

Chapter Ten – Changing Tides

Everyone was happier than usual to see the sunrise the next day. Given the events of the previous night, no one could have known if they would live to witness it. So many unknowns were finally revealed and yet there were still so many questions. Gwen had come clean about being a werewolf, but none of the mages had any idea exactly what they were supposed to do. All they knew was that Order and Tribe magic were needed, but how exactly was that supposed to work?

Skylana stayed at the bow for the whole day, keeping the wind at the sails, while Talis and Ryder remained in the cabin to continue their research. She knew how much Ryder had no interest in research – at least not nearly as much as Talis did, but she wanted to reach Carnac as quickly as Gwen did. Her magic spurred the ocean gusts on, as swiftly as they could possibly carry the ship. The crew only needed to be out to steer, but even then, only Hands and Nemo remained out on deck.

Seeing a nearly barren deck for an entire day did nothing to ease any tension she had. She would think that after the events of the previous night, the crew would be more forthcoming and trusting. But for the whole day, no one dared come near her, Ryder or Talis. Even Hands kept his interactions with her to a minimum. He even brought breakfast from the deck to them that morning, but didn't stay to make sure they took it.

That night, the mages felt more alone in their cabin than they had the past three nights. When Skylana returned, she saw the boys in the same position they were when she had left. Ryder was sitting in the hammock sharpening and cleaning his arrows, while Talis sat sprawled out on the floor looking through books he had somehow managed to fit into his bag. His arm was bulkily bandaged from wrist to shoulder. He had insisted on healing himself with his own methods, but the wound would take a day or two to fully regenerate into healthy skin. Until then, he bound the wound himself.

“You two look like you’ve had an eventful day,” she sighed.

“Isn't it obvious?” Talis replied, never taking his eyes off his books.

“All those books fit inside that tiny bag?” Skylana asked, as if she didn't know.

“Bag of Holding. You know this. I've been looking through these books all day to see if there was any information about the Font Garoux... or something like it. Now that I know what I'm looking for...”

“Yes?”

“I've still found nothing.” Ryder let out a smart laugh. “You'd think someone would have found something like it. Maybe even previous members of the Order or the Tribe had found it and used their magic to open it.”

“But if the Lord of Light sealed it and only the Paragons –.”

“Paragon,” Talis corrected.

“We don’t know that Nais was the only one who knew about this.” Ryder suggested.

“Taking notes about something sounds like Aria’s specialty. Besides, it would be much more detailed than this picture. Many more words to read.”

“Assuming you understood their meaning.”

“Either way,” Skylana continued, “if only they knew about it, how would the Order and the Tribe know how to open it? How do *we* even know how to open it?”

“I’ve been looking at that too.” Talis slammed one book closed, trading it for a stack of nearly illegible notes, and the parchment Nemo had given them the previous night. “If the Lord of Light sealed it and only Order and Tribe magic can unseal it, then the only logical answer I can think of is that opening the gate requires the power of the Paragons.”

“But the Paragons are gone,” Skylana pointed out.

“Truth. However, when you first encountered the Paragons, you learned from them, didn’t you? You learned how to harness their power and knowledge.”

Ryder and Skylana exchanged glances. Though they did leave Bristol with plenty of knowledge from the Paragons, quelling the wrath of the Fire Paragon with a child’s toy did not seem all that empowering (as humorous and shocking as it was to watch). But Aria and Nais did teach them a few spells and they did feel like they learned something from all four of them, especially when they reconciled with each other at summer’s end.

“What about you?” Ryder pointed out. “You never trained with the Paragons.”

“Mayhaps not as intensely as you two did, but I did have a brief stint with Ignis. It can still work. And as Skylana observed last night, Aria did teach me a spell or two.” Talis said confidently.

“So then what are we supposed to do when we get to the Font Garoux?” Skylana asked, though she was slowly starting to understand.

“We tap into the power of the Paragons. If my notes are correct, it should be no different than casting an elemental spell, so long as it’s one that the Paragons taught us.”

“Just a simple spell? That’s it?”

“That’s the theory, at least.”

“Well, the sooner we get this over with, the better,” Ryder chimed in. “And I bet the crew feels the same way.”

Skylana turned to him slightly confused. “What do you mean? I’ve been out there all day. No one has even been on deck. How could you presume to know like that?”

Ryder put down his arrows and sat slowly upright. Skylana recognized that action immediately. Ryder could multitask very well, but if something was important enough to stop, she paid great heed to his words.

“Because when I went down to get something to eat earlier, Nemo stopped me and told me to go back up. The rest of the crew has been below deck all day, and from the look of those glares I saw, they are *not* happy with us.”

Talis looked up from his notes for the first time that day. “How can they be mad at us? It’s not like we knew what was going to happen.”

“Maybe they have too much respect for Gwen, so for someone to disobey her is treason,” Ryder half-heartedly guessed, though it didn’t seem too far from the truth from what he had observed.

“What do you think would have happened if we had stayed on the Dracos’ ship instead?” Skylana asked.

“Apart from remain useless?” Talis spat.

“Well think about it. They might have told us when it was safe to go over and we wouldn’t have been in danger or endangered anybody else.”

Ryder let out a snort and rolled over onto his hammock. “Either way, we need to tread lightly on the ship. I’m staying with you, Sky. I don’t want you to be alone anywhere on this ship.”

Skylana wanted to assure him that such a thing wasn’t necessary, but perhaps it was the smart thing to do. She let out an exhausted breath and carefully crawled into the hammock with her companion. Talis’ candlelight remained the only illumination.

As Ryder felt Skylana climb in, his mind was still racing. Even her warm body and her soft touch wasn’t enough to quell the thoughts running through his mind and the growing anxiety he was feeling on his ship. What made it worse was that though he disagreed with the crew acting the way they were, he completely understood why.

The next morning bit at the skins of anyone who dared venture outdoors. Everyone scampered for their thickest cloaks and tried to remain near any heat source they could find. Skylana bundled herself up as she stepped out into the cold, although Talis stayed near. He was

somewhat envious that her cloak was thicker than his. Ryder remained at his companion's side, especially because of who was outside on the deck.

The moment the door to the mages' cabin opened, all heads on deck turned. It seemed like every crewman was out and about that day: A sea of eyes stared at them in varying degrees, none of them pleasant. Several faces blossomed with anxiety. Others brandished intangible yet piercing daggers.. But not a one of them dared to look away from the trio.

“Keep yer eyes on ‘er, boys,” Scarbeth’s voice echoed, “Never known a knife-ear to follow orders.” There was that name again. Every time she heard it, she shuddered.

“Scar,” a man with a speckled face tiredly stood, “just leave them be. Your just gonna make it worse.”

“You trust these things walkin’ about, Seamus?” another man at Scarbeth’s side chimed in. “We spent all day down in the orlop yesterday untanglin’ all the ropes. Didn’t we, Nic?”

“Aye, we did!” a short, stocky one near the edge shouted. “Who knows? Mayhap they’ll rip the mast tryin’ to catch ghosts.”

Talis wasn’t sure if he wanted to correct them on the *proper* way to catch ghosts or to mock their woe, but Ryder glanced back as he wrapped an arm around Skylana. “Just ignore them,” he whispered to the others. Talis followed closely behind, shooting evil glares at the crew.

“Aye, tha’s right. Keep ignorin’ us. Ye seem to be real good at tha’.”

Something stirred inside Skylana. Perhaps it was their lecherous laughter or their hateful eyes upon them, but instead of disgust, something else rose up from her gullet. She felt the steam of anger exhale through her nostrils and knew she could not ignore this.

She gracefully swirled out from under Ryder’s arm and huffed over to the men. Each of them placed a hand to their blades, ready to strike until she stopped a safe distance away from them – at least safe enough away from Scarbeth. She ignored how the men braced themselves for an impact.

“If I’m not mistaken, I saved one of you last night. You, wasn’t it?” she pointed to Scarbeth. “If I hadn’t shielded you, you would have been infected or worse.” Whatever bravery she mustered for that simple truth quickly dissipated as Scarbeth slowly rose from a crouch. Ryder and Talis approached from behind, trying to give Skylana support.

“Ye think I needed your ‘elp, ya sylvan tart?”

“Oh, so you do know fancy words,” Talis impulsively shot out from behind the ranger. “Here I thought Gwen just took in dumb strays.”

Scarbeth's eyes darted from Skylana to Talis before weaving smoothly past the elven couple to stop mere inches from Talis' face. "Ye think yer smart mouth'll protect you, mage?"

"No, but my fire will." Part of Talis was running of its own accord, but he knew he was not going to take anything from anyone anymore. He just spoke and the words flew out.

"Is that a challenge?" Scarbeth sneered through cracked lips.

"Talis, please," Skylana pleaded, but the two stared each other down with neither one showing any signs of backing off.

"Your anger is pointless," Talis began, ignoring Skylana's words. "You're merely upset that we made you do actual work last night. So you wrangled a werewolf. Any experienced hunter can subdue a beast. And you had to untangle all those nasty ropes down below. Oh, the horror!"

"Laugh all ye want mage," the pirate sneered unflinchingly.

"If you've something to say to us, then say it. We all know it's there. Be a man and let it out."

For a moment, only the whistling wind dared to speak. The two adversaries eyed each other before Scarbeth let out a small laugh.

"Yer really tha' stupid tha' you need me to spell it out fer ye? Or do ye jus' like orderin' us around coz we can' touch ye? I ain' givin' ye the satisfaction o' tellin' ye."

"Well then let me tell you something: Like it or not, we're here to stay. Unlike you degenerates, *we* have some semblance of honor." Talis ignored the stirs among the men. Some of them began to join Scarbeth's side. While Talis continued his admonishment of the crew, Ryder and Skylana prepared themselves for the worst. "We promised we would help your captain and we are doing what we can. So for the next week and a half, you're all stuck with the three of us. We can settle this now or you can leave us be. It's that simple, you moronic lout."

"Only one person gives us command." Something about Scarbeth's voice changed drastically. It turned quiet and very low, turning into the same growl that his captain gave. His words also became more articulate. "Unless you got something hiding underneath those rags of yours, none of us will ever listen to the likes of you, moor."

"Because your captain is a *much* better leader. Do you suppose if she had the sense to, I don't know, *tell us* what was happening before we came here nothing from last night would have happened? I bet if she had half a brain she —"

An ovoid ruby wrapped in iron slammed straight into Talis' cheek, nearly knocking him out. Gasps from mages and some of the pirate gang rang throughout the ship and everyone crowded in to see how he would retaliate. Some hoped nothing would happen, but the few who stood with Scarbeth hoped he would knock more sense into him (or worse). Talis lay on the ground,

surprised that his skin hadn't broken, but felt a possible crack in the cheekbone. As he panted on the ground, his assailant's viper-like eyes leered at him. His fingers curled as if to hold an invisible sphere, ready to gather energy.

"Whatcha gonna do, mage?"

"Scar!" The name stopped Talis' preparation as the crew quickly dispersed, separating pirate from mage. Hands stormed through the group, parting them even further away from each other. No one dared to get in his way for fear of being trampled on the deck. Without stopping, his massive hand scooped up Scarbeth by the throat and pinned him against the mizzenmast.

"The hell am I gonna do with you, Scar?"

"They ain't gonna listen to th' cap'n! If somethin' happens because they –!"

"You think I wanna hear wha's spewin' from your rotten mouth?!" Hands boomed, nearly scaring the mages. They had never seen anyone, let alone Hands, lose it on the ship. "You think I don't know wha' happens? Wha's said?" The pistol never lowered as he spoke. Scarbeth's face grew red with rage, wishing so desperately to lay just one blow on any of the mages, but knowing (and fearing) the consequences of doing so.

Hands threw Scarbeth back towards the men who stood beside him, turning his pistol towards the crew. His words shot out one at a time like a cannon. "We have orders. Captain's word is law. These mages ain't to be touched. Issat in any way unclear?"

One by one, the shoulders of the crew sank and backed away from Hands and the trio.

"Then shove off an' get back to work! All of ya!" Still glaring, Scarbeth turned his seething eyes from Hands and went below deck with the rest of the crew.

The pistol that spent an eternity in the air finally went back into its holster as Hands turned to the three. "Ye well?" Ryder nodded for the rest of the group, too struck to answer after what they just saw. "Everythin'll be fine now."

"No it won't," Skylana retorted. "The crew hates us. Or at the very least, they're afraid of us. We probably wouldn't have come outside our cabins, but I have a job to do."

"Wind's at our backs today, little dove," Hands replied. "If ye like, ye can take the day off. I'll letcha know when it becomes otherwise. An' if ye like, I can come to yer cabin an' escort ye. Give ye a bodyguard tha' no one will dare to challenge." He turned to Ryder, noting the possible offensive comment he made. "Their trade is takin' out mages. They'll 'ave a much 'arder time with me."

"No, I get it... and I think we would *all* appreciate that," he replied thankfully, as he turned to Skylana, who also nodded in approval, giving Hands leave to follow the subordinates.

Before the mages turned back to their cabins, they noticed one other figure still on the *Fenris* deck. Her small yet curvy shape identified her on the spot and the trio paused, wary of her presence. This was the same child from two nights ago, the one who weaved through Gwen's legs when she was a wolf.

She looked somberly where the men descended and took a heavy sigh, releasing a vapor trail from her lips. "I know it's unfair to ask, but please understand how incredibly awkward this is for most of us."

"You've been hunting mages, now you're escorting them," Ryder said dryly.

A subtle smile emerged before she turned towards Talis, "Well, your taunting ain't making things better around here. I get what you're trying to do: you're standing your ground and all, but all you're doing is rattling the cages."

"They're really that upset over extra work and tangled ropes?"

The smile on her face grew to a small laugh. "You don't really think that's why they're upset, do you? We're sailors. Doing work is like breathing to us. But the Captain... Do you know why the *whole* crew went to the *Deimos*?"

"Isn't it so there's more people against the enemy's crew?" Ryder answered.

"That's one reason, but it ain't the main reason. I may not have been on this ship long, but from what I understand, the crew's done that routine so many times, they could do it in their sleep. We all go on the ship, Gwen lures them back to her cabin, she changes, and... that's really it. So long as no one's on the ship, when the wolf's sated itself on blood and meat, it searches the ship for new prey. If it finds nothing, it waits until the sunrise."

"So you just wait until she changes back the next morning? Why would you wait that long?"

"Because that woman has done more for every single member of this crew than anyone we've ever met. She's saved us in so many ways that you can't even begin to imagine. The last thing we wanna do is hurt her. You saw how many scars she has. It's more than all of us combined. She doesn't need any more."

The cryptic message was all she said before she descended downwards after the crew, leaving the three mages alone on the main deck.

Talis rubbed the indent Scarbeth's ring placed on his cheek, but as soon as his fingers touched the ridges, whatever anger he felt dissipated. Despite how horridly Scarbeth acted, the crew's loyalty and admiration to Gwen was plain as day. He looked toward the main cabin where the doors remained sealed. During the day, those doors rarely, if ever, opened. In fact, he only saw them open perhaps twice on this whole journey. For someone whose crew shows undying dedication, why did she continually seal herself inside?

He was now determined to find out.

“Talis, where are you—?”

“I’ll meet you at the cabin,” he promised Skylana. “I just need to do one last thing.” Her exhale gave him permission to take leave as she and Ryder returned to the safety of their room.

Talis approached Gwen’s cabin and knocked on the plain oak door. Gwen seemed to have heard him and gave him permission to enter. Slowly, he turned the handle and entered.

He half expected to see Gwen standing at her window in some profound, sage-like pose. Though she was not too far away from it, she sat at her bureau, staring at maps through pointed compasses. Her fingers were slightly stained with the charcoal used to mark the *Fenris*’ progress. From what he could glean from them, they were actually making rather good time (part of him was actually *surprised* to see Gwen doing actual work).

“Feeling better?” he asked. Gwen paused, as if his voice was not the one she was expected. She looked up from her work to see his exhausted form standing over her. She seemed surprised to see someone – especially Talis – willingly enter her quarters.

“I have been unable to answer that question truthfully for years.” Talis noted that her voice was uncharacteristically soft. It was as if she was a completely different from the woman who recruited him.

Is this what happens when you see the monster in someone? Talis thought to himself. *They try to be the opposite of that thing?*

“But if you’re really asking if I’m physically better...” she sighed and placed her compass down. “I think I am, but that doesn’t say much... Thank you for asking.” Another phrase he never expected to hear from her. “You?”

Talis shrugged his shoulders. He could have made a remark about the crew’s treatment of them or how he didn’t sign up to cruise along the seven seas with a werewolf, not to mention how the thought of a pirate werewolf seemed more like a cosmic joke than anything else. But after the events of last night and the emotionally dynamic day, he kept silent.

“Something you wanted?” she asked, unfazed by his presence.

Seeing Gwen act in a much nicer mood confused him to the point where he had forgotten why he entered. As he aimlessly looked around to collect his thoughts, he noticed the room itself. Along every wall seemed to be a series of claw marks and freshly splintered wood. Each blemish was chaotically yet eloquently etched into the walls and floor around the whole cabin. They all told the same story, especially the bloodstain on the floor near the bed where, he assumed, Malocchio had been sitting. It baffled him how he did not notice any of these markings before; was he too angry to observe his surroundings?

“I’d thought about just leaving it like this instead of paying someone to fix them,” Gwen said as-a-matter-of-fact, “and to keep their mouth shut about it. It gets expensive after a while.” The mage was too transfixed to catch the Cheshire grin she greeted him with as she walked over to the jug of ale that rested along the starboard wall. His eyes lingered on the shattered mirror that hung just above the liquids. Its spider web formation created myriad images of the Captain’s face, but as he observed, her eyes never went to her splintered reflection. Nor did she use it to try to catch his eye. “You wanted something?”

Talis tried to remember what he had originally wanted, but only thoughts of last night bloomed in his mind, Gwen’s story being the most profound.

“I…” he stammered at first, before quickly recovering. “Your attack…” Gwen’s eyebrow rose in a glare directly fixed upon him. Talis noticed how brilliantly green her eyes were. It was another clue that he should have picked up on… though he admitted to himself that she looked better with green eyes. “From what it sounds, your family was attacked by Draco Disciples.”

“Of course they were.” Gwen said wryly. “Nais told me they were the likely culprits. She also said that it was probably a blood-relative of Druscilla, one who is able to harness the powers of the soul.”

“Have you ever gone after the man responsible?”

“Many times. And every attempt has led to a dead end,” she explained as she made her way back behind her bureau. “This is no simple underling. He’s clever and knows how to cover his tracks. If he does not wish to be found, then he will not be.”

“It almost sounds like you admire him.” Talis was unsure if he meant that as a snide remark or a harmless observation. Gwen stretched her legs out over the arm of her chair as she answered him back.

“The biggest mistake anyone can make is not respecting an enemy. It makes them underestimate their foe, which could prove disastrous… but I suppose that’s also why I’ve delayed looking for him for so long; his is a form of magic I’ve never learned to fight. Mages who use the elements and enchantments are easy enough to defend against. You either find another energy to counter the effects or defend yourself, or you steel your resolve enough to endure the assault through sheer force of will… but the very *soul*? Even if I were to find him, I would hardly be ready for him.”

This feeling was too strange, yet welcoming. It was jarring for her to be so nice, but having her open up like this made him feel welcome for the first time. “Perhaps we could help you.”

Gwen’s lips tightened at the verb and stole a sip from her mug. “How noble of you, Riverwind. You’ll forgive me if I take your words with a grain of salt?”

“I suppose you’re expecting an apology from us then?” he replied slightly annoyed, slowly remembering why he came into her cabin. This was the Gwendolyn Gwilt that he had grown

accustomed to. "I know that you harbor no love for mages, but you swallowed your hatred to recruit us –."

"Out of necessity," she interrupted. "I need you to open the gate. It doesn't mean I trust you."

"Funny. I thought we passed this milestone last night when you promised to stay an open book with us."

"You think that just because I said I would not lie to you anymore that means that trust has been established? You disobeyed a direct command. I told you not to come after me. How can I trust you if I can't expect you to follow a simple order?"

"We heard you screaming over the storm clouds. What the hell did you expect us to think?"

"My crew told you to listen to me. If they thought I was truly in danger, they would have acted the same as you did. If you are angry with me for nearly killing you, remember that you, the elf and the ranger all put yourselves in danger by stepping foot back on my ship." Gwen slammed her drink and brought the empty mug down hard upon the bureau.

"I don't understand you," Talis said, shaking his head. "You have been a ride of emotions ever since I first met you. You were coy and a smooth talker, then you become a cold-hearted bitch the next day. You become a werewolf and nearly kill us, followed immediately by a sad little girl who lost her mummy and daddy. And now your voice is filled with that ice again. Who's to say that you and your crew will not turn on us? They're about ready to!"

"Does it surprise you? Honestly?" The unchanging tone in her voice began to rile Talis, especially since she refused to look at him. "You knew that I brought you three here for one purpose and it was not to make friends."

"How can you not appreciate the help that you are given? You clearly need it, and not just because you need mages to open the gate. I know not what your crew truly knows of you, but this façade you put up does nothing but hide the frightened child underneath. Being afraid isn't a weakness. Everyone has a dark side that they must fight. It is a part of life. You don't need to fight this battle alone. You have a crew who is loyal and despite your actions... at least Ryder and Skylana are willing to help you.

His last words made Gwen burst into laughter. As Talis' face twisted into confusion, her eyes shot to his. "You're not the first mage to make that claim, Riverwind. My scars are not just from the wolf or my men."

"There's your problem. You're letting one incident cloud your judgment of all mages. You don't think mages are free from persecution? Our magic is forbidden –"

"I wonder why." Talis tried not to let her jabs get to him. He never imagined someone like her could do it so easily.

“Practicing our craft endangers our very lives. Most of us just wish to help others and practice in peace. It’s hard enough for us without bounty hunters like *you* aiming to slaughter us.”

Here was where he expected her to laugh at him again. Though she kept her smile tight, she stayed silent. The captain slowly, yet gracefully, rose from her chair and sauntered around the bureau, her eyes never coming off of Talis.

“Well... aren’t you so smug. So now this is about you?”

“I never said –”

“Tell me, Riverwind: do you remember how I was able to recruit you so easily?” The way she paced around the room caught Talis’ attention. It was similar to how Gwen walked when she was taking Malocchio back to the *Fenris*. It was also the same walk she used when they first met. He had no way of identifying it other than appropriately comparing it to an animal circling its prey. Talis’ defenses went up and he turned to ensure his *eyes* were always facing her and never his *back*.

“The Scroll of Alchemy...” He didn’t see why his bargaining chip was worth mentioning.

“Yes, but now there’s another grand discovery for you, isn’t there? You wish to study the Font Garoux. Learn its properties and use it to heal others?”

“And what is so wrong with that?” he replied indignantly. “As a member of the Order of the Sun, it is my duty to help others. If the Font is what you say it is, then there is a chance that it could be of some greater use.”

“Whatever happened to ‘I don’t trust the fact that the place had to be sealed’? Why the change of heart?”

“Well, I’ve had the chance to actually think about it...”

“But you didn’t wish to at first. Now that there’s a new experiment for you, there’s nothing stopping you from learning more.” The two had been going back and forth so intensely and Talis noticed how close Gwen was getting to him. Yet he stood his ground, never backing up once. “Pretty up your words all you like, but in the end, you mages are all the same. You thirst for nothing more than knowledge without a care for what the cost is. You open forbidden texts that have been ‘sealed for a reason’ with the slightest hope that you will exclusively know something. You experiment with others, placing them in danger without fully knowing the risks all to see what the end result will. You are so ashamed of what you really are that you seek power just to prove that you can be something you’re not. The truth is, Riverwind, you’re no different than the Draco Disciples who abuse others in their own quest –”

The audacity of the last statement brought out the worst of the Order blood. Roaring loudly, he raised his hand and threw a fireball towards Gwen. Only there was no fireball. Nothing

manifested in his hand. She stood unflinching and waited a few moments. Her face gave a confused look as if something had wandered past her.

“Are those the runes from Scarbeth’s ring on your cheek? The same ones on the coin I gave you?” Her eyes then slowly turned towards Talis with that familiar ferocity he knew all too well. “Have the events of last night muddled your memory, moor?” She marched toward him and all bravado that Talis had died when she advanced. He backed up too quickly, tripping over the rug. Gwen pounced on top of him, drawing her cutlass out and pressing it against his throat. “Have you forgotten who I am? You are on my ship. Did you seriously not think that I would have prepared for you?”

Talis struggled underneath her, but she was surprisingly strong for a woman of her size and form. He began to wonder if part of her strength was her own and not the wolf’s. Either way, Talis began to fear for himself.

“Call me a monster if you will. I’ve resigned myself to that title years ago, but I’m at least trying to change it. Yes, everyone has a dark side, but unlike your brooding example, mine can physically harm, no, kill people. You have no idea what it’s like to have a monster share your body.

“For decades, I have fought the beast inside me so that I do not hurt anyone else, and believe me, it is not an easy battle. The first few months, you fear every full moon because of the agony that accompanies it. Soon enough, the nightmares come. Horrified faces visit you in your dreams. You have no idea who they belong to, but they only last for a split second before becoming washed in claws and blood. After a year or two, you become sick of it all and try to end it, but you’re too much of a coward to bring that silver blade across your throat, or step off the ladder and let the silver braid swing you from the rafters. Sometimes you practice with an iron blade just to see if you have the gall to do it. Have you ever looked in the mirror with a knife sticking out your chest and you wonder why you’re still standing?”

Despite the horrific image, Talis showed no emotion as she spoke. She had overcome him physically, but he would be damned if he let her will win out his own.

“But do you *really* want to know the worst about it all Riverwind?” she hissed. “The punchline behind the whole joke? It’s not the faces that visit you at night, or the agonizing pain that waits with every change. It’s not even waking up next to torn bodies on the forest floor. It’s that after a few years, when the wolf has been with you long enough, it becomes a part of you. You hear whispered conversations from across the room as if they were speaking loudly right next to you. You finally know what fear smells like and believe you me, it’s just as unpleasant for you as it is for them. Instinct begins to command your body into reacting. Sometimes it keeps you out of harms way. Other times, you bite a helping hand. All of this culminates into the awful realization that even after I lift the curse, I am forever changed. I can never go back to the way things were. No matter what I do, I will never reclaim those twenty years back. And yet somewhere deep down, there’s a part of me that is starting to relish it all. I’m starting to enjoy the hunt...”

Gwen leaned in, trying to intimidate him. Talis kept his stone face, but inside, he felt fear slowly start to well up inside of him.

“But I cannot let that happen. Every slip, every life I take, every morning when I wake up in a stranger’s blood adds another scar to me. I’m sick of the scars. I’m sick of taking innocent lives. I now have a chance to be rid of it forever and I will not let a hot-blooded mage ruin it for me. You know nothing about me, Riverwind. Don’t ever presume to again.”

The blade pressed harder against Talis’ throat for seconds before Gwen stood straight up. The tip pointed towards his heart, showing where it intended to go if it needed to. The captain’s face was filled with more emotion than Talis had ever seen her with, but even with the daylight lighting her back, her eyes were more brilliant than ever.

“Now get out of my cabin.”

The air was filled with the sound of heavy panting before Talis even moved. He couldn’t bring himself to break eye contact with Gwen as he made for the exit, half expecting her to pounce on him the moment his back was turned. As his hand turned the handle, a small icy breeze rushed inside, carrying Talis’ final words to her.

“Do you know what makes a monster, Captain? A *true* monster? It’s fear. Fear is where it all begins. It’s obvious that you’re afraid, but the tricky thing is that everyone underestimates how infectious it is. You may be trying to stay human, but what about your crew? You train them to fight what you see as monsters, but how long will it be until their fear makes *them* monsters as well?”

Talis closed the door behind him softly, but the chill from the outside seemed more comfortable than the stinging silence in the cabin. Gwen’s grip tightened on her cutlass at his words. Her heart asked how he dared to say such things of her crewmen, but her mind began to wonder how much truth lay in his words.

As she staggeringly lowered her blade, Gwen turned to the only person who could look back at her now: her fragmented reflection in the broken mirror.