

The Tale of Gwendolyn Gwilt: Chapter 3 – Tension on the Fenris

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Morning...

Ice was beginning to coat the early November wind, signaling the foreboding approach of winter. No one seemed to notice how premature that chill was to the season. Then again, an icy chill always seemed to follow the *Fenris*. The fog that crept along the docks was also no stranger. The last of the stars' lights had already died at the docks. A purple haze had already begun to color the sky. Daylight was approaching soon; it brought more than just the windy chill to the *Fenris*.

Gwen had already given the word that the ship would leave at first light and her crew followed her instructions to the letter. Each man prepared the ship for departure and storing freshly acquired supplies. Nemo had already told her that they were ready to make wave, but she stood at the helm with a stoic face. No activity was seen on the docks. For a moment, Gwen wondered if offering the Scroll of Alchemy was enough for Talis. He seemed too much like the man who swore to defeat all evil in the world. She nearly laughed to herself for thinking that a man like him would ever consider helping her. If it weren't for the coin, she would not have lived through the night. As much as Gwen didn't want to admit, she was expecting to leave London empty-handed.

Traces of daylight were beginning to creep over the horizon before a voice cried out from the crow's nest. Quickly, the crew rushed to the port side, still viewing the empty docks. Through the fog, some of the crew pointed to the hazy figures approaching. As they drew closer to the ship, their outlines became clearer, indicating two male figures and one female. They could see the bags that each individual had packed bulking out from behind their backs. The three had also anticipated the cold that would linger during their journey and wore cloaks, although it seemed they were of a weaker material. Gwen feared more for the elf, for her thin leather attire would not protect her from the chill. Nonetheless, she let out a sigh of relief to know they had agreed. She called forth for the walkway with one booming command and her men responded quickly. She nodded to Nemo and he made his way to welcome them aboard the *Fenris*. As they prepared the walkway, Gwen could not help but feel her heart racing. She would have gone to greet them herself, but there was so much running through her mind. There was so much they didn't know, not necessarily because she lied, but because she did not tell them. In her mind, if they did not ask, she had no reason to tell. It would be safer for them that way...

Skylana was the first to approach the ship with Ryder very close behind. The moment her figure set foot on deck, the crew fell silent. Eyes stared not only at her, but at Ryder and Talis as well. They were eyes filled with contempt and hesitation, as if they were unsure of what to make of these guests on their ship. For a brief moment, Skylana did not wish to advance any further and pulled her thin cloak tightly around herself. Though staring men was not uncommon, especially human men, she was with pirates and suddenly began to fear what they would try, even with Ryder around.

Almost as if on cue, Ryder immediately took a step in front of Skylana, casting an almost possessive glare to the crewmen. He didn't mean to, but his hand absently went for the hilt of his blade, which the men noticed immediately. A signaling shout erupted and the sound of blades erupting from their sheaths rang through the morning air and Ryder found a blade pointed at him and then another, causing him to draw his own blade. Talis took up his staff and infused it with his magic. Strangely, the men did not flinch at the sight of Talis' power. For tense moments, every man stood still, neither side backing down even in the midst of a storm brewing.

It's in these moments that most men just freeze, but Ryder has been in enough battles. He knows that in this crucial moment, the most important information about an adversary can be found. He noticed that the crewman standing in front of him was struggling to keep straight and was slightly teetered to his right side. A blow to his right leg would put him at a disadvantage. The crewmen behind him squinted his left eye, showing where his blind spot was. Several men had visible scars on their faces and arms. The man to his left even had a healed one on his neck. These men had seen plenty of battles and survived them all, so these men were not going to be easy to deal with. He could take a look at each man and find his weakness, but there was something that caught his attention longer than most. He wouldn't have caught it if it weren't for the morning light that gleamed off all of their blades. There was a slight difference on color on the sharp and dull edges of the blades. The sharp edge was a lighter metallic color and caught the rays of the sun in a way the the duller edge couldn't do. Never had Ryder seen swords made of two different metals before.

“What’s wrong, gents? Is this any way to treat guests aboard our vessel? Stand down, now! The lot of you!” A voice cut through the silence. The men seemed to snap out of their trance and let Nemo slide through. He had abandoned his mask, but still had that fierce look in his eye and that jester-like grin. Talis sneered as he saw him approach and tightened his grip on his staff. Ryder even tensed a bit as well. Skylana, who had stayed passive the whole time, placed a comforting arm on Ryder in an attempt to get him to relax. “Any of you so much as breathe an improper word to them, I’ll have yer hide and feed ye to the gulls.” The crew shifted uncomfortably around the group. Skylana turned to Nemo and nodded to offer thanks before he bellowed again. “What are you dogs standin’ about for? Get ready to make wave! Move, ye slack-jawed sots!” Crewmen spurred into action as they hurried to their posts. As soon as Ryder and Talis set foot on deck, the walkway was lifted from behind them. Both gentlemen felt a sense of dread creep over them as their path back to land was removed.

“My humble apologies,” Nemo added, turning to Skylana and offering to carry her bags. She stood still, staring at Nemo’s hand for a brief moment. The howling wolf tattoo on his hand stared at her and it sent shivers along her spine. Nemo saw her eyes wander to the ink on his hand and lowered it out of courtesy to her. “Though they seem uncultured, they’ll not touch you. Captain’s orders.”

“Oh, well that’s comforting. ’Tis good to know that a woman who could kill us at any moment will save the honor for herself,” Talis muttered under his breath. Nemo cast a look to Talis before letting a Cheshire grin spread along his face.

“Still bitter about our last encounter, Riverwind?” he asked. Talis only glared as a response. “I promise you there shall be no subterfuge between us.”

“Because I can trust a man who stalked and attacked me.” Talis replied bitterly. He angrily brushed passed Nemo without a second glance.

“Is there no way to make it right?” Talis stopped dead in his tracks. For a while, the only noise was the waves that beat against the ship. Talis turned back to Nemo with the smuggest expression on his face. Tightening his grip on his staff, he thrust it forward into Nemo’s stomach. Nemo doubled over and began coughing. Some of the crew stopped and even began to approach Talis, but Nemo quickly put up a hand to stop them. As soon as he caught his breath, he looked back up to Talis, whose smile had grown just as wide as Nemo’s had been.

“Now ‘tis right.” Talis turned and forth to the cabin quarters, trying hard to suppress a child-like giggle. Nemo let out a small laugh as he got back up on his feet.

At the helm of the ship, Ryder and Skylana made their way to Gwen, who had her gaze locked to the darker horizon. In her arms, they noticed she held a thick wool cloth. The southern wind brushed her hair to the side. For a brief moment, she seemed peaceful. Neither of them wanted to snap her out of her meditative state just yet, but Gwen broke the silence for them. “I am honored you both could join us. ’Twill be a long journey ahead of us.” Ryder stepped forward; he was ready to ask a few questions that had pestered him the night before. Skylana had beaten him to it.

“So, where should I be to help this ship go faster?” Skylana asked. Ryder wanted to keep asking more interrogating questions, but Skylana knew now was not the moment to ask. She knew Ryder was aware of that as well.

“That need not happen until we get out to the sea, around midday,” Gwen retorted almost too quickly. She turned to face a slightly disheartened Skylana. “The river flow will take us there quickly enough. But if the wind stays true, you might not be needed until we get further out to sea.”

“Well then what is she supposed to do until then?” Ryder demanded.

“Get yourselves settled in,” Gwen replied curtly once again. Ryder flinched. Last night, she seemed willing to let Skylana make the ship go faster and now she had changed her mind.

“She could make the wind stronger.”

“There is no need for that now.” Gwen turned away from the duo towards her crew, but Ryder cut off her path.

“The journey will be much faster that way –”

“And suppose we crash into some shallow rocks, especially this close to land?” Gwen sneered, meeting Ryder’s eyes once again with a calm yet powerful ferocity. Skylana flinched at the harshness of her voice. Gwen slowly advanced to Ryder like a predator cornering its prey. “I’m going to give you a courtesy and assume you’ve never sailed on a ship. You’ve not the slightest idea what it takes to sail. Having the wind go right is a luxury and that is all that is required. Too soft of a wind and we will not budge in open water. Too powerful, and it has the potential to throw us off course, and that is the slightest of problems that might arise. I understand that you have the potential to manipulate the winds and make things go our way, and for that, I am grateful, but *never* have the inclination to tell me how to sail my own ship!”

Ryder glared back at her, trying not to back down. The tension between them was too apparent, even to Skylana. She almost thought that she heard Gwen growling.

“I understand,” she cut in, diffusing the anger slightly. “Just let me know when I am needed.” Gwen’s eyes briefly ran to Skylana before matching Ryder’s gaze once again. She tossed the wool blanket over to Skylana, who caught it quickly.

“You’ll need this. That rag on your shoulders will be torn to pieces in the sea wind.” She let out a quick huff before walking away to the main deck. “Enjoy the sea life. I hope you have a strong stomach.” As soon as she reached the bottom of the steps, barking at the crew to weigh anchor. Talis brushed past her and watched her rub her ear as the boatswain’s whistle blew. He continued up the stairs and joined Ryder and Skylana at the helm. He quickly noted Ryder’s agitation and opened his mouth to say something.

“Don’t ask,” he started, holding his hand up as he walked back to the stern of the ship. Talis cast a look to a concerned Skylana, who looked to the blanket and realized it was actually a cloak. Not wanting to endure any more cold, she slipped it over the cloak she was already wearing before turning to Ryder.

“If we just keep to the plan, we should return here alive,” Skylana tried to comfort as she walked over to Ryder and placed a hand on his back.

“I still think I should take the first watch,” said Talis as he walked to the edge with the two. “Did you see those men when we got on the ship? They hate us. I’m willing to bet all these men are experienced in fighting mages. None of them flinched when they saw my magic.”

“I don’t doubt that” Ryder mentioned. “Did you see their swords? They have two different metals on them. Maybe iron infused with steel. If that’s the case, they know how to fight the supernatural.”

“The first mate seems to have made certain they won’t do anything to any of us and if not him, surely Gwen has,” Skylana replied. Though she knew her retort was weak, she hoped that it might quell some tensions.

“You trust pirates not to do something awful?” Ryder questioned, turning back to face her.

"In all fairness, you put your hand to your blade first. If they are mage-hunters, then they probably don't take chances."

"Are you saying you trust these degenerates?!"

"I trust that Gwen needs us. Alive and unharmed." The men looked at each other. Both of them were thinking the exact same thing. Neither of them trusted one strange man alone with Skylana, let alone a ship full of pirates. But if Gwen's plight was real, then the three were no good to her dead or worse. Ryder sighed heavily and placed his hands on her arms, letting the thick wool cloak warm his hands.

"I swear if they so much as touch you..." he began.

"I know," she purred. As much as she did not wish for him to fear for her, she could not deny the anxiety that filled her as well. Even Talis felt a little touched. *At least someone in the Lunar Tribe knew something of loyalty and honor*, he thought.

"So she keeps first watch tonight to make certain Miss Gwilt is not leading us to our death or tries to slit our throats whilst we sleep."

"I shall take the next watch," Ryder spoke softly. He picked up his belongings and tried to exit as quickly as possible. Skylana caught his eyes again for a brief moment. In those eyes, she tried telling him to trust her, but Ryder's concern outweighed her confidence. He sighed heavily and wandered over to the cabin's quarters, leaving Skylana and Talis alone on the stern.

"You're certain you want the first watch?" Talis asked, looking after Ryder. "Your magic might be needed tomorrow."

"If I stay up first, it might be considered an act of good faith to Gwen. Make her trust us a bit more." Talis could not help but let out a laugh. He thought it adorable how innocent her way of thinking was. "And then when Ryder takes over, I can get the rest I need."

"Something is not right about that woman," Talis said. "She may say she needs our magic, but this whole crew is uncomfortable around us. It concerns me to think about what might happen when we're no longer needed." Skylana pulled the wool cloak tighter around herself, which shielded her almost perfectly from the cold. A small, toothless smile ran along her face, despite the chill that ran up her spine.

"I think we will be fine," she responded. "And if not for that reason, then it could be a tactic to lower her guard and drive her to a false sense of security so that we can take control of her mind and manipulate her into doing our bidding."

Talis' face twisted into confusion as he eyed Skylana curiously. Her only remark was widening that innocent, child-like smile. "You're not allowed to stay at my house anymore." Skylana let out a soft giggle as she ran off with her belongings to catch up with Ryder. Talis gazed out into the Thames as the anchor was being brought up. The ship was ready to leave port.

There was no turning back now. As the *Fenris* began to make her first movements towards her journey, Talis raised his head to the heavens, praying to the Lord of Light that he returns to see this port once again.

The journey down the river went smoothly enough, and Gwen was right. The wind had kept Southward when they exited the mouth of the river. By the time night had fallen, the wind turned slightly westward. Once the ship left the Thames and they sailed into open water, Gwen ordered the ship's true name to be shown. She gathered that Skylana would not be needed until the next day.

Much to Ryder and Talis' dismay, Skylana insisted on keeping the first watch. As the two men retired to the cabins that night, Skylana remained on deck admiring the stars. Though she did not mind keeping the first watch, she was still glad the night sky was clear. It reminded of her home

A small commotion came from behind her. She turned around to see that the boatswain had some of the crewmen gathered around on the main deck, saying he had a surprise for everyone. She could still see his silver whistle glimmering in the torchlight, even as he crept. The event was hushed so that others might not catch wind of it. Each man eagerly waited as the boatswain snuck along the deck in a mocking fashion. Chuckles ran through the night air, catching Skylana's attention further. Silently, she watched the men, leaning on her elbow on the edge of the ship. As the boatswain approached the group, he seemed to be hiding something in his chemise, making him seem burlier than he already did. Skylana squinted her eyes to try and get a better look, but it became unnecessary as he slowly yet proudly produced it in front of the men.

Groans and jeers suddenly erupted from the crowd. One man even took off a boot to throw it at the boatswain. As he turned around to protect himself, Skylana saw the object in his thick hands. It looked like an emerald-colored bottle with a dark liquid inside. She cocked her head to the side. *This is a new sight*, she thought to herself: *I never thought I would live to see sailors admonishing liquor.*

The boatswain tried to explain, but the men wouldn't hear of it. They shouted remarks such as "You daft or summat?" or "I dinnae think ye drank the weak stuff" and "Whassa matter, Hands? Too soft for the real thing?"

A smile ran across Skylana's face. For a moment, she pitied the man called Hands, but wondered why he was being ridiculed. She had never heard a sailor, let alone a group of them, refuse liquor. Wasn't it something they lived on at sea? The situation fascinated Skylana. She wanted to go to the men and learn more of the situation. Also, it wouldn't hurt to try and relieve some of the tension that the crew might have towards her, Ryder and Talis. Perhaps she could show them that they shouldn't be afraid of her and that they could relax.

Finally letting her curiosity get the best of her, she straightened herself up and sauntered over to the group. Instantly, they heard her approaching and turned towards her footsteps. They

quickly silenced and their faces hardened into stone-like expressions. Some removed their caps as a gentleman's gesture, remembering Nemo's threat. Skylana tried hard not to seem uncomfortable. Her eyes fell on Hands as she neared him and extended her hand to the bottle. For a moment, he didn't seem to understand. Then he looked down at the bottle as if he'd forgotten he was holding it. Cautiously, he offered it to Skylana. She smiled and nodded her head in thanks as she popped the cork. The dark glass rose to her lips and she slowly sipped the liquid inside. She brought the bottle down slowly, but let the sweet drink linger on her tongue. Her eyes widened instantly. The drink had a flavor that she had only tasted once in a drink. It chilled her throat, but tasted like a sweet candy. As the last of the sweet liquid trickled down, she turned to Hands.

"Ice wine," she commented.

"Tha's right," he replied, very surprised. He did not even think that anyone else would know of it. Somehow, this notion warmed him to her, but only to the point of reducing hostile feelings to a minimum. It was a small success, but a success nonetheless. "We normally drink rum and whiskey on this ship... but I prefer the finer tastes..."

"And the most exotic," she finished for him. "Very admirable."

"I didnae think elves knew of this sort of drink." Hands extended his hand back to receive the bottle from Skylana. Not wanting to cause tension, she gave it back.

"Tha's 'cos knife-ears cannae 'old their liquor," one of the crew shouted from the group. Skylana tilted her head towards the voice, which came from a skinny man in the middle of the group. His cold eyes stared down Skylana, almost freezing her on the spot. The man stood up, revealing a deceptively lanky figure. The over-sized pantaloons and sleeveless chemise made him seem smaller, but the well-toned muscles caused Skylana to take a small step back when he stood straight up.

"Scarbeth," Hands interrupted. "Ye know wha' Nemo said--"

"I know wha' 'e said," the man called Scarbeth spat back. His gaze met Skylana's with a sinister stare. She tried hard not to visibly tremble. The icy night wind didn't help. "I merely wish to point out simple fact."

"He is right," Skylana said quickly in a futile attempt to diffuse the situation. "I know I have a low constitution when it comes to alcohol, but I do know that this is a really rare wine that could fetch a hefty price for you should you ever decide to sell it."

"How cute," Scarbeth crooned as he paced towards her. "The little elf wishes to 'elp us poor unfortunate souls." Behind him, the crew let out devilish chuckles. "Ye think we cannae make a livin' on our own?"

"No, I didn't mean to imply that at all."

"Ye think ye be so much better than us?" He finally got close enough to her to reach out and twist a lock of her hair in his fingers. Skylana's breath was shaking. "So superior with yer little lightnin' fingers and siren voice. But without yer magic, ye'd be nothing more than a forest floozy--"

"I said enough!" Scarbeth was suddenly thrust backwards into the crew by the burly arms of Hands, nearly stumbling as he went. "We were told that we are not allowed to bring harm to them so long as they are on this ship and you will abide by that order!" Quietly, Skylana peered out from behind him. Scarbeth stood up glaring at Hands.

"We knew ye 'ad a soft stomach when it came to booze, 'Ands, but now ye defend this mage? Ye'd betray us for this knife-eared wench?" Some of the men behind him started growing tense, begging him to let it go. A couple others started cheering him on. Still, Hands stood his ground between Scarbeth and Skylana.

"Captain Gwilt trusts this woman and 'er companions on this ship. Tha' should be good enough for the lot of ye!" Hands yelled, pointing out to the entire group. "Besides, this girl's done nothing to deserve our ire. She may be a mage, but she 'asn't so much as provoked us. If ye truly wish 'arm on this girl then you can try, but ask yerselves this," Hands' voice softened into a low growl before asking his question. "Do ye really wanna endure the Captain's rage?"

Whatever bravery that drove the men to a near mutiny was quickly extinguished after that. Each of them looked at each other nervously, hoping that no one would dare step out of line. Even Scarbeth, who was ready to strike Skylana, stepped down from his aggressive stance and sat down pouting like a child. Skylana watched, amazed, as each man brought himself out to the situation by turning away from them. She watched as Scarbeth gave her one last icy glare before turning back to the crewmen

"Apologies, miss," Hands said softly, turning back to Skylana. He led her back to the ship's edge, widening the distance from the hostile crew members. "Ye must understand tha' the men are not used to working with mages. It makes them... uneasy."

"You don't need to apologize," Skylana said, finally able to breathe in safety. "If anything, I should be thanking you. It must have been difficult to stand up to your own crew."

Hands responded by merely shrugging his massive shoulders and smirking to the elf. "This life ain't easy, I can tell ye tha' much. But please don' blame them fer 'atin' ye..."

"Why?" Hands almost flinched, as if he wasn't expecting her to ask. He sighed heavily, struggling to look for an answer. "You must know that not all magic is evil..."

"We know tha', love," he began as an attempt at a saving grace. Failing that, Hands composed himself to try again. "Tell me: who do ye think we are exactly?"

Skylana struggled a bit. This question caught her off guard. She wasn't sure if he was asking her truthfully or sarcastically. Either way, she didn't feel any hostility directed to her, so she decided to answer as truthfully as possible.

"I don't think you are pirates," she began softly. Once she noted that Hands remained calm and unflinching, she believed that it was okay for her to speak her mind freely. She continued on. "I think you are more like mercenaries, but a special kind... You hunt mages for profit." Here, she saw a grin unfolding across Hands' face. She stopped thinking that she had said something wrong, but he merely waved his hand, urging her to keep going. "I think that every one of you on this ship knows how to fight against mages and you have all spent the last few years hunting them down."

"I'll stop ye there, love," Hands cut her off quickly. "Ye've mostly got it right. We do hunt mages, but not fer the reason ye may think. Profit's a nice way of gettin' by, but the reason's a bit more... personal." Skylana inched closer to Hands like a child listening to a story. It surprised her that pirates would do anything for more than just profit. "We mostly just hunt rogue mages. Those who take advantage of others, kill innocent people. On an occasion or two, we get hired by superstitious lords who know tha' something wicked is happenin' to them but cannae go through the authority to take care of it. So we do."

"What do you mean it's 'personal'?" Hands remained silent for a moment. "Did something happen to you?"

"Somethin' 'appened to all of us, love. We witnessed wha' mages can do first'and. Eventually, one by one, Gwen found us and recruited us on the *Fenris*. We never looked back." Hands took a sip of the ice wine still in his hand.

"That surprises me. If you just hunt mages, then why do you have a ship?"

"Surely ye don' believe mages stay in one spot. They travel jus' like normal people do. Sometimes we follow them. Sometimes we find magical sources an' study them so we know what we're fighting against. Some of us 'ave been in this business for so long, it's become them. They know only to 'ate mages because they see 'ow the power can easily take control of them. Sometimes, 'tis not even their fault. The power consumes them until they become somethin' less than human. And we stop that. For some of us, this 'ate is all we know. The mere sight of a mage makes them uneasy."

"If the crew hates mages," she interrupted softly, "why did you defend me?"

"As I said, we ain't fools... at least some of us ain't," Hands said softly, looking back to Scarbeth briefly. Once he saw that Scarbeth paid no more attention to them, he slowly turned to face Skylana. His silver whistle gleamed so brilliantly in the moonlight as he turned that it nearly distracted her. Then his pale eyes caught her attention. "Like I said, Gwen trusts ye out on the *Fenris*, so we've no right to doubt ye. But out of all three of ye, ye seem to be the one who wishes peace on us. Yer willin' to be civil and seem to genuinely wanna look out for us. Tha's somethin' we 'aven't really seen in a long time... and tha's reason enough for me to respect ye."

"I do want to help," Skylana replied softly. It relieved her to know that not everyone on the ship was uncomfortable around them (or her at least) and that when Ryder wasn't around, she could still feel safe. But there was still something bothering her. She turned up to Hands and asked him, "Can you tell me one thing?"

"Depends on the thing, love."

"When we first met Gwen, she told us that she was sick..." Before she could continue her question, she saw an uncomfortable shift in Hands. It was slight, but noticeable if one was really looking. After the shift, he cut her off.

"I'm sorry, love," he began, "but I cannae help ye there."

"Why not?" Skylana pleaded. "We need to know what's wrong with her so we can help her." Hands turned away, but Skylana was not about to just let this go. She grabbed his massive arm and tried to stop him. "We can't help her if she keeps us in the dark like this! We need to know!"

Instantly, she felt one of his giant hands grip hers. Normally, she would have flinched, but she was so frustrated that she stood still and stared Hands down as he looked back at her.

"I really do respect yer kindness, love," he spoke somberly. "But the Captain 'as good reasons for not tellin' ye. She might think if all goes well, tellin' ye would be a waste of time. Per'aps ye would not believe her even if she told you. Or maybe she's just afraid."

Skylana half-scoffed. "Afraid of what?" she asked. She couldn't imagine Gwen having any fear.

"Maybe she's afraid of what ye might do if ye found out." Her eyes widened. Though still partially confused, she could still feel the gravity that Hands was trying to convey. Skylana relaxed her grip on Hands' arm as she began to understand his words. Though she still had no clue what Gwen's sickness was, if it was something truly horrendous, would Ryder have agreed to come with? Would Talis agree? But Skylana knew that if Gwen's desire to be cured was legitimate, then at least she would have stopped at nothing to help her.

"You cannot possibly tell that nothing will go wrong. If the effects of her sickness come out and we are not prepared for it then we are in even more danger." Hands looked as if he were about to answer until Skylana saw his eyes wander behind her. Briefly, she saw something flash behind his eyes, as if something was halting his speech. He took a large deep breath and sighed.

"I understand, love," Hands replied, "but this is the Captain's request an' we need to abide by it." Skylana let out an exasperated sigh and slumped against the side of the ship. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a figure near the captain's quarters. She didn't need to guess who the figure was. The familiar chill went down her spine as those golden eyes seemed to try to stare into her soul. His words from before echoed in her mind *Do ye really wanna endure the Captain's rage?* These men were afraid of their own captain. Why?

Skylana shivered and pulled her cloak tighter around her. "The nigh's gettin' colder," he said. "Ye should tuck in, love. Ye might be needed tomorrow."

An exhausted gasp escaped her as Skylana took her leave. She wished desperately that they could keep talking, but knowing that they were being watched limited what she wanted to say. While she gained a supposed protector on the *Fenris*, she retired to the cabin with far more questions than answers. She took one last look at Hands before turning in that night. A small smile spread from her face and she could tell he wanted to smile back as a sign of peace. She liked him.

Sadly, he was the *only* satisfying part of the night.