

WING A BIRTHDAY

*For Karamyr,*

*Yes, I'm aware that your birthday is coming up. Yes, I'm aware you will kill me if I'm not present.*

*I'll return in time. Don't send the Imperial Army after me just yet, this is something that I need to do on my own. If it all goes well, I'll provide you with reason enough to forgive this grievance.*

*(Don't torment Azula too much in my absence),*

*Gwendyr*

## Quest One: Of Pendants and Bonds

Gwendyr landed with the imploding sound of the vacuum her sudden stop had created. Salf guards jumped to attention and then chaos as they noticed her presence. Most would've advised against her strategy considering she was, after all, attempting a robbery, but subtlety had never really been her thing.

Alarm bells rang in the distance as the first soldier threw his shot at killing her. Her spear ran him through cleanly at the first sweep. Three more soldiers moved in her direction wielding swords. The Thiagon family had chosen well in keeping salfs as protection here. Not so well in giving them short-reach weapons.

Gwendyr rose a few feet in the air, using the length of her spear as an advantage against the superior numbers. Not that she needed it, but this wasn't the time to risk it. She was on a schedule.

She finished off the three guards as easily as if they'd been one and almost felt bad for them. Almost. They were still rebels. They were still the enemy, however weak, and she still needed to steal those pendants.

She focused on her next target. The last remaining guard. She raised her spear, aiming, but an odd rush of wind caught her wings, throwing her back. She tilted her head, looking around. A second salf, an old man, stood behind her, on the corner of the terrace.

He thought he could use the wind against her. Poor fool.

With a dismissive gesture of her hand, he was thrown away by a swift hit of the wind. It was *her* domain. A sharp pain hit the side of her neck as a dagger flew by. She frowned and took a mental note to remember in the future to not ignore enemies while in battle. The cut wasn't deep enough to cause any real damage. The soldier had lost his shot. He knew it.

As Gwendyr walked to him, he dropped his sword and attempted to fly away, his grey wings fluttering desperately. She threw her spear. He fell. She couldn't have him telling others of her position.

She rushed in through the doors, knowing she had limited time before reinforcements figured out where she was. She headed down the hallway and counted three doors. If her intelligence was right, that's where they kept the pendants. If it was wrong, her informant would need a very good excuse to not end in the deepest dungeon she could find.

She pushed the door open. A man was sitting on the floor, legs crossed, eyes closed. He wasn't a salf or a den of any kind, but she knew his kind. She knew what she would find when he opened his eyes and talked to her. Hypnosis. And fangs. A predator. She could deal with those. She adjusted the grip on her spear, making it short enough to use indoors.

Behind the man lay shelves and chests filled with jewelry and antiques. The pendants she was looking for hanged from a hook like they weren't more important than the old pottery sherd being displayed next to them.

"What do you seek, heir?" the man asked, opening his eyes and directing at her the green storm of life and truth that seemed to rise from within them.

She'd been wrong. He wasn't a predator at all. He was a truthseeker. Those were among the rarest species in Crownir.

Gwendyr redussed her weapon back into a dagger and sheathed it on her chest. She sat in front of the man, folding her wings. This would be a very different kind of battle, more dangerous for her than any involving a spear would ever be. This was a fight of truth and intent. Only if he found her to be sincere and pure in her coming here would she survive.

“I come seeking the Bondtelling pendants, wise one.”

“And what, do you believe, gives you the right to take them for yourself?”

“I have something to prove.” She held his gaze. There was no other way.

He said nothing in response. He was not satisfied with her answer. There was more to tell. The pendants worked with a magic very similar to that of the truthseeker. They perceived truth and responded accordingly, just in a very specific way. You’d wear one and give the other one to someone you were close to. If the bond was real, if it was wanted, they would accept the pairing and stay on. If it wasn’t, they would fall off, leaving behind a green mark in the shape of a tear. The shame of attempting to fake a bond. Even after acceptance, the danger of it changing was always there.

“She fosters doubts at times,” Gwendyr continued. “My best friend. She’s also my sworn protector. Assigned to me. Permanent. That, you would say, would make most people certain of the relationship they have. I know, however, that it makes her wonder if I would stay if there wasn’t a sacred oath tying us together. If I’d be her friend if it weren’t already chosen.”

“Are her doubts justified?” he asked, the infinite deepness of his eyes weighing on her like no other pressure ever had.

She was certain of her feelings, of her intentions. That’s why she was here. Why those pendants had seemed like the perfect first gift. She considered Karamyr’s doubts to be far from

the truth, and wanted to make them void forever. Still, at facing this man's knowledge, aware that lying would mean death, a part of her was afraid.

"Her doubts," she said anyway, "have no real foundation."

Her wings twitched slightly as he tilted his head.

"This truth," he said, "is accepted. But why would you come all the way here just for those doubts?"

Gwendyr shrugged. "I will always do whatever it takes for her. To make her at ease about me."

He nodded. "You might take what you wish, Gwendyr Silverstone."

She stood up slowly, not sure she should trust her luck. "That easy?" she dared to ask.

"Most thieves, you usually find, have much less honest intentions than you do. None had ever left this room."

Gwendyr grabbed the pendants from the wall and put them in the leather sack she'd added to her waist just for that very purpose.

"Silverstone," the truthseeker stopped her before she went out the door.

She freezed. "Yes, wise one?"

"If you could've chosen a different person to be in her place, one you wouldn't have to put at ease so often, would you have?"

Gwendyr smiled, looking back at him over her shoulder. Maybe, if she were someone else, that question right there would've ended her little quest. If she were someone else. But she wasn't.

"Being *able* to put her at ease is one of the great privileges of my life, wise one."

The truthseeker smiled back and she left, hearing the chaos of an army coming to get her.

No, Gwendyr wasn't someone else, she was just who she needed to be to fit with her best friend.

And that, today, had saved her life.

## Quest Two: Contrasting Qualities

It was known in the whole empire that purple wings were the mark of the Siras family. An ancient lineage. Great power. Beautiful as few others. Most of the time, Gwendyr loved Karamyr's wings and the obsession with the color they'd cultivated on her. Today, she found it horribly inconvenient.

As she went deeper and deeper into the cave, she wondered why the purest purple couldn't come from a flower on a sunny mountain. If only Karamyr were obsessed with blue, Gwendyr would now be trading with pirates for a gem from the deep seas. Instead, she was stuck in the darkness hunting an overpowered reptile.

The violet raphis was horrendous. She'd seen drawings of the thing as she prepared for her journeys. The species had too big a head, an underbite causing the lower teeth to stand out, and legs way too muscular to look natural. But the worst of it all were the scales. They were a color that could only be compared to the result of a drunkard's hangover, and smelled as badly. Or so those who'd faced them had described.

It was an odd choice that the goddess had created such a disgusting thing to bear in its very heart something so precious. A gemstone experts turned into the purest purple pigment you could find. Its qualities were so unique and vibrant, no one could really pinpoint the reason it stood out so much. It was just accepted. So Gwendyr had to come get it for Karamyr.

The sound of claws scrapping against stone made her turn, searching the shadows. The cave was slightly illuminated by some crystals that grew on the walls and roof, but was mostly covered in darkness. Bones lay scattered on the ground. The raphis, as much as it was ugly, was also dangerous.

Gwendyr tightened the grip on her spear. "I don't have time for this." She hit the bottom of the weapon on the floor, the impact echoing all around her. A screeching sound, like that of metal scraping metal, filled the cave in response.

The thing fell from above. She barely had time to dodge as the reptile landed on the spot she'd just been. It lost no time, lunging at her and trying to bite off one of her wings. She flew backwards, but hit a wall. No more avoiding. She pointed the spear at the raphis and prepared to pierce him through.

A loud clang replaced the sound of flesh being cut she'd expected. She'd stopped the beast, its fangs mere inches from her face, but instead of running it through as she planned, the point of her spear pushed against the scales. *That* she hadn't read about.

She shook her head, the putrid smell making her drowsy. The raphis backed away, but threw itself at her again. Gwendyr dropped to her knees so the beast went over her. She reduced her spear's length, and thrusted it up towards the belly of the thing. It did not work.

The raphis looked down at her from between its legs and screeched again. Gwendyr sighed and, with a command to the wind, glided away from underneath the reptile and landed a few feet away.

She shook her wings, trying to get rid of the damping feeling all over her, and sheathed her weapon. The raphis circled her. Why wasn't it attacking anymore? Back spots filled her vision and she fell to her knees.

She had, apparently, failed to read about a lot of things.

Gwendyr woke up in a pit, surrounded by disgusting baby raphis. A reptile that kept and fed its babies, that was a first. The things, to her luck, were asleep. Her wings, not to her luck, were covered by some mucous substance, which made it impossible to fly.

She knew a few purists that would have heart attacks if they saw the sacred white wings of the heir like that. And some others who would think it inconceivable that she'd put herself in danger this way. Gwendyr, unfortunately for them, was best friend first, and heir second.

She couldn't say she understood Karamyr's fascination with purple. She didn't even completely see the special qualities of the special pigment. For her, it was all like a different world she couldn't reach. She could maybe gaze at it from afar, but it wasn't for her to live in. It was Karamyr's world.

Gwendyr also had worlds of her own her friend didn't follow her into. It was expected. Accepted. But that, to her, was irrelevant. That she didn't understand it didn't mean she couldn't support her. That she wouldn't try and give her what she so badly wanted. What *she* valued.

She took her spear out. There was work to do.

As she suspected, the hatchlings weren't as resistant as the adults. They also seemed to be under some kind of stupor, because none reacted as she killed them all and got the gemhearts out, gathering enough of a supply that she wouldn't need to face their mother. Each was barely the size of her palm, so she could fit them all in the bag she'd brought stripped across her side.

Gwendyr got another of her weapons out, taking them both as daggers, and used them as leverage to climb. It didn't take her long to reach the top.

That's where her luck ran out.

The adult raphis was laying there, right over the edge, its hateful little eyes focusing on her like she had no right to avoid becoming dinner. She looked around her. There wasn't enough space to outrun the beast. Less even to fly, even if she could summon enough wind down here to dry her wings up, which was very unlikely.

She'd promised she would return.

She dropped her weapons. Their clanking against the stone was a testament: Gwendyr Silverstone didn't need weapons. Not when she embraced the power. Not when killing became the sole purpose of her existence. Her feathers became red. The world around her, shadows deeper than those of any cave.

The reptile began to choke. It wasn't enough.

Gwendyr grabbed it by a fang, keeping it still as it tried to lure away and find oxygen. She commanded the wind with a thought. A swift hit of air at the right speed went into the raphis' mouth and pierced it through from the inside like her spear had failed to do. The beast collapsed. She didn't have the right tools to open it up. She didn't need to anymore.

Gwendyr picked up her weapons and headed out, feeling cold. Her wings, still red. Always red for far too long. She hated the red. But she'd made a promise, and she would fulfill that, even if what she wanted to achieve and the way she did it were two of her more contrasting qualities. If it was for Karamyr, it would always be worth it.

### Quest Three: Feels Like Fun

Gwen had always liked forests. They made her feel alive. There were no expectations in forests, not from society anyway. Cats were a different matter.

She'd come to the Laiali forest to get a cat, but it seemed the cat had got her first. Or at least planned to, as he'd been jumping from tree to tree watching her for the last hour.

Gwendyr wasn't the biggest fan of felines. She didn't hate them, but she wouldn't ever be so crazy as to adopt one either. Karamyr was a different matter. She loved cats. Even her magic manifested as a cat, but despite her best friend's very pronounced, maybe a tad exaggerated, inclination for the animals, she also happened to be allergic to most of them. Most. Except a very particular kind.

Gwen finished cutting the fish she'd gotten from the river earlier that morning. It was her third day in the forest. Maybe today, the ferani cat would come down. She was running out of time. It had to work *today*.

"Hey, kitty cat, want some fish?"

The cat sat on the branch he'd been walking on. And began bathing himself.

Gwendyr sighed and sat on the ground, dropping the fish. What was she thinking? That she could get the most untrusting feline in the world to trust *her*? She couldn't even get her own people to do that. The people she was supposed to rule.

"I give up," she said. "Do you hear me? I give up. You can go. I have nothing else in me. I'm clearly not going to change your mind."

The cat continued to clean his black fur as if he wasn't aware she'd been talking to him. She knew different. They were way too smart for that. They just liked to pretend ignorance.

Gwendyr sighed. "I just wanted to make her feel less alone."

A meow made her raise her eyes to the tree. The ferani was looking at her.

"What? You think it's ridiculous? I know she sometimes feels far away from me.

Different. Distant. I am the heir. I also feel like that sometimes. It's not fair that she experiences the same just because she was assigned to protect me. Someone should be there... when I can't."

"Meow?"

She frowned. The cat jumped down and sat in front of her.

"You'd like her." Gwendyr smiled. "You seem like a smart cat. And she's the best you could ever ask for. Once you know her there's no going back. And she should have more people, or whatever you count as, who think that way."

"Meow?"

"I have no idea what that means." But she did.

In his black eyes she saw the question.

"Yes," she replied. "Also for the times when she needs something different than me."

The cat moved closer, rubbing against one of her legs, which she had folded against her chest.

"I still don't like you. But she will. I'm willing to have a cat for her and she wonders if I really do love her."

The feroni cat meowed again and jumped into the basket she'd brought. And the same way she'd seen the question, she could now see exactly what he was thinking. They were magical cats. They sensed emotions. Understood them.

"If you can love her like that," the cat thought, "I really wanna meet her. She feels like fun."

Gwendyr smiled. Feels like fun. That was definitely one way to put it.

## Quest Five: The Toughest of It All

Karamyr sat across from her, looking worried. Gwendyr wasn't still completely sure she'd completely forgiven her from leaving to "have fun" without her, but her gifts had worked well enough to avoid assassination. Thing was, the last of her quests wasn't at any remote and dangerous place. It was right there. In their city. And although Karamyr had been insulted at not being involved before, she now seemed to be doubting that premise.

This one plan, though, involved her presence directly, wanted it or not.

Gwendyr had left her fighting clothes at the palace. She carried no weapons. And her hair, like it never was when she anticipated danger, was lose. And Karamyr seemed more worried about it than she did.

"What is it?" Gwen asked, stirring the coffee on her mug.

"Are you sure you want to be doing this?" Karamyr crossed her arms. "We can go back to the palace, stay in your room."

"I'm sure."

"Your wings haven't stopped waving back and forth since you sat there. And you've been stirring your coffee for five minutes. And you keep looking around like someone's gonna jump at you."

“Karamyr.” She walked around the table to sit on the bench with her friend. “You know how I fought for you? And killed? And domesticated a cat?”

“Yes.”

She took her hand in hers. “Let me do this too, would you?”

“But I don’t want you to do something that makes you feel bad just because of me.”

Karamyr’s gaze lingered on their hands. Gwendyr knew why, of course. That was the whole point.

Gwendyr Silverstone showed no affection in public. She was the heir to the empire. She was composed and dignified. She was a figure of authority. She followed that. It was just what she’d always done. The opposite seemed to go against her very nature, she wasn’t about to deny that. But not all that seemed to be was always real. So today, Gwendyr Silverstone had gone out not as the heir, but as Karamyr’s best friend.

“I do feel exposed,” Gwendyr said. “They’re going to look at me and they won’t see the image I so carefully catered for them. It *is* tough. Perhaps, the toughest of it all. But you know what?”

Karamyr looked up at her. “What?”

“It’s also refreshing. And oddly reaffirming.” She sighed and rested her head on Karamyr’s shoulder. “It’s your birthday, this was supposed to be for you, why am I the one suddenly feeling happy?”

“Thank you, Silverstone.”

“You can thank me by staying there a little while longer.” She closed her eyes. “Happy birthday, Karamyr.”