

Chapter Nine – Composed of the Greatest Pain

Talis lost it.

“A werewolf?!” he shouted. “She’s a bloody werewolf?! That’s her sickness?! You did not think to mention this at the very beginning?!”

Nemo paid no attention to him. Instead, he anxiously looked about the *Fenris*. Despite his calm demeanor as he held his captain, he was frantic on the inside. “Where’s Malocchio? Where’s the body?” he shouted.

“We can’t find him,” Hands replied back.

“I don’ see nuthin’ overboard,” Scarbeth cried back. “The bastard migha sunk to the bottom of the sea by now.”

“Shade?”

“Nothin’ all around but black seas!” a surprisingly feminine voice called from the mast before leaping gracefully down on deck.

Disappointed and anxious, Nemo sighed as he gazed upon his unconscious captain. He could still hear Talis screaming his lungs out behind him, but his voice was muted compared to the thoughts racing through his head. So much had gone wrong in so little time. People had been endangered and their mission might have all been for nothing had they not gotten back to the *Fenris* in time. Everyone on the ship was either in a rage or a state of panic. And everyone was looking to him for answers.

It was time for him to decide.

“Make way as soon as possible. Put us as many leagues behind this ship as we can. We cannot afford to lose anymore time. The full moon is nearly upon us. We need to hurry. Go to, men!” The crew obliged and ran quickly to their duties as Nemo went towards the cabin carrying a lifeless Gwendolyn. Hands stopped near Skylana, still shivering from the cold, and returned the thick cloak to her. She turned and nodded towards him in thanks before she saw Talis storming after Nemo. Knowing the Order in him and considering his grievous injury, he would not be as civil this time.

“Do NOT ignore me! I am talking to you, you mangled, fen-sucked, foot-licker!” He burst through the doors that Nemo had tried to close behind him. “We are far from done speaking!” Ryder and Skylana followed quickly behind, hoping to diffuse the potentially explosive situation. But Talis’ anger overshadowed their own concerns. As Nemo lay Gwen gently down in the bed, Talis grabbed his chemise and pulled him within inches of his own face. “You give me one good reason why I should not just kill that hell-beast right now!”

“You know why –” he began.

“Are you a bloody fool?! What did you think? That you could keep it a secret from us forever? I should just –”

“Talis, stop!” Ryder grabbed Talis’ up-stretched arm that hinted at a spell.

“Stop?! Are you mad?! We could have died here! Why the hell would you want to wait?”

“Don’t think I’m not as upset as you,” Ryder shouted, matching the anger in Talis’ voice. “I’m not saying that they should have kept this a secret, but this could have turned out a lot worse. We could be dead by now –”

“I just said that, you prat! We *could* be dead by now. And now I’ve been scratched by a werewolf. I will be turning into that thing come the next full moon, which is in four damned days! This *could* have all been avoided if *they* just bloody told us from the start that our mage-hating employer turns into a man-eating wolf-beast every month!”

Talis glared angrily at Ryder as she shouted. He had this argument many times with members of the Lunar Tribe. They always wanted to hear the whole story while danger seemed to flourish. Even Ryder understood the futility of trying to explain to a member of the Order of the Sun why they need to understand what they are fighting. Both knew that the other would not be reasoned with.

“Would you have agreed to help if you knew?” Talis whirled around at Nemo.

“I would have at least taken precautions!”

“Very smart of you,” Nemo replied, “but that’s not what I asked.”

“I had no choice! You bribed me into coming on this god-forsaken voyage!”

“You always have a choice, Riverwind. You could have chosen to take the Scroll of Alchemy by force, but you didn’t. You instead chose to be civil. You chose to come with us. I’ll ask you once more: would you have agreed to come with us if you knew about this?”

Before Talis could utter his response, he knew that he would be proving Nemo’s point. Skylana shivered as his words echoed what Hands had told her two nights ago.

“While I can understand that reasoning in regards to some people,” she continued while glancing towards Talis, “Ryder and I might have understood if you had been honest with us from the beginning.”

“We did not think that this would happen. This is something that we wanted done as soon as possible and we couldn’t risk the chance that you would refuse. We hoped to reach our destination without an incident. Even so, she told you to stay on the other ship so that you

wouldn't follow her back here and endanger yourselves." Both Talis and Ryder tried not to show an obvious uncomfortable shift.

"Again, if you had bloody told us –"

"How did she transform?" Skylana cut off Talis. Answers were more important now than arguing who was wrong. "It's not a full moon. How is it possible?" Nemo's fingers slowly went to the rune on her neck. The symbol was still glowing faintly.

"This keeps her human form, but it does not prevent the change. It merely saves it for another night."

"Another night?" Nemo shifted his weight so that he was facing all three head on.

"Imagine a bucket that you use to store some liquid. If you wish to save it, you can put it in the bucket. But after so many times of storing it, eventually it will fill up. You need to empty the bucket or else it will overflow." Ryder recalled the cage in the brig.

"So that's what the cage is for... so she can let it out?"

"Aye, that it is."

"So that's... her skin?"

"Silver burns a werewolf. 'Tis the only thing that can kill it. All the silver we gathered on our ventures we had melted and coated onto our blades for safety reasons. We even forged the bo'ssun's whistle to be silver. It works effectively, but even as a human, she can feel the effects." As he spoke, Nemo kept his eyes on his unconscious captain.

"Well that's all very educational," Talis wryly commented, "but that still doesn't excuse your deceit. And we still have no idea where the hell we are headed!"

"That part has always remained true," Nemo retorted. "As Gwen said, we need to cure her."

"Don't be a fool. There is no cure for lycanthropy," Talis tiredly dismissed.

"Actually, there is," Nemo countered. "There's a place we learned about recently that has the power to lift the curse of the werewolf." The three mages turned to Nemo, curious about the impossible.

"The Font Garoux," was all he said. Talis' eyebrows arched as Ryder and Skylana stared at each other. None of them had ever heard of something with that name. Nemo handed Ryder a weathered parchment that looked like it was torn out of a book. He and Talis determined it was a map with writing littered on the page. Visual and verbal instructions were given on the page. Pictures of a cave and the full moon's light pouring into a cavern. A cave on the shores had the

symbols of the elements around the entrance. A figure of a human fighting a wolf. Ryder and Talis examined the parchment carefully as Nemo explained its meaning to Skylana.

“The cave is housed in Carnac. Legend says The Lord of Light himself created it as a healing font. Lycanthropy is such an ancient curse that even the elders and the greatest historians are unsure of its origins. This font has the power to relieve the person from the werewolf within, but they had to prove themselves first.” Ryder looked up from the parchment to Nemo.

“Prove what?”

“That they were worthy enough for the body. Lycanthropy is more than just a disease. ‘Tis an invasion.”

“Invasion?” Skylana asked.

“A werewolf transfers their curse to their victims,” Talis continued before Nemo could say another word, “but some scholars once believed that they transferred part of their soul as well.”

“Aye, and the creation of the Font proves that theory. When a person bathes in the waters, their soul and the soul of the wolf would emerge. They would do battle and the stronger soul would determine the fate of the body.” As Talis looked at the parchment, Nemo’s words reflected everything it was depicting. Even if this wasn’t the truth, it was something they believed in.

“I understand,” Ryder replied. “If she defeats the wolf’s soul, then she defeats the curse itself.”

“Right.”

“There’s one thing I do not understand,” Talis asked, not removing his eyes from the parchment. “Why is the cave sealed in the first place?”

“She did not tell us.”

“She?” Talis asked. Nemo flinched as if he said something he shouldn’t have. Since he let it slip, he decided not to hide it any longer.

“Where do you think we got this rune? How do you think we found you? It was all her doing.”

“Who’s she?” After a beat, Nemo gently took Gwen’s right arm. The coat was far too big for her and the sleeves seemed to have devoured her arm. Nemo slid back the sleeve and showed them a tattoo. It was a combination of two symbols: A crescent moon inside an upside-down triangle. Even if they were separated, they knew what it meant.

“You’ve met Nais,” Skylana breathed.

“She’s an angel, that lass. This rune is her enchantment. She’s also the reason we’ve been so prosperous. She led us to places we needed to go. Silver stores hidden in lost coves. Caverns with hidden nooks that held great treasure. She told us about the Font after we escorted her to Venice and back.”

“So that’s how they traveled so fast.” Ryder and Skylana looked to Talis. He put up a hand, telling them he would explain later.

“She inducted Gwen into the Lunar Tribe for her services to the Paragons just before telling us about the Font. That parchment is from one of her tomes. She told us to find two mages and to use this emblem if they truly doubted her intentions.”

Talis folded the parchment and laid it to rest on the nightstand near the bed. “I believe that even with that tattoo, I would have found it difficult to believe.” With that statement, Nemo’s trademark smile returned.

“She told us exactly where to find you, Riverwind. She even told us where to find the Scroll of Alchemy that you’ve been seeking. We spent the entire summer looking for it. She said it would be your reward for your service to the Paragons.” A twinge emerged in Talis’ heart. Knowing that the Paragons had not forgotten his contribution was a welcoming thought. It made him miss them. He remembered Aria’s words the last time he saw her.

“It’s all an adventure,” she said once. “One more task, one more quest.”

But this adventure had turned horribly wrong. He couldn’t take any more risks.

“And what if it fails? What if this Font does not exist?”

“How could it not exist? It came from the Water Paragon herself. Why would she lie to us?”

“She has a knack for deception. I would not be surprised if this was no more than a wild goose chase.”

“Talis!” Ryder almost shouted.

“What? We’re talking about a place that only one of the Paragons seemed to know about. I, for one, do not trust the fact that it had to be sealed. Do you know what it means if something is sealed? It’s either to keep something in or to keep intruders out. How do we know if that is how the Font works? How do we even know the ancient magic still works?”

“Because I need to believe it will work.”

All heads turned to the bed as Gwen sat hunching over her knees. She was breathing heavily, as if struggling to move. Nemo moved over to her to help, but she breathed, “No,” to stop him. Her body shook as she lifted herself from the bed. She wrapped Nemo’s coat over her body. As

thick and large as it was on her, Ryder could still see her shaking. He couldn't tell if it was from physical weakness or from the cold.

Her eyes lifted, meeting Talis' head on. He hated when she did that. Every time their eyes met, they met with ferocity and hostility. The ferocity was still there, but this time, something new also met his eyes. A hidden passion and a subtle hint of sorrow emerged from her eyes and Talis could not look away. If he did, it seemed he might kill her.

Gwen slowly turned her back to him and lowered the coat, exposing her heavily scarred back. Old lacerations and burn marks from silver weapons varied in size as they lay in intricate patterns over nearly every inch of her body. Even a slight contusion on her neck from the cord only added to the horror these injuries detailed. Skylana gasped and covered her mouth, Ryder inhaled sharply, and Talis winced at the emotional and the physical damage he saw in her.

"Don't you dare look away," she warned. "If you really want to know why, you must see this." All three were compelled to obey, but it was Skylana who took a step forward. She extended her hand softly towards her back.

"May I?" Gwen nodded once, slowly and hesitantly. Skylana ran her fingers all along the scars. At each mark, she could feel the history pouring through her fingertips into her mind. She could imagine the pain she had to go through. Though she knew that a werewolf's mark never healed completely, she noticed that most of the scars had faded over time. "These are old scars," she spoke softly. "How old?"

"I had ten years when those scars were formed." Her fingers hesitated for a second. So young, she thought. It only made the pain worse.

"These are just their claws." Her fingers continued to trace the scars until her fingers jumped to her wrists, still freshly burned from the chains. She even found the exit wound from Ryder's acid arrow. Skylana felt Gwen tense, like she wanted to flinch but was forced to stay still. "Can you feel it... when you're like that?"

"No," she sighed in bittersweet relief, "but I feel it after I change back."

Eventually, her fingers traveled to her left shoulder. Right where her arm began, she saw a new wound with symmetrical indents aligned in an oval. "And this is where it bit you." Gwen nodded once again, this time with a slower response.

"My father was a respected sailor." Skylana's fingers stopped on her skin. "He loved the seas, but he loved his family more than anything else. He never believed in the superstitions and would let me on his ship. Sometimes, he would teach me how a ship runs in the event that I was ever on one. It was like he knew I was made for the sea life.

"One day, men in black robes came into our home and captured us. They placed hoods over our heads and took us to some remote location in the woods. For days they tortured my parents for information. I was so terrified back then, I cannot remember for the life of me what they

wanted. My parents said they had no idea what they were asking. When they refused to give in, the leader decided to try a different tactic. He led me into the chamber with them. At his side was a... creature..."

She hesitated on the word. Skylana could feel her skin tensing, telling her that this was a difficult moment to relive. Her hand went back up to Gwen shoulder and squeezed it gently.

"There was something about the creature. It was pacified, but it was almost as if being still was against its nature. It wanted to kill but was forced to behave." This caught Talis' attention. Something seemed too familiar but he held his tongue and let Gwen speak.

"He told my father he had one last chance to confess. When the monster came in, the man told him he considered making it bite him, but he had a change of heart. He said that if he did not confess that he would taint his precious child. My father still claimed he knew nothing. He begged and begged to let me go... But the man just laughed. He waved his hand towards the beast and it began to move. It... crept towards me and I tried to escape but... it blocked me from running to my mother and father. It tackled me and... bit me... clawed all over my body. I thought I was going to die. But then the man waved his hands again and the wolf got off me. Some men came by and tended my wounds, but... the damage was done. I could feel the venom coursing through my veins. He left me in the same cell as my parents for a month... until..."

She didn't need to say what happened next.

"That... man... used some sort of magic on that creatures to make it bite me but let me live. From that day on, I learned how to fight against magic, so that when I met him again, I could take my vengeance on him." She slowly brought the coat back over her shoulders and turned to face Talis with reddened eyes.

"That man has caused me more pain than anyone could ever imagine. Every transformation mutilates my body. The pain is unbearable and I had to endure it every time! Every single month! I've killed people that did not deserve such a gruesome death and every night they haunt my dreams.

"Do you understand now? I'm tired of what this curse is doing to me. I want this curse to end. I want peace from all these nightmares. And I will do whatever it takes to end it, but I need you to help me!"

No one could move. This was the first sign of any true emotion that Gwen had shown the entire voyage. The pain she experienced was palpable in her words. Talis was the first to speak again in a somber tone.

"And if it fails?"

"Then I am ended... I refuse to let this monster take control of my life anymore, nor will I let it ruin any more lives. My crew is ready to carry out the task should I fail. And you will get your Scroll either way. You cannot lose, Riverwind, but me? This has to end one way or another."

Talis soon found himself unable to look at Gwen. Everything he had thought about her had been wrong. He could not tell who this woman was anymore, only that she was suffering. He cursed that it took him this long to see such desperation in her. But Skylana had been right since the night they met Gwen. She was in need. He took one look at Ryder and gave a slight confirming nod.

“We will open the gate and help you,” Ryder continued for Talis, “but on one condition: No more secrets. This would have been cleared up long ago if you had told us this from the beginning. If there is anything else we need to know of, you had best tell us now. Is that understood?” Gwen looked up to him and nodded her head.

“We need to get to the caves before the full moon. The ritual can only take place when the moon is at its peak in the sky. We have four days until then.”

“Very well,” Ryder continued. “Skylana can make sure that the winds stay at our backs.”

“I will let you know when the wind needs to change course...”

“But until then,” Nemo interrupted, “we need to rest. This had been a trying day for all of us and your magic must be replenished.”

The mages sighed. They had forgotten how much magic they had expended in the previous battle. If they were to continue this journey, they needed to conserve their magic and this night had almost depleted their mana pool. Talis had even forgotten that he had been scratched. Now he had more of a reason to stay with Gwen, if this Font truly existed, though he dreaded to think of the possibility of the Font not working, or worse, not existing.

“Perhaps I should tend to this wound,” Talis breathed a bit too melodramatically. “I may as well prepare myself for the full moon then.”

“Did I bite or scratch?” asked Gwen. Talis turned around confused. A werewolf wound was a werewolf wound. Why was that important?

“You scratched me. What difference does it make?”

Gwen let out a sigh that might have suppressed a laugh. “A hell of a lot of difference. The werewolf’s curse is transferred by tooth, not by claw. You will be fine, Riverwind.”

Talis could have died a happy man right then and there. There was a part of him that wanted to dance and kiss Gwen for telling him such splendid news. Even Ryder and Skylana seemed relieved that Talis would not soon turn into a werewolf.

“Well then,” Talis replied both relieved that he was still safe and slightly humiliated by the dramatic declaration, “perhaps we should get some rest then.”

“Perhaps you should,” Gwen smiled. It was unlike her cold sneer. This was a genuine smile. The three excused themselves from the cabin as they readied for a new day.

“Why did you tell him?” Nemo asked as soon as he closed the doors behind them. For a while Gwen didn’t answer. “If he believed he would turn, he would have no choice but to come with us.”

“I know.” Gwen looked out the window to her ship, where she saw the three retire to their cabin. Talis paused to look back at her quarters. It seemed like the two locked eyes for several moments before he retired to sleep. In those moments was something that she had not felt with anyone else other than her crew. Something that she thought died a long time ago.

“But I promised, didn’t I? No more secrets. No more surprises...”

Back on the ship the *Fenris* had abandoned, a hidden presence emerged from the stillness. Up in the crow’s nest, a figure waited until the *Fenris* was a fair distance away. He took a brass whistle from beneath his crimson chemise and blew two distinct notes from the instrument.

Below him, a small yet mature feminine figure emerged from the lower deck of the *Deimos* as the men were regaining consciousness and the first mate climbed down. She had already disabled the antimagic effect she had cast on the *Deimos*, allowing her to use her own magic. With a simple chant, she managed to revive and restore the broken and bloodied crew. One by one, each fallen soldier of Tiamat rose from Death’s embrace. Their purpose was not yet fulfilled. They were still needed.

Ignoring their groans, she glided over to the starboard bow and stood, as if waiting for something. More bodies began to stir as the men flooded to her side. The man in the red shirt made his way towards her as the rest looked out to the dark sea. The rain had recently let up, improving their vision, but only slightly.

The woman stretched out an arm towards the sea. The men looked in its direction and stirred as they saw it. It was faint, but they could make out the familiar outline of a figure just under the water. The crew began to head towards the longboats before the woman told them to hold. She looked back towards the figure and waited. Her extended hand made a welcoming gesture and the crew watched the dark mass float towards the ship. Then, as if lifted by angels, it rose from the waters and landed gracefully on the deck.

The crew rushed to welcome the body and began rifling through their things to try to tend to the unconscious Malocchio. Both the woman and the man in the red shirt knelt next to their admiral. No movement came from him, but the bite wound on his neck was still bleeding. There was still time left. The woman produced a salve from her robes and rubbed it lightly on the wound with a delicate hand. As whispers emerged from beneath her hood, a soft glow emanated from her fingertips. Malocchio inhaled sharply as this new life invigorated him. The wound closed, but still scarred over. They knew that it never would heal, and yet they smiled.

Malocchio opened his eyes and gazed at the faces before him. "Alice," he wheezed. "What a lovely sight to see when I come back from the land of the dead."

"You were lucky," the woman called Alice replied. "Another moment and the blood would have stopped flowing. Fortunately, you still have the venom running through you. We can proceed."

"Are they still going to Carnac?"

"Aye. Their course still remains true. We will follow them at a distance. I shall enchant the ship so that they will not see or hear us behind them."

"Good work," He turned to the red-shirted man. "As for you, I will need to rest. I underestimated her strength. She may not have tamed her wolf yet, but she sure as hell knows how to use it." The man thought he saw a glimmer in Malocchio's eye that hinted at admiration. Of course, he knew that it was an admiration of power, nothing more. Weakly, the Admiral nodded to his underling. "You are in charge of the men. After all, you are most acquainted with her mages, aren't you?"

"I've dealt with the elf and her companion before. The moor was one our Lady dealt with personally, so my experience with him is not personal. But if all goes according to plan, all their magic will be for naught." An evil smile curled on Malocchio's lips.

"Then it seems that our victory... our revenge is close at hand."

"Aye," the first mate replied as he rose, removing his flat cap and letting the rain soak his face and dirty hair. "They will pay for what they've done to our Lady." He looked towards the men and nodded at them to take their admiral to the cabin. The first mate and Alice went to the helm. Tense hands ringed the wheel. "You're certain it will work?"

"They must perform the ritual first. We need to make certain it truly works, but I highly doubt it will fail." When the man refused to look back at her, she swayed her hips as he clutched his shoulder gently. "Have faith, cousin. This journey will not be in vain..."

The ship was ready to chase quickly. Alice stood behind the helm and uttered silent words to enchant the ship with invisibility. Remaining at the helm, piercing blue eyes stared at the small figure of the *Fenris* before the *Deimos* disappeared into the night.