

Chapter Eight – Fury Unbound

A scream emerged from Skylana as Talis tackled her out of the beast's way. The behemoth spun around glaring at the three before hunching down to all fours and circling its way around them. Talis pulled Skylana back up quickly and the two rejoined Ryder. His hand immolated as he gathered the energy to prepare the assault. Fortunately, the rain could not extinguish his flame (his own righteous fury provided the fuel) and they could catch a better glimpse of the monster before them.

Even shrouded in darkness and rain, the mages could distinguish the massive form of the great wolf, growling and snarling as it prowled about the ship. Its claws and teeth glistened in the lightning flashes like freshly forged blades. Talis could feel its piercing golden eyes trying to stare him down, as if trying to break his determination. It stared only at him, barely giving a second glance to Ryder or Skylana, who it just tried to attack, but it was obvious why. Talis was the biggest threat at the moment. Worse still, he knew exactly how this creature was seeing him: nothing more than prey.

“Do not gaze at me like that!”

Bolts of fire erupted from each end of Talis' staff as they were propelled towards the wolf. The first several attempts missed as it ducked and weaved out of its path with ungodly speed. Unfazed by the failed attacks, Talis kept thrusting his staff through the air with tremendous force, hurling fireball after fireball towards his target waiting for a lucky shot.

It came quickly, hitting its mark square in the face and stopping it in its tracks. Without even thinking, Talis stepped forward, trying to force the beast into a corner. Each step was fluid and calculated and managed to increase the power of each successful hit. The next explosion was bigger and more brilliant than the last. Though it seemed like a powerful intimidation for a normal human, the wolf only retreated because of the infernal barrage, not the caster.

It backed up towards the main mast where the lump had been thrown, nearly tripping over it. A frustrated roar erupted from the beast as it grasped a part of it in its teeth and hurled it towards Talis at incredible speed. The mage ducked just in time to avoid going over the edge with the mass. This stopped Talis' assault long enough for the wolf to charge him.

Before it could do any damage, a torrent of water slapped the beast so hard, it tumbled towards the bow of the ship. Skylana immediately took the place where the wolf would have landed. Her hand and staff controlled the tornado of seawater that enveloped the creature into a tight ball. Talis gave himself a breath before regaining his ground and using his own magic to gather more water. The wolf desperately struggled inside as it sought a chance to breathe.

While the mages held it in the aquatic cage, Ryder drew once of his specialty arrows from his quiver. Unlike most of his arrows, the arrowhead seemed crystallized and gave off an eternal frost that had the potential to freeze anything it touched instantly. He was quick to nock it into his bow, but not quick enough to release it.

Making a prison out of anything elemental, no matter how large or small, was a daunting task, especially when containing a large beast. Talis and Skylana tried holding the cell above the deck, which they did adequately. But they hadn't paid attention to their depth perception. The cage floated in the air until it hit the steps leading towards the front of the ship. The wolf used the massive strength in its legs to push itself out of the water and towards the mages. The arrow flew out of the bow, but it only met the cold, wet steps of the ship where ice bloomed from the arrowhead. Talis and Skylana dove out of the way of another attack just in time, but the wolf still had its eyes on its former prey. It reeled around as it slid on the deck before rushing towards him again.

Talis had a plan for everything. No matter what battle he was in, he would know exactly how to take the enemy down and use a carefully thought-out strategy to weaken them before taking them out. This battle, however, was not only a surprise, but his opponent was much faster than him. Talis had to act purely on instinct, like the creature did, if he wished to see the sun rise. He hoped for the quickest energy to erupt from his hands and do as much damage as he could.

The entire ship glowed an eerie violet as lightning exploded out of his fingertips. The arcs of electricity crackled in the air and connected right at the wolf's heart. An otherworldly sound emerged from its maw that seemed like a mixture of a roar and a scream, rage and suffering combined into one. It was almost heart wrenching, but it only steeled Talis' focus as he poured more energy and effort into the lightning.

To Talis' shock, the wolf never lost consciousness. It never fell down to all fours. It didn't even stop advancing. It only slowed it down. Step by agonizing step, it forced itself towards Talis as if it were trying to walk against a sandstorm. Talis let the audacity of its efforts to stun him for only a moment before concentrating harder on his attack. Its only effect was a louder, more blood-curdling shriek that overpowered the accompanying thunder. The steps it took seemed more booming like an angry god coming to unleash his wrath. With each advance, Talis could feel something well up inside him; something that weakened his resolve, and thus, the power of his lightning; something that he hadn't felt in a long time.

It wasn't until the wolf was close enough to raise its razor-sharp claws that Talis felt the full force of paralyzing fear.

Something whizzed past Talis' ear and struck the paw that was about to slice off his face. It broke Talis' concentration and the lightning dissipated from his hands. A well-placed arrow loosed by Ryder was enough to halt the wolf's attack and distract it long enough for Talis to get out of harm's way. Suddenly, the arrow engulfed its claw in white hot flame. It cried out for a brief moment, but then sought out its new target as if its hand wasn't on fire.

"I don't understand," Talis exasperated as Ryder and the wolf engaged in a deadly duel. "Our magic is barely scratching it."

"Talis, stay focused!" Skylana almost strained to reply as she concentrated on shielding Ryder from oncoming attacks. As dexterous as Ryder was, the wolf was surprisingly quick

despite how large it was and kept up with the ranger no matter where he moved. “We’ll find a way somehow.”

“Skylana, I’ve used my most powerful spells fighting this thing and it’s still going strong!” Talis shouted. He was still trying to shake the fear off of him. “We need another plan. I don’t suppose this ship has any silver on it then?”

Talis meant it as dry humor, but it gave Skylana pause. Wheels spun in her head as the evidence they had previously found on the ship came rushing back. She blinked as a dangerous idea quickly formed itself.

“Ryder!” she screamed over another clap of thunder. “Ryder, where was that cage you found last night?!”

“Why is that important?” He dodged another furious swipe and rolled closer to portside.

“No time! Just tell me!”

It would have been very difficult to catch in the heat of battle, especially from a small distance and soaking in the storm, but Skylana saw the look in his eyes; a revelation that gave him a very brief pause before he shot an acidic arrow towards the beast. “In the brig! Lowest level!” The wolf merely winced at the pain as it tore the arrow from its shoulder, ignoring any damage it was incurring, and closed in on Ryder.

“I need you to keep it busy a little longer!”

“Don’t I always?” he snidely replied to himself as another arrow flew through the rain.

While Ryder kept the wolf distracted, she rushed to Talis’ side. “Did Aria ever teach you the Wind Body spell?” Skylana didn’t have look at his confused face; the long pause told her he was having a difficult time understanding her motives. “Did she?”

“Of course she did, but that’s a temporary spell! It doesn’t last for more than a few seconds!”

“If this goes according to plan, that’s all we need.” Talis huffed at her words, but his spells were doing very little to help the situation. If Skylana had a plan, he had no choice but go with it. “We need to get its attention so it can follow us into the brig.” Talis almost did a double take.

“We’re luring a large beast into a small confined space where we can barely move around?”

“Talis, I need you to trust me on this.” Her face grew dark as she grasped her staff tightly. It was difficult for Talis to do as she asked with such a grave profile. Even he couldn’t tell how he found the will to trust her.

A soft glow emitted from the crystal embedded at the peak of her staff. It was difficult to see through the heavy raindrops at first, but eventually, the light became more intense, emitting an

icy blue hue. Her eyes slowly began to match the color of her crystal as she kept focusing. Talis felt a slight shiver that grew colder the longer Skylana concentrated. It began to sting even worse than when they had to jump off the *Deimos* just moments ago. Once the cold seemed to reach its worst, Skylana raised her staff as if to command an army.

Skylana's staff summoned the rain, demanding it to assemble. Globules of water swirled around where the staff directed it in a fluid, almost graceful manner. As each drop danced in tandem with the others in the gale-force winds, they became much easier to see. A closer look revealed that the rain was crystallizing into sharpened blades. The staff suddenly stood straight up in the air. The ice daggers swirled above Skylana before falling into formation, each point directed at the wolf. Skylana's eyes held the wolf in her gaze, staring hard at the beast. It was almost as if she became as cold as her new weapons. Her eyes glowed brightly as the ice above her gave off the same fierce light.

"Get ready to move," was the only warning she gave.

Skylana threw the point of her staff downwards towards the beast, ordering the ice to charge with tremendous speed. Each point hit its mark, shattering with a small explosion of frosted shards upon contact. The wolf stopped its attack on Ryder and snarled towards Skylana and Talis. A long beat passed before it curled up on its haunches and pounced towards the two.

The elven maiden grabbed Talis and pulled him towards the stairs that led below deck. Talis quickly understood where he was being taken and thrust his hand out in front of him. The force of his magic was powerful enough to swing the door wide open and allow them to leap down into the dark crevasses of the *Fenris* with the wolf not too far behind.

Fire enveloped Talis' hand again as they hit the bottom of the gun deck. Frantically, they looked around for the next level down. They could hear the snarls and snaps of the wolf as it wriggled itself through the small opening that allowed humans to pass through with ease. But it wouldn't be long before it slipped through. They had to find the next entrance to the hold, but the darkness and unfamiliarity of the lower decks caused them to hesitate.

"Thol shar Ai mael!" Skylana muttered hastily. The light that bloomed in her hand floated of its own accord and fluttered about the gun deck, careful to stay away from the gunpowder. Skylana held tight onto Talis' hand and began their journey just before the wolf forced its way through the door. The mages followed the light until they saw it hovering over a single area. Talis used the same force to open the door leading downwards to the next level of the galleon.

This led them down into the orlop, where all the spare ropes were stored. They had at least one more level to go. This was not as crowded as the gun deck was, but there was more in their way. Skylana and Talis' progress slowed, as they had to climb over each and every pile of rope. At least the wolf had to struggle to fit through the opening again, giving them more time to follow the will'o'wisp.

A stray loop caught Skylana's ankle, tripping her to the ground and causing her to drop her staff. As her body collapsed to the ground, the booming force of the wolf's descent echoed

throughout the orlop. Talis quickly retreated to the elf, recovering her staff as she tried to undo the knot at her feet. The wolf was closing in on both of them quickly. Talis pointed his middle and index finger outwards, feeling hot energy collecting and sharpening at his tips.

As Talis worked, Skylana extended her hands out to the ropes surrounding the beast. Flayed ends began dancing in the air, waiting for their next order. Her hands suddenly clasped together and each of the ropes entangled themselves on the limbs of the creature. Though its advance on the mages was not halted, it was at least slowed enough to free Skylana.

Talis gathered the energy he needed in his fingertips and brought them down hard on the rope, slicing it clean through. Skylana scrambled to free herself while Talis looked for the orb, which stopped not too far away from them. They heard the snapping of ropes and a raging howl behind them, urging them to move forward fast.

They caught up with the light that led down to where the hold was, but one more obstacle lay in their path: the door to the lowest deck had been padlocked. Talis wanted to scream almost as loudly as the wolf was, but Skylana acted quickly. As she uttered a spell Talis couldn't hear, she watched a sparkling aura envelop the lock before fizzing out.

“Antimagic,” Skylana almost cursed.

“God’s death! Really?” Talis exclaimed. In the back of his mind, he should have known that after Ryder got caught sneaking about the ship, the crew would start taking precautions to make sure they didn’t sneak back into the hold. But now the wolf was almost free and their only hope of surviving was locked. Without even hesitating or losing her cool, Skylana brought her staff, crystal point down, onto the lock as hard as she could. Sadly, Skylana did not have the strength to break the iron lock, no matter how rusted it looked.

Desperate and almost panicking, Talis snatched the staff out of Skylana’s hand and brought the crystal down hard onto the lock. The first two tries seemed futile, but the very moment the wolf had completely untangled itself from the ropes, the mages heard the metallic cracking of the lock. Skylana quickly removed the loop as Talis opened the door leading downwards into the dark hold, narrowly missing a deadly swipe from the wolf.

The orb remained the only light in the otherwise pitch-black area of the ship. The brig was down here somewhere and the glow would lead the two mages to the cell that they needed. The spell seemed to sense their urgency and quickened its pace. This time, there were no ropes or cannons in the way. The light flew in a straight line towards the solitary cell as Talis and Skylana followed it closely.

Thankfully, the cell was unlocked and the two mages crowded inside as the wolf bounded down the steps into the hold. The thunderous landing nearly made the entire ship feel like it was about to collapse. As the wolf glowered at them, Skylana stared back defiantly while she collected the orb in her hand.

Unbeknownst to the beast, a small glint of light briefly shone in the dark. Skylana nodded towards her companion, who had been following their descent into the *Fenris*. She knew he was ready; his arrow was nocked and ready to fire.

“When it leaps in here, take the Wind Body form and we’ll lock the cage.”

“You can lock things without a key, then?” Talis asked.

“I can,” she assured him, “Ryder will shoot at it to keep it inside while I do so, but we’ve only got one shot at this. Don’t move until I say so.”

Their muscles tensed as they prepared for a quick exit from the claustrophobic cell. Skylana’s breaths became deep as she tried to calm herself down while Talis remained as still as possible, trying not to waste any more magic. The two tried to mask their dread with stoic tranquility, waiting for the beast to leap into the cage and hoping to the gods they were quick enough to avoid being torn to pieces.

But something wasn’t right. They expected the wolf to lunge for them almost immediately after entering the brig. Now the wolf wasn’t paying attention to them. Instead, it seemed like it was analyzing the cell they were in. It paced back and forth as if looking for another entry point and grew more upset when it couldn’t find one. Skylana saw the fur on the scruff of its neck stand on end and glare at them in the musty confines of the ship.

The wolf growled, slowly backing away from the cell and turned towards Ryder. Without thinking, his arrow fired, but this time, the wolf caught the arrow midair before the head struck it between the eyes. The ranger backed away expressionless, careful not to make any sudden movements. It wasn’t until the creature dove for him that he sprinted back towards the deck with the wolf not too far behind.

Skylana’s heart sank. The wolf knew exactly what this cell was made of. It had been here before. And if it was already familiar with the cell...

“This cell has no magic on it.” Talis looked around trying to make sense of what just happened. “It couldn’t have hidden us from its senses or disguised anything. Sky, there’s only one way I can possibly make sense of this...”

“The bars are silver.” she finished for him.

Before any more conclusions could be drawn, Skylana suddenly remembered that the wolf was now chasing Ryder back up the *Fenris*. She quickly grabbed Talis’ arm and pulled him towards the steps with surprising strength.

“Corpus animae!” Talis uttered, thinking ahead and grabbing Skylana by the waist. The two were lifted into the air towards the ceiling. Before they physically hit it, Skylana repeated Talis’ words, her voice shaking. The two felt their bodies float through the decks of the ship, finding

the cracks and holes between floorboards as they ascended back upwards. If they couldn't use Aria's spell as they planned to, they may as well use it to go back up the ship to help Ryder.

As they passed the gun deck, Talis saw the wolf snap at Ryder's ankles, barely missing them as he leapt up the steps onto the main deck. Ryder tumbled until he nearly hit the mizzenmast as Talis and Skylana rejoined him.

"Now what?" Ryder asked. "We're running out of options here!" The wolf pounced the three, separating them into individuals again.

"We should go back to that cell," Skylana advised as she narrowly avoided its claws. "At least we can be safe there. It wouldn't go near it when we went in."

"Sky, that thing is wrecking the ship. We owe it to the crew to make sure it doesn't completely destroy it." Ryder shot an arrow to its ankle, only to have it reel around and attempt to slam him into the deck.

"To hell with that!" Talis shouted before another thunderclap echoed the wolf's missed attack on Ryder. "None of our magic or attacks are working on this thing! 'Tis life over limb!"

"Then we should wait in –" Before the sentence was finished, a clawed hand came down hard on Talis. This time, he didn't have the time to react. The alchemechanical screamed as the bladed hands tore into the forearm he futilely threw up to defend himself.

"Talis!" Skylana's cry drew the wolf's ire towards her and charged. Skylana was too focused on Talis that she didn't notice the attack at first. It wasn't until it was several feet away that she stopped in her tracks to avoid the wolf pouncing her. She retreated away from every one of the wolf's attacks, but it became more and more difficult. Every swipe, every slam drew closer and closer to her. The attacks were too quick for her to conjure one spell that required her to stop for even the shortest amount of time.

Suddenly the wolf spun around to catch Ryder. He was unsure how much longer he would have arrows and decided it was time to engage in melee combat. But the wolf had adapted to the three and sensed the ranger before he got close enough for an attack. Fortunately, none of its claws had broken anything except for cloth. Before Skylana could help her companion, the wolf scooped Ryder down and threw him towards the starboard edge, colliding with Skylana as he flew through the air and over the side of the ship.

Thinking quickly, Ryder unlatched the grappling hook at his side and grabbed for Skylana. With as much force as he could muster, he launched the hook back towards the ship. He hoped that even through the storm that the hook would connect and the line would become taut.

Thankfully, some deity was listening and granted his wish. He pulled on the unyielding line back towards the *Fenris*, holding a stunned Skylana as tightly as possible. The rope attached to the hook was not short enough to keep the two out of the frigid waters, but the sharp cold was enough to rouse Skylana. She focused as hard as she could to levitate them both back onto the

ship, but the icy temperature made it a challenge. Slowly, the two rose back up towards the edge of the ship.

Meanwhile, the Order mage clutched his arm in a hopeless attempt to stop the bleeding. It had cut deep into his forearm; blood was flowing heavily. One or two of the claws managed to reach his upper arm and nicked his brachial artery. The more pressure he put on the wound, the more blood seeped through his fingertips, spilling onto the deck and washed away by the torrential rain. Talis saw the wolf close back in, towering over his weakened self. The mage closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

Suddenly, a high-pitched shrill erupted over the sound of the rain. Talis opened his hazy eyes to see the great wolf howling as it covered its ears and dropped a knee to the ground. It didn't bother flailing around since it meant leaving its ears unprotected. Talis followed the sound to locate its source and breathed a heavy sigh with what he found.

Hands stood near the edge of the ship, keeping his lips around the silver boatswain's whistle while the rest of the *Fenris* crew climbed over the port side of the ship. Talis could see his face turning scarlet under his facial hair. Now he understood why the wolf was in agony. At his side, Nemo pulled himself over and barked orders as last of the crew came onto the deck.

"Keep it going, Hands! Keep her subdued! Crow! Ecks! Help the mages! The rest of you, occupy her! Find me an in!" The crew sprang to life at his orders. Crow went to help Ryder and Skylana come back on board as Ecks, a thin yet well-built man, ran to grab Talis' arm.

"What the hell is going on?!" Talis demanded as he clutched his forearm.

"Nemo asks for your trust, sir," Ecks replied as he ripped part of his chemise off and bound Talis' wound. "We know what we're doing. We'll take care of her, just stay back." Talis wanted to protest. Part of him wanted to take out this creature himself. But Talis could not deny the fact that he had never faced a creature like this before. He had not anticipated how resistant they were to his magic. Had the crew not intervened, he wasn't sure if he would even survive the encounter.

The more he thought about this strange event, the more the stray pieces began falling into place. The special cell in the brig and how the wolf avoided going inside it, the weapons with two types of metals, even the whistle (which he could not deny was an ingenious tactic) all began to make sense. But he had to see it. He had to know that this was what was really happening.

Before Nemo could get closer, the wolf knew that its space was being invaded. Its eyes flared in the darkness and made a lunge for him. Nemo jumped back just swiftly enough for the wolf's sharp claws to barely miss him.

"Chains!" he screamed over the thunder. While some men stayed in a circle to keep the beast distracted, most rushed to chests scattered on the deck and retrieved long chains that shimmered in the lightning. It would only make sense that these chains were also made of silver.

Suddenly, the ship lurched sideways after a massive wave collided with the starboard side, knocking people off balance. The wolf, Nemo, Ryder and a few others were able to keep their balance, but everyone else took a disorienting step port side. Scarbeth fell to his knees, inching him closer to the beast and dropping the chain he retrieved. It took notice and turned towards him with a growl. Skylana watched as the wolf raised a massive clawed hand to bring it down on Scarbeth's head.

"VYREAS COS!" she yelled, pointing her hands towards Scarbeth. An invisible shield of energy covered him, forcing the wolf's paw to deflect off the barrier. Scarbeth noted the second attack the wolf attempted, which hit the barrier again, and scampered backwards to safety. As soon as his anxiety calmed down, he turned to Skylana as she kept the shield raised. She nodded back to him, letting him know it was okay to keep going. Without nodding back, Scarbeth turned and recovered the chain he dropped.

Ryder gave him cover by loosing occasional arrows towards the claws when they attempted another attack at a crewman. Though the arrows interrupted its attempt to slice one crewman's face off, it didn't seem to slow the beast down one bit. The hairs on the back of its neck stiffened as it kept trying to find a new sack of meat to hack through. It would not be able to hit anyone, but no one would get any closer to it.

"Shade, distract her!" Nemo shouted to one of the crew who looked to be the youngest and smallest member of the crew. The dark-haired child shot out of the crowd like a dart and slid under the beast's legs, narrowly missing its claws. As soon as the petite figure was clear, it went back in as a brief flash of reflected light vanished at the beast's leg. An angry yowl erupted as fierce golden eyes sought the assailant. The great wolf now followed its new target closely, trying to catch it in its death grip, but every lunge towards the one called Shade missed by a fraction of a second. Every miss meant another attack on the beast. This one was quick. Ryder attempted to provide cover for this one as well until Crow lowered his bow for him.

"That won't be needed," he coolly suggested. Ryder was about to raise his bow back up until he starting watching the distraction closely. The wolf was now completely focused on Shade, not even paying attention to the men circling around it. They were tight enough to keep it from fleeing yet far enough away to be considered safe. Every man that held a chain positioned himself. Those behind the wolf kept their eyes on its feet. Those in front watched its claws. They were going to try to pull the beast prone. If Ryder had loosed an arrow, its fury would be diverted back to the men, making their efforts to subdue the wolf in vain. The ranger relaxed his bow, but still kept a tight grip on it just in case and waited for the right moment...

It happened so quickly it could have been missed in the blink of an eye. Shade deftly avoided another attack, landing just in front of the beast. The young pup then boldly leapt onto its knee. Before it even realized something was there, Shade used all the leg power to jump impressively high and latch onto one of the mast's ropes. The wolf leapt towards Shade, but the men were quick. Chains were shot out of their hands and latched themselves onto the wolf's wrists and ankles as it launched itself towards the mast. With a grunting heave, the crew successfully pulled it back to the ground. Because of all the groaning, howling and the thunder, the mages missed the hissing sound of burning flesh.

This gave Nemo the in he sought. He leaped on the beast's back and appeared to strangle it with some sort of cord. It was hard to make it out from where the mages were standing from but it was not difficult to guess what it was.

"Isa..." Talis whispered. Now he fully understood and the more he did, the less he wanted to believe it.

He watched the wolf, now choking from the air supply that Nemo was cutting off. It struggled and fought to remove whatever was on its back, but the crew held firmly on the chains, keeping the claws away from the first mate. It fell to its knees as failed roars turned into raspy breaths. Once its claws no longer seemed like a threat to him, Nemo loosened the grip on its neck, but kept the cord wrapped around. He fastened it as soon as the beast stopped fighting and struggled to keep upright.

The rune blazed in silver light, piercing the darkness, causing the wolf to unleash an agonizing howl once it was able to breathe again. Skylana could feel the anguish in its cry as it dropped to all fours. She looked to Ryder, almost pleading with him to let her help it. Ryder stood motionless, watching the creature transform. He had to see it.

As the creature shrunk in size, he heard the distinct snapping and cracking of bones. It almost made him sick just to hear the noise. Matted fur receded into fair skin. Claws shrunk to mere fingernails. The howling soon died down to heavy pants. Then, after what could only be imagined as labored suffering, the wolf's form collapsed and fell unconscious on the deck.

Once it stopped struggling, the crew cautiously approached it and started to remove the chains from the wolf's wrists. The mages couldn't help but notice how delicately they unbound each wrist and ankle. There were moments where the limp body twitched in weakened anguish as the chains came off. Nemo removed the coat that he was wearing and began to cover the body. The face of the wolf shrank and contorted until its muzzle disappeared and the face was covered in familiar brown hair, now darkened by the pouring rain.

Breathless moments passed until Nemo finally stood up and held the limp form gently in his arms. The crew somberly circled around them. He had pulled his coat tightly over the figure to cover her nudity, but the hair fell from her face revealing an unconscious Gwendolyn Gwilt sprawled in his gentle arms.