up. "But just because you're the captain, don't think that I can't take orders directly from the boss."

"Marek, watch your tongue." The captain's voice was warning. I heard the men mount their horses.

"Who was that girl that was with Greyl? Never seen her before."

"No clue. Maybe a prostitute or something."

Greyl tensed beside me, and I could sense him scowling, as protective as ever.

Kylian's voice was gently reproving. "Watch what you say around here, Captain. You nearly got mobbed at that inn back there because someone understood your comment to the innkeeper's daughter."

I got the feeling that the captain shrugged, because the first man said, "And don't brush it off that quickly. You'll get into real trouble someday."

"Not that you would seem to care, Marek. What I've been hearing all week has sounded a lot like insolence."

The captain gave a sharp order in a strange tongue, and I heard them turn their horses around and ride off in the direction of the village.

As the hoofbeats faded into the distance, Greyl shifted beside me, and wriggled his way out of our little hovel. He turned to help me out, being careful not to bump my arm. He was grumpy, and muttered,

"I can't believe him. Insulting to the both of us."

I agreed, but would rather the Riders not think I was any danger to their orders.

"It's fine. Just ignore them."

I sat down on the roots and began unwrapping the bandages. Greyl was already getting his new poultice ready, and had a bottle of water ready to wash my arm. I looked around for Werrley. I didn't see him anywhere. I wanted to call out for him, but couldn't risk being heard by the Riders.

Greyl finished unwrapping my arm, and took in a sharp breath. I didn't look. I didn't have to. It was hurting enough I knew it had swelled more. Greyl gently rinsed off the old poultice and let my arm dry, then applied the new poultice and let it sit for a few minutes before wrapping my arm back up in new bandages. I was still looking around for Werrley.

"He knows where we're going. If at all possible, he'll meet us at the village." It seemed Greyl read my mind, but he probably just saw my gaze sweeping the trees. "If you feel strong enough, I'll have you stand so the Lady can pull her roots back."

I stood, and immediately the tree's roots retracted into the ground, unweaving themselves as they went. It wasn't an unpleasant sight, but for someone who had just been sitting under them for a good ten minutes, it was a bit unnerving to watch.

Greyl stood as well, and handed me a water flask.

"Have a drink, then we'll start off again."

I did as he told me, and handed him the flask back. I took a deep breath and turned, facing east.

"Let's go."

Chapter V

{title}

Greyl and I walked for miles it seemed, through the forest. We stopped a few times for a break and a drink. We saw no sign of the Riders, or of anything or anyone besides ourselves. Finally, I called to Greyl who was walking a few paces ahead of me.

"I need to sit. My arm..."

Greyl was by my side instantly, helping me sit on a little knoll. He quickly changed the bandages, and handed me water and an apple.

"Greyl, what are we going to do about my arm? We can't continue to just... do nothing."

He was silent. Finally he said,

"I'm going to be honest with you, Gwendolyn. It may have to come off."

I jerked my head up to look at him. "Like, amputated?"

Greyl nodded. "I don't know for sure. I have a friend in the village who can tell us. The only problem will be getting there, because I'm fairly certain that the riders will be waiting for us as soon as we set foot out of the forest. It's my own fault for not checking to make sure you had no reaction to the herbs. I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "No. You had no reason to think I might be allergic to them. Just because you were the one who put the poultice on my arm doesn't make you accountable. Now, this friend of yours..." I trailed off. "Can we really risk another person knowing about our mission? She'll want to know exactly what happened and how. We'd have to tell her. Can we trust her?"

Greyl nodded. "Wise assumptions. Yes, we can trust her. She doesn't dabble in gossip, so she wouldn't care about it except that it has to do with your arm. She'd only care about the medical side."

I frowned. "Ok. But I don't like doing this without asking Werrley first. After all, this is his family we're talking about. He insisted on staying in my pocket while we walked through Asterdgen, and this village is much larger. I don't know how he'd feel about another person in on the mission."

I sighed. “I wish he was close. Here with us still. I worry about him. He’s just an owl, even though he’s a smart one. He could become something’s meal all too easily, or be caught for his feathers before he could blink.”

Greyl smiled at me kindly. “I understand. And I wouldn’t feel right doing it, either. But it may be that we have no choice. The longer we sit here, the worse your arm gets. At some point, we’ll have to risk going into the village, and we’ll have to risk telling Dana about your arm. With or without Werrley.”

I was silent for a while. I was pretty sure if Werrley were here he’d tell me to stop being silly, and go get my arm healed if possible. But I didn’t know why he’d flown away. Maybe he had got a message from his people. Maybe the mission had failed. Maybe... Well, any number of things. I sighed once more, and leaned my head back against a tree. I stared up at the sunlight filtering through the branches above me, the little specks of dust floating lazily around. A shadow passed overhead. A scream. Dolvani. I froze, not breathing. Greyl had looked up when the shadow passed over, and his mouth was set in a hard line.

“Gwen,” he whispered. “We’ve got to get a move on. If the Riders are sending out Dolvani after us, they’ll send other things as well. We must be at the village before that happens.”

I nodded and took a breath. We continued on through the trees, Greyl checking his map occasionally or muttering to himself in his native tongue. Finally we could see the walls of the village through the trees ahead.

“Gwendolyn, wait here. I’m going ahead to see if we’re clear to go in.”

I shook my head. “No. It’s you they’re looking for. They’ll have spies who will recognize you and capture you on the spot. Let me go. I’ll pull my cowl up over my head and keep my eyes to the ground.”

“Gwendolyn, as much as I appreciate that, and aside from your arm, you don’t know what to look for.”

“Then tell me.” I stared at him calmly. “Tell me what to look for. Let me do this.”

Greyl stared back for longer than would usually be tolerated. Finally, he sighed. “No. Give me your cloak. Let me wear it. We go in together.”

I unclasped the pin that held my cloak, and Greyl pulled it around him. It was long on me, and on him it dragged the ground, dwarfing his smaller frame.

“In case something goes wrong…” Greyl pulled his map from his bag and handed it to me. “Take this. Ask around the village for Dana Salisbury, and if someone tells you that they’ll show you where she lives, instead of simply giving directions, do not follow.”

I looked down at the map for a moment before putting it in my own bag. “Let’s hope I can give this back someday. What does her house look like?”

Greyl frowned. “It depends on her mood. Come.” He pulled the cowl over his head. “One more thing… You must do the speaking if need be. My voice will be recognized.” He led me out onto the road and through the gate into the village. I nodded to the gatekeepers, who gave me bored nods back.

Greyl and I walked through the town, skirting around the market crowds. He led me past a couple guards, who gave us curious glances as we passed. I was tempted to curl my lip at them, and did so, but kept my face hid. We came across a few more people as we walked, but they didn’t seem to pay us any mind. Then Greyl took hold of my good arm and pulled me into the shelter of an alley, up against a wall. Footsteps passed, and I saw the backs of three men in black cloaks. The Riders. Greyl waited for a couple minutes before pressing onward. Finally, Greyl pointed ahead of us at a small cottage nestled on a corner between a bakery and a blacksmith.

“Right there. Go.”

I looked down at him and frowned. “You’re coming, too, right?”

Greyl shook his head. It’ll be too suspicious to anyone watching. They know Dana is my friend. You go. Tell her I sent you, and that I’ll join you when I feel it’s safe. I’ll be fine. I spent fifteen years in this village. I know people and places. Now shoo.”

He gave me a gentle push towards the cottage, and with one last glace back at him, I went. At the door, I knocked. I heard gentle footsteps inside, and muttering. The door was opened and a voice said,

“Rimming, I’ve told you thrice, I don’t want any of your—”

We stared at each other for near upon a minute, neither of us seeing what we had expected. Her head barely came up to my chest, and her hair fell to her ankles. It was pure white, but I thought I saw bits of red mixed in as she moved. I could feel her eyes sweep up and down, lingering on my arm and on my hip, where my bag rested.

“Well, come in, dear.” The woman stepped aside and held the door. “Have a seat on that stool and let me look at your arm.”

I stepped into the room, looking around me as I did so. It was incredibly neat and organized, except for one desk along one of the walls. Bundles of plants hung from the beams, some still fresh, some dried, and some in-between. Shelves of bottles and jars were decorated with bouquets of flowers, a fire was burning merrily, and an oval rag rug contrasted with the wooden floor planks. I sat on the stool and the woman unwrapped the bandages on my arm.

“You must have an interesting story, dear. It’s not every day that Greyl takes in a young woman with such fire in her eyes.”

“Are you Dana? How’d you know I was with Greyl?” I asked, trying not to notice the pain that was shooting through my arm.

She snorted. “Please. I’d recognize his bandaging job anywhere. He goes over, not under, here.” She pointed to a section of bandage. “And under, not over, here.” She rolled her eyes. “Takes up nearly half again as many bandages as it should use. And yes. I’m Dana.”

I found myself smiling at the fond way she criticized him. “I’m Gwendolyn. Nice to meet you.” My smile faded as Dana unwrapped the final bit, and the raw air hit my arm. I explained as much as I could without mentioning Werrley, and said that Greyl thought it may have to come off. Dana was nodding along and ghosting her fingers over my arm. I finished, and she was silent for a moment. Then she nodded again and went to a shelf, grabbing jars without hardly looking at the labels.

She does this a lot. I watched her as she pulled a new roll of bandages from another shelf, and a small knife from her belt. She sat down beside me again and brushed her hair over her shoulder. Now it looked like it had black undertones, but maybe it was just the fire casting shadows.

“Will it need to be amputated?” I watched her as she cut a length of bandage about half the length Greyl had been using.

She was silent, and I began to wonder if she heard me. But then she sat back, and studied my face with a calculating expression. “I can’t say, exactly, dear. It will depend on how far the infection has spread.” She thought for a few minutes, turning her knife over in her hands, fingers smoothing over the blade and handle. Finally, she looked back up at me from where she had been staring into the fire.

“I can give you a poultice that will numb the pain, so you can try to go onward, or I can take it off. I don’t know if I have the right to tell you one way or another what you should do. Ultimately... this will be your choice. Greyl cannot make it for you, and I cannot. Though I will warn you, probably needlessly, that your life is in danger if I amputate. If you really were close to death, as you said Greyl told you, you’re still not up to full strength, and may not be able to take the blood loss and stress.”

I sat there, silent. My thoughts raced back and forth between Werrley and my own health. If I went onward, disregarding my condition, I could die on the way or soon after. If I wished to help Werrley, I would lose my arm. I leaned back, then realized I couldn’t do so on a stool. I grimaced, straightening my back.

Dana sat there patiently, silently, letting me listen to my thoughts and the crackling fire. I glanced outside, noting that it was a little past sunset. I looked back to the fire, flitting my eyes over the flames, seeking some sort of guidance in the flickering light, and finding none. My thoughts wandered to Greyl, wondering if he was safe and how soon he could join us. I closed my eyes, wishing he was here. His presence was soothing.

My thoughts kept getting further and further from the situation at hand, and I found them back in Asterdgen in a little white-trimmed cottage with roses lining the front walk; soft notes flowing from a lyre, lyrics hummed from breath that smelled of rosemary. Blue eyes twinkling softly, something between a smirk and smile gracing those lips.

I was startled out of my reverie by the creaking of the stool Dana sat upon as she stood. My eyes opened, and I glanced over as she went quickly to a back door I hadn't noticed upon my arrival. Her knife was in her hand, but she was relaxed as she tucked the hand beneath her apron and opened the door, searching the night outside. I heard a few soft words in a familiar strange tongue, in a familiar soothing voice. As a short figure wrapped in my cloak entered, I went to stand; but felt the blood drain from my head. I dropped back down the couple inches I had risen, resting my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands.

Greyl shed the cloak and was by my side in an instant, looking over my arm that Dana had yet to re-bandage. I looked him up and down at the same time, checking for any scratches that he hadn't had when we parted. I found none that I could see, which made me feel better, but his eyes were hollow. I touched his arm with my good hand, and his eyes flicked up to meet mine, searching. I opened my mouth to ask him what happened, but thought better of it. He would tell me in time, if he saw fit. I shook my head, and nodded at my arm.

{stuff}

Greyl nodded, surely expecting as much. "You want me to offer advice, tell you what to do. I can't. The only thing I can say is go with your first instinct. More often than not, your first instinct is as right as you'll be able to get. I wish I could offer you more guidance than that. Really, I do."

The hollowness in his eyes was there again, stronger and deeper. I once again nearly asked him about it, but once again didn't. I looked down at my hands, ignoring the ache that was spreading through my arm again. Dana pulled another stool closer and sat with us, offering me companionable silence. I appreciated it, but right then I would almost have rather had the noise of a bustling crowd than our breathing mixed with the fire. I stared into the fire, and Werrley's voice protruded through my thoughts.

"Lady Gwen, make up your mind!"

I sighed, then looked up at Dana.

"Do it."

Chapter VI

{title}

[INSERT PARAGRAPH ABOUT THE OAKENGUILD IN PARTICULAR HERE BEFORE JUMPING HEADFIRST INTO GREYL'S PERSPECTIVE. IT'LL BE CONFUSING IF YOU DON'T DO SOMETHING]

Greyl stood outside Dana's back door, in the alley, shifting from one foot to the other. He'd been waiting for about ten minutes now. He'd heard nothing from inside but Dana's humming as she worked. He supposed that was good. No pain. He took a deep breath and glanced from side to side again, as he'd done every five minutes. No sign of anyone.

Greyl adjusted his cowl- Gwen's cowl- so it covered his face better, and leaned back in the shadows against the wall, away from the light of the single lantern in the middle of the alley, closing his eyes and opening his ears and mind, letting his sixth sense see for him. He reached out with his seventh sense and found the faint pulsing of energy that came from the dying oak that stood on the edge of the market. He found comfort in the energy it still gave off. Not much. But some. Just enough to balance the pain he felt for it. He had once sat up in its branches as a child and young adult, and had a special bond with it through his own energy.

Greyl felt a tear rise in his eye, and made no effort to blink it back. Letting it fall was better. It had always been better. Just as long as no one was around to see him begin to crumble. He always prided himself on his ability to help and comfort people and stay strong in tough places. But he never showed his own pain. He'd seen many things in his life, many of them undesirable, and as time went on he was slowly losing his faith in humanity.

The door opened, and Greyl snapped his eyes open, turning towards Dana. He searched her face for anything to tell him of Gwendolyn's condition.

"She's asking for you. You can come in."

Greyl all but ran to Gwen's side. She was staring blankly at what was left of her left arm, amputated at the elbow, neatly bandaged. Dana was clearing away her knives and a bundle wrapped in bloody linen.

Greyl took Gwendolyn's hand. "How do you feel?"

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with confusion. "I don't know. It doesn't hurt too much. But it does, at the same time."

Greyl nodded, and was about to reply when he felt his seventh sense twitch. He opened his mind to it, reaching out in question to the dying oak. He felt the warmth of a final pulse of energy, then it faded from his senses, leaving him cold and empty.

He took in a sharp breath, bowing his head. He felt Dana's eyes on him, then her hand on his shoulder, understanding and comforting. He swallowed the sob that threatened to rise, and looked at Gwendolyn again. When he was sure he wasn't going to end his words in tears, he asked,

"Gwendolyn? Will you be alright if I go back outside for a bit?"

She nodded, her hand slipping from his. "Yes. I'll be fine."

Greyl stood up from the bed, grabbed Gwen's cloak once more, and was out the door before Dana could say anything to him. He slipped into the shadows beside the door to put the cloak on, then took another look at the house before he let the alleys to the market welcome him as one of their own shadows. He slipped from corner to corner, avoiding the puddles of lamp-light and the occasional guard.

He walked quickly along the edge of the market, until he came to the east side, where he stopped and looked up at the oak before him. It had always stood strong, boughs swaying in whatever wind happened to come along, holding up platters of snow in the winters, and nesting birds in the spring. Offering shade in the summer, and a blanket of auburn leaves in the fall. It still looked alive. It still had its leaves, still had its imposing stature. But Greyl could feel that it was no more. The next storm that came in from the sea would collapse it, and probably this side of the market as well.

He took a seat on one of the roots that pushed up through the earth, and leaned back against the trunk. He kept his eyes open, watching the empty market. Ears alert, listening to every sound. Sixth sense awake, feeling around his sub-consciousness for anything amiss. Yet his seventh sense felt nothing. Nothing besides cold and emptiness. Loss. The lamplight began to blur as saltwater rose in Greyl's eyes. He reached his hand back to rest on the lifeless trunk, caressing every groove of the bark. He remembered climbing up in the branches as a young boy, pulling himself higher and higher until he poked his head out of the leaves at the very highest point, the breeze ruffling his hair, looking out over the village, just barely able to see the edge of the forest where the sea would begin.

Greyl looked up above him, knowing from memory where each branch would be. He stood quietly, and reached up to the first one, testing its strength. In moments, despite being years older than he used to be, he had climbed up to the very top and found the branch he used to sit on. He looked out over the village, his gaze finding Dana's house where he knew Gwen would still be lying. Perhaps she was sleeping now.

He tipped his head back to look up at the sky, finding the different constellations and patterns. He slipped back down a few feet to a different branch, and let his eyes close and his head lean back against the trunk. His senses were still alert, for he had not forgotten the danger of being in the village right then. Letting his ears concentrate harder, he heard a wolf howl a few miles off, a whippoorwill cooing his lonely song somewhere in his own cozy nest, and... Greyl snapped his eyes open. Moonlight filtered down

through the branches, and he could just see the ground beneath him. A cloaked figure passed across a patch of light, paused, and then sat down. Greyl felt his hand move to his belt, where his knife hung. His fingers glanced across the hilt, then pulled, loosening it. It was in his hand now, and he shifted to plant his feet more firmly on the branches below. The figure hadn't moved from the spot, but sat playing with something in his hands, twisting it back and forth.

Greyl moved further out onto his branch, selecting a clear path through the boughs, and dropped. He let the ground absorb the impact, and called on the roots of oak beneath him as well, landing in a crouch not as steady as it would have been fifty years ago. His knife was held out, pointed at the figure. Greyl's back was to the village, yet he didn't turn to check behind him. He swept out with his sixth sense and found no one but the figure in front of him, who had looked up from his hands as Greyl dropped.

The figure's hood was up over his head, yet Greyl could feel his eyes upon him, appraising his stance and his knife. Greyl found himself checking that his feet were planted firmly, his knees bent, ready to move, for worry that there was fault to be found. Then he shook off the worrying, not liking the masterful aura of the figure. Greyl was the master here. Not this man. It was a man; for Greyl recognized the way the figure moved and sat, and his build was decidedly masculine. Greyl shifted his stance slightly, and relaxed his grip on his knife.

"Good evening, sir." The man spoke softly and gently, and Greyl recognized the voice, yet unable to place it. "I trust I did not disturb your musings?"

Greyl dipped his head. "Good evening." He reciprocated the soft tone. "No, not to speak of. You will forgive my inquiry of your name and business, of course, as it is rather late and we are secluded here."

Greyl could sense the man smile. "Of course. Captain Dharin Rider of the fifth Trio, of the east Quintant." [make sure you have a consistent system going here]

Ah. That was it. The leader of the three pursuers. Greyl was silent a moment, and Dharin took the chance to ask,

"And who do I have the pleasure of meeting?"

At Greyl's continued silence, the man cocked his head to the side inquiringly.

"I believe you know already, Captain." Greyl tightened his fingers around the hilt of the knife. "And I believe that, as a citizen of [city], I have the simple right of knowing what it is I am wanted for, before being arrested."

Dharin flipped his hood back, revealing a strong jaw and chestnut hair. As he leaned his head back against the tree the moon shone off the soft waves that framed his face. His eyes seemed to search the stars above for something. "Yes, Greyl of the Oakenguild... you do have that right. You could take me

to court for not allowing you to have it, and yet—" he tipped his head back down to meet Greyl's eyes. "I cannot tell you, for I do not know. Commander Vulferym did not see it fit to tell me."

Greyl allowed himself a raised eyebrow. "Where are the other two?"

Dharin's expression immediately soured. "In the overnight prison. One charged with excessive intoxication and initiating a brawl, the other found guilty by association."

Greyl hummed. "Reflects badly on you, Captain."

Dharin narrowed his eyes, yet Greyl could sense he was angrier at his companions than at Greyl. "Yes." Suddenly, his look changed to something unreadable. "Would you let me buy you a drink?"

Greyl raised both eyebrows. The Riders [how are the groups named? Do the captains get to pick a name?] were sent to arrest him, and here was their captain, offering to buy him a drink?

Dharin smiled. "I wish to talk. I cannot leave without my men, and the night is young."

Greyl twitched the corners of his mouth up slightly. "The night may be... but I am not, I'm afraid."

Dharin laughed, and the sound was soft and pleasant, like church bells on a spring wedding day. "Is that how you decline? Without even an apology?"

Greyl thought on it a moment, then relaxed his stance and stood up straighter. He slipped his knife back into its scabbard. "I never said that. I would be a fool to turn down free ale."

Chapter VII

{title}

Greyl followed Dharin to the tavern, straining to keep up with the tall man's stride without looking like he was running. He found it easier said than done, and had to erase a scowl from his face as the captain turned to let him in the door first. Greyl walked past, and had a feeling Dharin was laughing at him. Greyl looked up at the captain and saw him quickly hide a smile behind a fake cough.

"What?" asked Greyl, though he knew very well what.

"Nothing." Dharin led the way to the bar and waved over the bartender. "Two large ales. And I'll buy the lady's drink." He motioned to the other end of the bar, at a fair-skinned woman with smirking eyes.

Dharin took a seat on one of the tall barstools and turned back to Greyl, his mouth open to say something. Greyl gave him a warning look that Dharin chose to ignore.

"Would you like a leg-up?" he chuckled.

Greyl made no effort to hide his scowl this time. "No thank you." He clambered a bit and was finally atop his own stool when the bartender slid two tankards to them.

Dharin snatched his up and drained half of it without pausing. He set it back down and licked his lips appreciatively. "Best ale within two hundred miles."

Greyl hummed again, sipping his. He'd never had much taste for ale, but he had to admit the captain was right. "You mentioned you wished to talk, Captain. I'm afraid I can offer precious little where news and stories are concerned."

Dharin turned from smirking at a pretty young woman passing by. "So I did, so I did." He drank another mouthful of his ale. "I've heard that you've seen things, heard things, know things. I need advice."

Greyl swished a bit of ale around in his mouth. Swallowing, he lowered his voice and said, "I must ask you, Captain, why you want advice from the man you were sent to arrest."

Dharin nodded thoughtfully. "I understand your confusion. As I told you, I don't know the reason you're wanted by the Commander; and I really don't care. But I've heard things about your race. Good things. Those of the Oakenguild are known particularly for studying many things and for having

knowledge of leadership and life in general. I'm having... difficulties with my men. And I wish that you'd help me."

Greyl sipped at his ale and watched the bartender pour a drink for another customer. He felt Dharin's eyes on him, waiting patiently for an answer. Greyl stared down at his tankard, thinking. He wasn't opposed to giving advice, and it was true that those of the Oakenguild prided themselves on their scholarly habits. And Dharin seemed genuine. But he had orders to arrest Greyl, and that didn't quite go hand-in-hand with asking him for advice.

Greyl sighed and looked over at the captain, whose eyes had flicked briefly over to the dark-haired woman he'd bought a drink for. He drew his gaze back to Greyl, arching an eyebrow curiously and snapping his fingers at the bartender for a refill. Greyl held a hand over his tankard as the bartender reached for it.

"Can't stomach a second?" Dharin peered into Greyl's tankard and then drew back, laughing. "You haven't even finished your first!"

Greyl smiled grimly. "Now is not the time for me to stuff myself with alcohol. I need a clear head if I am to offer anyone advice."

Dharin let his laugh fade off, then seemed to realize what Greyl said. He sat up straighter, hopefully. "So you'll help me?"

"I'll try." Greyl slid his half-finished ale towards the captain, who accepted it happily. "I'll need more details. What exactly is going on between you and your men?"

Dharin frowned at his ale, and spoke into his tankard as he brought it to his mouth. "They're acting rebellious and belligerent." He took a long drought and set it back down. "Not accepting me as a leader anymore. They want to take their orders directly from the commander, even if my orders are the same."

Greyl nodded, remembering the exchange between the three Riders that he and Gwendolyn heard. Gwendolyn... He sat up suddenly. He needed to check on Gwendolyn. He inwardly shook his head. It would be foolish to let Dharin know where he was staying, and foolish to let him know where Gwendolyn was. Greyl would have to wait until after he took his leave of the captain, if he ever got the chance. He'd probably have to slip away secretly. Perhaps he could prompt the man to have one ale too many.

Dharin was waiting expectantly, the expression of hope on his face almost comical.

Greyl took a breath. "First things first. I assume it's Marek giving you the most trouble."

Dharin nodded. "How'd you know?"

"I overheard your conversation in the forest earlier. That's beside the point. And Kylian is more inclined to listen to you?"

Dharin narrowed his eyes. "That mess of roots. You were right under our noses, and we didn't notice." He shook his head, and drained the rest of the ale from Greyl's tankard. "Yes. If I could talk to Kylian alone, without Marek to offer complaint, I could get his loyalty completely."

Greyl nodded thoughtfully. "What would be Commander Vulferym's reaction to Marek being rebellious to you?"

Dharin frowned. "If Marek was being rebellious to the commander, the commander would kill him. To me? He'd tell me to deal with it myself. After all, Marek is one of my men. I'm supposed to be able to keep him in line. I would rather not kill one of my own men, but I really can't think of any threat that Marek would care about."

"I see." Greyl let his eyes wander the room as he thought, then chose his next words carefully. "Would it be alright if I thought about this further over the night? I frequently come up with solutions as I sleep. I can have one by morning."

Dharin nodded. "That's fine." Then he asked, in a carefully disinterested voice, "Where are you staying?"

Greyl smiled to himself, and matched the offhanded tone. "I thought I'd sleep in that oak where we met."

Dharin nodded, and waved the bartender over. "I'll have another tankard, if you please." Then he turned back to Greyl. "What about the girl who was with you? Who is she?"

Greyl made a dismissive gesture. "Some woman from an earlier village. She was guiding me through the forest." He hoped beyond hope that the captain wouldn't see Gwen as someone who needed watching.

"I see. Where is she now?"

"Gone back to her own village, I presume. I hired her to bring me here, and she made it clear she would come no further with me."

The bartender was back with Dharin's ale, and the captain took a drink as he studied Greyl. The lie was plausible, yet Greyl had no way of knowing if the captain might have seen them both enter the city. Greyl shooed those thoughts away. Life would be impossible if one lived with the worst-case scenarios in the budget.

[note: Dharin has had three and a half tankards]

[Note: figure out where this is going before you try to write more]

[Greyl could sneak off to Gwen while Dharin pretends to sleep. Dharin follows. Greyl needs to know that Vulferym is in the slave market before Dharin will help him. Maybe he can overhear the bandits talking. Right, because you need to not lose the bandits. They still have the kids they kidnapped. The owls are still in danger. And where the heck is Werrley? Dharin can see a slave being mistreated and get annoyed. Greyl can see this and keep it in mind when asking for help with the bandits. But how does Greyl overhear the bandits? Unless a couple came into the city to buy things, and had loose tongues. WERRLEY. He can overhear the bandits talking about where they're going, what they're doing, etc., and come flying (pun intended) back to find Greyl]

Dharin finally nodded. "All right. I'll walk you to the oak." He downed the ale and tossed some coins to the bartender, slipping off the stool with grace. Greyl jumped clear of his own stool, almost stumbling when his feet met the floor. It was pine, not oak, and he'd no anchor there when he reached out. He grumbled a bit, and followed the captain out the door.

Outside, Greyl looked around them, noting anything that might be helpful at some point and storing it away for future use. The captain suddenly cursed and dodged aside as something swooped down from a nearby sapling. Greyl raised an eyebrow.

"'twas just an owl, Captain."

Dharin glanced back. "Yet I am not accustomed to having a bird seemingly dive-bomb my head."

They continued on across the square. A nearby late-hour store was closing, and a little girl in dirty rags was sweeping the doorstep. The broom was a good deal taller than she was, making it unwieldy, and she toppled over with it just as the shopkeeper came out. He pulled the girl to her feet by one arm, backhanding her across the face.

"Clumsy creature! Ungrateful child! I give you a place to live, and ask little in return, and still you refuse to work harder than this! I should sell you back to the traders!" He glared at her, and said, "When you finish sweeping, you can sleep out here tonight." The man stumped back inside, slamming the door, and the girl hung her head and picked up the broom.

Dharin had stopped and watched, and now he set his jaw, turning away. There was a hard glint in his eyes that Greyl mistrusted. When Dharin saw Greyl watching him, he said, "Child slavery in particular has had favor in my eyes. You will do well to never mention it."

Greyl said nothing, for fear of stoking the captain's anger and having it turned towards him. He agreed, however. Owning a human being and treating them as an animal was something horrible to think about, more so to see. Greyl shook the thoughts off, as they reached the tree.

Dharin gestured at some roots that made a bit of a nest. "I presume you'll sleep up in the boughs. I found this spot comfy earlier, so this is where I will be."

Greyl hadn't dared hope that he would be left without a guard; but he felt his spirits sink, nonetheless. He simply nodded, and pulled himself up into the branches again, making his way to his seat at the top. He watched the captain make himself comfortable, and then become as still as the roots surrounding him. Greyl didn't have any intention of sleeping; not for a while yet. He had to find some way of telling Dana she needed to keep Gwen's errand unspoken of, even in her house. Dharin was suspicious, he knew. If he waited until the captain was asleep, and he climbed down the back of the tree, he might be able to slip off for a bit. But it was too risky. The captain was probably trained to sleep lightly.

Greyl sat still, thinking hard. Then a movement caught his eye. A shadow flew over and landed on his knee. Werrley was breathing hard, and hopped from one foot to the other as he caught his breath. When he could speak, he whispered,

"I have information, and questions. Can the captain hear us up here?"

Greyl shook his head, his heart lifting somewhat. "Unlikely, if we whisper."

"Good. How is Lady Gwen?"

"She's fine, as of an hour or so ago."

Werrley looked relieved. "I was worried. I apologize for not coming with you two under the roots, but I thought it would be better for one of us to still be loose if they caught you. A little while after the Riders left, I followed them. They came here, and I watched them for a while, until they went into the tavern. Then a rough-looking man went into the tavern a little later. He came out immediately, though, and hit for the gates. I followed him, because I didn't like the looks of him, and I thought he might have been giving a message of some sort to the Riders.

"He wound through the forest for a while, then came out in a little clearing. It was the bandits' camp. He went into the biggest tent, so I waited until nobody was watching and I hid behind a pile of firewood right next to it. He greeted Brodie, and said 'I couldn't buy the ale. Some of Olavir's hunters was there. You know the ones.'" Werrley looked up at Greyl. "Who is Olavir?"

Greyl had sucked in a breath. "Olavir is the commander of all the groups of bounty hunters. Commander Olavir Vulferym. The Riders are some of his men."

Werrley started hopping on one foot again. "Got it. Well, then he continued. 'I didn't want them gettin' suspicious and start askin' questions, so I got outta there quick-like.' Then Brodie says, 'All right.

We'll get it at the next town. Start packing up. I want us halfway to the port by sundown tomorrow.'" Werrley paused here. He was getting excited. "Greyl, *the bandits have the children!*" Werrley hopped faster. "They're planning to sell them as slaves when they get to the seaport [needs name], and they're working for the commander!"

Greyl blinked a couple times, not quite believing it. "Wait, wait. Hold on. Vulferym is in the slave market?"

Werrley nodded. "And apparently even his bounty hunters don't know. He's trying to keep it down. It would look bad for his reputation, Brodie said."

The gears in Greyl's brain were turning fast. Dharin doesn't condone child slavery. This could be used to their advantage. If he could be made to believe them, that his commander was in the slave market... Greyl stopped himself from getting too excited. "Go on," he said.

Werrley shook his head. "There isn't much more to tell. They're planning on selling the children to the next slave boat that docks, then staying at the port for a few more days to rest before going on their way to the commander."

Greyl nodded thoughtfully. "Do they have the children there at the camp with them? And are you sure they're the same children?"

"Yes. They're tied in one line to the same rope, which is tied to a tree. And yes; I recognized a couple of them."

Greyl nodded again. "They are being treated well, I assume. A half-dead child isn't going to bring much profit." He was silent then, and Werrley waited patiently.

"We need to tell Gwendolyn," said Greyl at last. "She must decide what she wants to do. You two need to discuss it together. I won't be able to get down from here and go to her myself, unless an idea comes to me soon."

Werrley frowned. "Could I distract the captain somehow, while you escape?"

Greyl shook his head. "I doubt it. Dharin is no idiot, and would make the connection between you here and when he saw you earlier in the forest. Even if he doesn't recognize you for the same owl, he'll suspect. I thank you, though, for asking. But there's nothing else to do besides for me to give you directions to Dana's house, and for you and Gwen to keep on. I can give some advice, and try to help any way I can while I'm under Dharin's guard."

Werrley was silent for a moment, then said, "All right. But Lady Gwen will be torn between trying to help you and go on to help my family."

Greyl nodded. "I know. That's a choice she'll have to make, though I ask that you warn her I don't advise trying to help me in the least. Once a man falls into the hands of the bounty hunters, it takes a

large sum to get him out. Many have lost their lives before they even came to the commander; because the hunters are quick to anger, in general. If a man is lucky enough to make it that far, he can buy his freedom if his crime is not too great. But it is very unlikely that I will get such a privilege if I can get to the commander alive. I know what he wants me for. He wants my maps.

"One of them is hid in a place he can never get to. Gwendolyn has the other. The commander will likely have me tortured until I tell him where they are. I shall resist as long as possible, if it comes to that. But, if I do not escape the Riders until we are close to the commander, I shall try my best to make them mad enough to kill me. Then you and Gwendolyn will be safe."

Werrley was staring at him, shocked. He stumbled around to find words, then said, "There must be something we can do. There must."

[Quick plotting:]

Ok actually scratch that. Too much rewriting to be done, working things in. Like Vulferym's new and improved backstory. Gonna just have to completely rewrite. [[ALSO REPLOT. DO THAT FIRST, MUFFIN-HEAD.]]