

Chapter Eleven – Chasing the Ghosts

By the time night had fallen, the tension between everyone on the ship was thicker than the fog that had rolled in. No one could see the moon that night, but they could feel it hiding behind the clouds, slowly gaining power, ever threatening to disturb the peace of the *Fenris* once again.

Once particular member of the crew slipped quietly off the deck, avoiding Skylana as she guided the ship towards their destination. He was careful to avoid the watchful eyes of her guardians (the ranger refusing to leave her side given the stunt pulled earlier that day)... but although the mages unnerved him, they were not his foremost concern at the moment.

He had been summoned to meet with the Captain... but down below into the brig instead of directly to her cabin.

Scarbeth feared that this time, he might not be forgiven.

In his mind, he could hardly be blamed; Skylana had the same mystical eyes that forced their way into men's minds, making them do unspeakable things. Talis cast the same elemental magic that burned cities to the ground. Ryder had the same cunning mind that knew a person before they spoke a word to him – sniffed out their fear like a dog. All mages were the same to Scarbeth. How could he stand idle by as these intruders were allowed to walk free? The captain had to realize this, just as he had. She had to have some sympathy for him.

The brig was barely lit by candlelight when he arrived. He didn't have the keen vision his Captain had and could barely make out the shapes as he traveled through the musty innards of the ship. Peering warily about, there seemed to be no sign of her. Perhaps it was a trick, he thought, but then Captain Gwilt wasn't the type – not in this situation. He went further into the brig towards the cargo bay, passing only crate after crate of rations and other supplies.

“Captain Gwilt?” he called out to the darkness. His apprehension grew with each passing moment... but his concern was not for himself. He feared for his Captain. He knew as well as any man among her crew that her inner demons crept very near to the surface, and these did not need moonlit nights to rear their heads.

“Your loyalty truly knows no bounds, Scarbeth.”

It took Scarbeth every ounce of will not to jump out of his boots. Instead, he spun back towards the brig. In the back of the silver cell, he saw a pair of gleaming golden eyes peering up at him. Before them, the unsettling amber glow of a lit pipe illuminated the face of Captain Gwilt, who sat comfortably behind the bars.

This sight confused him. He had seen his Captain in the cell before, but only as a wolf. Why would she choose to even set foot in there as a human? The cell itself was open, and although she didn't seem like she was about to transform, Scarbeth moved gradually closer to the door. Just in case. The pain of transformation would not allow her to move from the spot and it took at least a minute for the change to occur; it would give him more than enough time to lock her in.

Scarbeth wasn't sure just what she was playing at here, but he knew something was wrong.

"Cap'n," he began nervously, "jus' lemme explain..."

"What can you explain that I don't already know?" she crooned, looking down into the ashen tobacco. "I've already had to speak to you once. I didn't think that I would need to again. Do I, Scarbeth?"

The words were reminiscent of a child being scolded by his mother, but they hurt him even so.

"You think I like this any more than you do?"

"I know ye don' –"

"Shut up," she uttered without raising her voice. She hardly needed to. It was when the Captain was quiet that one could tell she was truly upset. She leaned forward in her cell and locked her gaze with Scarbeth. "I thought I explained myself clearly last time, but apparently, I wasn't clear *enough*. I took you into my crew because I've kept you over these past few years because you've been very useful. You're a resilient fighter, Scarbeth. Strong. Quick. You've had my back more times than I can count. However, if I can't trust you to do what needs to be done, I will not risk your anger again. I will not have a liability on my ship.

"Understood Cap'n," he answered obediently, never taking his eyes off of hers. Gwen took a heavy sigh as she looked back into her pipe. He saw her hesitation before she spoke again.

"I had thought about leaving you here in the brig for the remainder of this trip, at least until the mages had gone. However, I know of your skill with a lockpick. I had even considered marooning you on some unknown island should we come across one, or just leaving you out in the middle of the ocean..." she continued with a wry smile.

"Maybe s'what ye need to do."

Gwen froze. "I beg your pardon?"

Scarbeth removed his bandana and took a deep breath, trying hard to keep any emotions buried.

"Cap'n, ye know tha' I'll follow ye 'to the ends of the earth and beyond. Ye saved my life and I've been indebted to ye ever since. But... these mages. I've been with ye for several years and we've never taken a mage alive, let alone travel with 'em. I've lost count of how many mages we've killed over the years an' now watching them... use their magic on *our* ship..." Scarbeth's fists clenched into white knuckled fists. It was the only way to keep tears from falling. "Just seein' their faces reminds me o' 'im... Every time they cast a spell, I think about wha' they did to 'im and how I could not save 'im. An' when ye took me on board, every mage ye let me

kill has been a release for me. I could take my rage out on the same sort o' mosnters who wronged me and others *like* me. It didnae matter who they were because they tried hurtin' other people. This anger ye won' risk is all I know after all'a these years. I'm sorry tha' I cannae follow a simple order to leave 'em be, but... I dinnae think I can do it anymore."

Scarbeth stiffened, expecting some form of retribution. Talking back to the Captain was never a smart thing to do on any sailing vessel, let alone the *Fenris*.

But Gwen couldn't look up at her underling. She knew what she would find even if she did. Worse still was that she knew he wasn't the only one.

How long will it be until their fear makes them monsters as well? Talis' words echoed in her mind.

"Cap'n?"

Her grip on her pipe tightened and she took a huff so long that the embers blazed within the barrel of the pipe. Smoke billowed out through her nostrils and she kept her eyes closed. Scarbeth stood in agonizing silence while his Captain meditated in the cell.

"You are one of my most loyal crew members on this ship, Scarbeth," she finally stated. Her voice was no longer filled with ice. "You have also been the most uncomfortable with this new situation. This has not been easy for any of us this past week, but I need you now more than ever. This is my only chance of undoing all the wrong I have caused for twenty years and I cannot let it slip away from me. Yes, this situation is unique. No one on this ship is used to an unchained mage on deck. But these three are not our marks. They are not our enemies. I need them as much as I need all of you. So prove to me that your loyalty to me is worth more than your anger. Do not disappoint me in my solemn hour. I will see this through to the end, and I would rather have you and the rest of my crew at my side, rather than abandoned in the middle of the ocean with naught but a longboat and your effects. Do you understand now, Scarbeth?"

Scarbeth finally exhaled his understanding, still somewhat shaking. "Aye, ma'am."

"Now get out. You've got work to do."

A bit abrupt perhaps, but she wouldn't have *any* member of the crew think she'd gone *entirely* soft.

It took a while, but Scarbeth's labored steps back toward the main deck finally faded. She knew he would probably resent her a bit for denying him the pleasure of slitting a mage's throat. At the very least, he would remain upset for being potentially unworthy in his Captain's eyes. But she was too close to victory to have him jeopardize it now.

Gwen leaned her head back and tried to close her eyes. She let the lull of the waves rock her like a child, hoping that the solace of sleep would give her some reprieve.

Just as well; she had not slept since the journey began.

The first sensation she felt was discomfort. The leaves and sticks underneath her body made it painful for her to keep sitting where she was. Then came the wave of dizziness, as though she'd been struck on the head and spun like a child's top.

She looked up to the night sky only to find the full moon staring blankly at her through the trees. Instinct told her to scamper for cover, though she knew it would be in vain. She tried to rise, only to have her first step catch on something. Promptly, she toppled back to the ground. The quick rise and fall made her head pound and the dizziness grew worse.

She turned to the object she had tripped over, but couldn't make it out through blurred eyes and a splitting headache. Carefully, she crawled closer and reached out for it. It was large, and bundled in fabric. Occasionally her fingertips brushed over smoother spots like silk, but... strange, somehow. At last, they came to rest upon warm wet strips... like gashes... hot liquid was pouring out of them.

When her eyes finally adjusted, she saw the pale blue eyes of a child gazing blankly back at her.. She shirked away, letting the moonlight illuminate the grisly scene:

Another young girl, no more than ten, lay lifeless on the autumn ground next to her. Patches of dirt smudged her face as if she had been dragged in the mud. Her entire torso was torn apart, staining her green dress. Only by the slits of moonlight could she tell that this child had golden hair, but even that was difficult with the blood already starting to freeze to the strands.

It had happened again.

The elder girl buried her face in the dead leaves and wept beside the mutilated body. Her cries were akin to a grieving howl had they not been muffled by the ground. She wished for the snow to come early and cover her in the cold.

Those blue eyes would forever haunt her.

Suddenly, she felt warmth on her shoulders; it belonged to a thick, wool blanket. It was that moment that she even realized she was naked, exposed completely to the cold.

Slowly, she turned around to see a dark figure standing over her, gently swaddling her within the blanket.

"Here," a soft voice came from the silhouette. "'Tis quite cold tonight."

"Who... What..." Her sorrow and the cold had muddled her mind. Her reactions and her thoughts were slow as she looked back towards the cadaver with a shudder. "I..."

“I know,” the woman responded, “and I’m sorry. She is dead. She must have run into your path as you escaped.”

When the girl looked back to the silhouette, she noticed the moonlight again. Terror suddenly surged within her, and she instinctively covered herself with the blanket.

“You must go!” the girl warned. “You cannot be here!”

“Fear not, child. The moon does not hold its sway over you now.” There was something about this woman’s voice that was... soothing. The girl peeked out from under the blanket and looked warily back up at the moon.

She felt no agony. No heat welling up from inside. In fact, even the sting from the cold was bearable.

“But... how?”

“Hush. Everything will be well soon.”

“The moon... still shines... how am I not...” As her mind began to clear a bit, the girl realized that she was not wholly nude. A cord was wrapped around her neck bearing small tourmaline stone. Engraved upon its surface was a strange silver rune. “What is this?”

“The amulet will keep you from changing.”

All at once, the light glinting off of the rune reignited the girl’s memory, and with it, a surge of fear...

She remembered a man... someone who had said he could cure her affliction, so long as she let him study it. He had a strange title, but remembered the word “alchemical”. She also remembered a similar light that had had the same feel as this one, only much more painful. She remembered it coursing through her body as he tried to induce a change in her. She felt the harsh bite of betrayal. She remembered why she hated that light and that aura.

The light and aura of magic.

“You’re... a mage,” her voice shivered, though the anger within her warmed her muscles again.

“In a matter of speaking...” the woman replied somewhat coldly.

“You... did this to me!”

“I made you human again as long as you keep that amulet...”

“I’LL KILL YOU!”

The girl ripped the cord off of her neck, throwing it aside in disgust. Instantly, searing pain wracked her body again as she hunched over for another transformation. Her mind began to cloud and she began to fade away again. Part of her regretted going through the pain again just to attack this one woman, but anything was better than having magic affecting her.

But suddenly her transformation ceased and she felt her consciousness return. She found herself on all fours, but her hands had been frozen to the ground. She found the cord was back on her neck, whole and secure once again, albeit a little tighter.

She glared up at the woman through golden eyes, and struggled in vain to free herself from the ice.

“Listen to me!” the woman demanded quietly, “I’m not the one responsible for your parents’ deaths! Your anger is grossly misplaced!”

“What the hell did you just say?” How could this woman possibly know what happened to her years ago? Was she there when it happened? The woman did not answer directly, but still responded.

“Understand this: I know what lies in your heart. Your rage is powerful, much like the beast inside you.”

“No!” the girl spat, shaking off a tender hand placed upon her cheek. “I am not a monster! I am human!”

“And no one can take that away from you if you don’t let them. That includes yourself.”

“I am human... I’m human...” the girl mumbled to herself over and over, her voice quivering.

“I know you ache for release, and I can help to guide you to it... you shall first need to prove yourself.”

*“I needn’t prove **anything** to a mage like you!” the girl spat back.*

The woman sat in front of her and nodded once, assessing the situation. She looked down at the ice covering the hands of her captive before placing her hands above it.

The girl did not wish to watch, but her eyes were drawn to her. She watched as the woman’s hands began to glow.

Her own hands tingled a bit, and again, she felt that comforting warmth seeping directly into them. Slowly, the ice melted off of her hands until finally releasing her. The girl had thought to strangle the woman at first, but something inside her gave her pause.

The water from the melted ice had collected in the woman's shimmering hands. Then suddenly, the crystal-clear liquid began to levitate, forming into a large, amoebic form before them. The rippling orb began to glow with the same magical light... but this was different. It was... comforting. All fears that the girl had were washed away within that light. She did not cringe when the water made contact with the scars on her wrists and hands – the scars from her previous “benefactor” – but stared in awe as they began fading away into unblemished skin.

When the water receded, the girl locked eyes with the woman in pure disbelief.

“You... who are you?”

“Someone who can help you,” she answered softly. “I can help you free yourself of this curse.”

“No... I've heard that claim before. It cannot be done,” she replied, though her conviction was becoming weaker after all that happened. The woman slowly reached out and placed her hand on her shoulder, despite the flinch from the girl. The moment skin met skin, the girl let out a heavy breath. The woman rubbed her back as if she were calming a wild animal.

“He hurt you, terribly, didn't he? Trying to harness the powers of a lycan? It's abhorrent that someone would do such a terrible thing...”

The girl tried hard not to let the tears flow, but the memories of her torture made it difficult. She was still a child, herself, and no child should have to endure what she had just escaped from. A gentle hand lifted her chin, tilting it to meet the woman's dark eyes that shimmered like the stars. “It is also the incorrect way to save you. I can show you how to subdue the monster inside you.”

The girl looked to her healed hands bewildered. She had no idea what to do. Could this woman truly be trusted? She wasn't sure what made her different from the man who made the same offer last month, and tortured her ever since.

“Lydia! Where are you?!” a voice echoed deep into the woods. The voice was older, but she knew to whom it belonged to.

“He's coming,” the girl shook. Her eyes, now brimming with tears, met the woman's again. “He can't see her. He can't see this.”

“Then come with me. I will explain everything.” The woman stood up and extended her hand towards the girl. She looked at the hand, unsure what to do, but her own hand drifted forth to take it, as though guided by something. Something inside her that told her this woman could be trusted. The girl looked to the woman and asked one final question before accepting her offer.

“Tell me who you are.”

The woman smiled as their hands finally met. “You may call me Nais...”

“Captain?”

The voice startled her awake. Her sleep was not usually deep enough to allow for dreams, as she would awake at the slightest noise.

Through the cracks in the ship’s hull, she could see streaks of musty daylight streaming in through a thick fog. The skies were gray as if heralding a coming storm.

Gwen’s eyes fluttered to see a small figure standing in the open doorway of the cell. The long dark hair may not have given her away, but the feminine voice did.

“They told me you’d be down here.” Shade held the door wide open, but stayed straight at attention like a soldier would. Gwen rubbed her eyes and groaned. “What are you doing in here?”

“Reminiscing,” Gwen exhaled, still exhausted. She hadn’t expected to sleep as long as she did.

“Remi- What?”

“*Remembering.*” She turned to find her pipe, which had spilled all of the ashes out at her side. She would have to get more tobacco from her cabin. “Did you need something, Shade?”

“Just checking in on you. I know that Nemo usually does that, but he’s with Hands making sure no one else troubles the mages.” Gwen wouldn’t have been surprised if Nemo had sent Shade down; she had spent the whole night in the brig. Anyone would have wanted to see if she was well.

“The rest of the crew hasn’t been threatening them, have they?” she deflected. Shade recognized the change in subject but chose to oblige.

“Nay, they’re given them their space. They don’t seem happy about them roaming free but no one’s said or done anything to them. Scarbeth’s been giving them the evil eye, but after whatever you said yesterday, he ain’t gonna do nothing.”

An exasperated huff escaped from Gwen’s lips. She knew that Scarbeth would hardly be happy, even after their chat from last night. She hoped that this time he would listen to her, but part of her was still uncertain.

“If he does anything, you come to me first, understand?”

“Aye, ma’am.”

Shade's salute did little to quell her concern. Not only were Talis' words stuck in her head, but Scarbeth's as well. She looked to Shade and shifted to a more comfortable position.

"Shade, as the newest recruit, I want to ask you something."

"Very well,"

"What do *you* think of the mages?"

Shade seemed to be caught off guard by the question, but only for a brief moment.

"Skylana makes good time with this ship, I'll give her that much."

"You don't mind her?"

"She seems the nicest. Seems to wanna please everybody. Though I'll admit, she's got a fire in her that not a lotta people see. I admire that."

"And the other two?"

"Talis likes to make it painfully clear how unhappy he is with us, but his little "pouty" face is more *cute* than threatening," she explained with a chuckle.

"Speaking of which, how *is* his face?"

"There's a pretty bruise there, but the runes have faded. He can use his magic again."

"And the ranger?"

"Ryder's smart. Doesn't give me much room to figure him out. He's always watching the crew. He *knows* when I'm watching him too. He never leaves the elf's side. Can hardly blame him after yesterday."

Gwen found it strange how she used their names and not their race or profession as a means of identity, the way she and the rest of the crew tended to.

"I hardly blame anyone for how they've acted. Anytime a mage has come on this ship, they've been in those cages, if they've even been breathing. They've never been allowed to roam free. But no one's come to harm them?"

Shade shook her head.

"Hands seems to have taken a fancy to the elf. He watches her as much as her companion does. Scarbeth thinks he's a traitor to the crew, but I don't think he'll challenge him anymore."

A small smile emerged from her lips. “No one who’s smart enough will ever challenge Hands. And Scarbeth knows what will happen if he disobeys me again.”

“Do you think that will stop him?” Shade’s lips tightened.

“I...” Gwen looked back to the empty pipe. “I’m not sure. His emotions cloud his judgment, but he knows how important this venture is. We cannot let our prejudices get in the way.

Even before the quiet of the brig could give her more troubling thoughts time to bleed back into her mind, she looked to Shade once more.

“What do you think of the crew?”

It was a fair question to ask; Shade was the first female crewmember other than Gwen to come aboard, and – as mentioned before – the most recent addition. She wondered if the Captain asked *every* new crewmember the same question. Still, she indulged.

“Everyone’s been real nice to me. Not *too* nice, if you thought that at all, but they’re not treating me like a leper either. Truth be told though... I’m afraid for them.”

“*For* them?” Gwen asked, leaning up towards her. Shade shied slightly away from the bars.

“I’m sorry, Captain. I shouldn’t be talking like that.”

Before Gwen could ask her to continue, something filled her ears. It was a sound she had not heard in a while, but it was soothing. Comforting. A soft lullaby carried out on the winds. Feminine and tranquil. It floated on the breeze and rode with the waves.

However, instead of relaxing, Gwen tensed. It was not one, but multiple voices, and if both she and Shade were *here*... even if Skylana was singing...

“Do you hear that?” she asked, hoping that Shade could hear it.

“What? I hear nothing.”

Gwen’s heart skipped a beat.

“Gods, no. Please don’t let it.”

Shade didn’t even have time to ask for clarification. Gwen bolted out of the cage and made for the stairs, charging up them almost on all fours.

“Grab as much rope as your arms can carry from the orlop and meet me on the main deck!! I’ll explain on the way up!”

On the deck above, Skylana sat behind the ship's wheel, guiding the winds into the sails as always. The cold air made it hard for her to concentrate, especially while trying to keep her cloak wrapped around her. Hands stood to the side of her while Nemo guided the ship at the helm. Ryder stayed with Skylana, ever vigilant of the crew, regardless of any reassurances.

The fog and thick clouds had forced Skylana to rely on instinct when it came to which way the ship was heading. She kept the wind pushing in the same direction where they were going, but after hours of sailing, she was beginning to wonder if they had drifted off course.

A slight rumble of thunder did not ease her worry.

"There's a storm coming," she whispered, trembling with uncertainty as she looked to the others standing nearby.

"Aye," Hands replied. "Looks like a rough one, dove."

"Do you want me to calm it?" she offered. It would slow the progress some, but the storm threatened to do far worse.

"Nah. We've sailed through fierce n' this. So long as ye keep the wind to our sails, this shouldn' be more than a nuisance.."

"You sure we're going the right way?" Talis asked from the ship's stern. "We haven't been able to see through this thrice-damned fog. How can you be certain we're even headed in the right *direction*?"

"We aren't." The mages glared at Nemo only to see him stare back with that damned grin on his face with a twinge of sarcasm. The three of them, Talis in particular, were getting tired of that expression. Nevertheless, they had no choice but to trust him.

As Skylana tried to concentrate on her guiding, her elven ears perked up. Something was being carried across the wind. It caressed her ears with a beautiful song, the likes of which she never heard of before. It was calming. Almost *ethereal* in a way.

"Ryder, do you hear that?" She felt her concentration on the wind lax a bit to ask. She thought she heard the words to the singing, but it was difficult to make them out.

Na thou art here...

"Yes, Sky. It's faint, but I think it's getting closer." Ryder moved portside to see if he could find anything that could possibly be making the sound, though the fog hindered his vision.

"I've never heard anything like it before," Skylana commented. "It's..."

"Beautiful..." Ryder breathed.

“What?” The elven maiden turned to her companion, but he merely stared out into the fog as if nothing on the ship existed anymore.

“Wha’s with him?” Nemo had turned from the helm to see Ryder almost clutching to the side of the ship.

“Can’t you hear it?” she asked desperately, hoping he would decline.

“Not really, but...”

Na thou art here...

“I hear it,” Talis interrupted. A new sense of vigor had filled him as he moved to join Ryder on the bow, but it only filled Skylana with a sense of dread.

“Me too,” Hands murmured suddenly, turning towards the two mages.

“It’s so beautiful!” came an exclamation from below. Skylana had to stop her magic to see what was happening on the deck below.

All of the *Fenris*’ crew was soon was looking portside, claiming to hear a beautiful song. Skylana was unsure why she could hear it and was unaffected, but that didn’t matter now. She turned back to Ryder and Talis, only to find that Nemo was starting to look portside as well.

“Ryder?” She ran to her companion, hoping to bring him back to her side, but he felt like stone. Immovable from the spot. Ryder took a step up and stood on the side of the ship. Skylana panicked. “Ryder! What are you doing?!”

“They’re calling me. I need to go.”

They? she thought. *Who’s “they”?*

Na thou art here...

“No! Ryder! You need to stay!” She tugged on his arm hoping to drag him down to the deck, but he crouched down as if preparing to dive off the ship into the murky, frigid waters below. At her side, she saw Talis climb up next to him making the same movements. All across the side of the ship, the crew began climbing over the side, getting ready to jump in.

Skylana had little time to think. She just reacted. With one grand movement of her arm, she clutched the wind in her grasp and made a harsh guiding movement. Every man who attempted to jump off the ship (some were even in the air already) was suddenly thrust backwards onto the deck. The men tumbled backwards, all the way to the starboard side, eliciting a sigh of relief from the elf.

The relief was short-lived. As quickly as the men were felled, they got right back up again and made way back for the port side as if the wind block barely fazed them.

Skylana had to think; she would not have enough magical energy to keep doing the same spell over and over again. She needed to keep them from getting off the ship until whatever witchery afflicted them had passed.

She closed her eyes concentrated. Her body ached with the effort, focusing as if lives were at stake – seeing as they *were*. Swiftly, a rush of water began to scale the walls of the ship, arching over the masts before freezing a crystalline cocoon. The sheer icy coat allowed for visual sight, but neither for entry nor escape from the highest crow’s nest to the lowest deck on the ship. When she opened her eyes again, she saw the men knocking on the shield, trying madly to sunder it. Skylana felt every pound beat on her mind as she fought to maintain the barrier. It was not difficult. At least, not yet, it wasn’t.

“Take out the mage!” she heard from below deck. Her eyes widened, but she still kept her concentration. She was amazed that whatever compulsion had caused them to abandon ship, it had not completely inhibited their intelligence. Something was barring them from the source and they needed to be rid of the obstacle. In this case, it was Skylana.

The elf retreated as the crew began to swarm her. She dared not use magic to attack for fear of the shield coming down. She backed up into the ship’s stern with the crew and her fellow mages closing in on her.

She closed her eyes. All she could do was focus on the shield... there was nothing she could do. Even her dearest and closest friends were a hair’s breath from tearing her apart with their bare hands.

There was no one left to aid her... except for–

At an instant, a long rope latched itself around Hands and pulled him away from her. Another rope caught Nemo’s legs and pulled him back towards the ship’s wheel. It was when she saw Talis and Ryder tossed aside like rag dolls by Gwen and Shade that Skylana felt she could breathe again.

“Gwen, what’s going on?!” Skylana shouted as the two women placed themselves between her and the ravenous crew.

Riste tu le vahn!

Gwen’s face darkened as the waters began to churn, directing the ship sideways. Her men slowly climbed up the stairs towards the elf that confined them to the ship.

“Sirens...”