

Each of the three longboats carried five or six men across the waters to the ghost ship. The longboat with an anxious Gwendolyn lead the silent and slow-moving charge. She didn't dare make eye contact with any of the three mages, who insisted that they remain in the same boat as her. She kept her eyes on the ship before her.

As her boats approached the silent vessel, she began to make out a name through the thickening fog clouds: Deimos. Gwen almost laughed. She was still unsure whether this deserted galleon was meant to be a trap or was just an unfortunate victim of pirates, abandoned and left for the sea to eventually swallow. Either way, she kept her eyes forward.

But her ears remained open. Her fantastic ears that could hear even the quietest mouse on the lower levels on her ship. She listened to her three guests on her boat as they futilely attempted to speak without her knowledge

"Blood?" Skylana whispered?

"Aye," a hushed Talis replied. "It wasn't much, but from where it was bleeding... well, a normal physician might take notice of it, and yet she reacted as if it were a normal occurrence."

"So there really is something wrong with her. She's not just luring us into a trap."

"Oh I wouldn't be surprised if she was still doing so." He shot up his hands to Skylana that asked her to let him continue, "But I understand what you mean. Whatever is wrong with her, there's something about it that hurts her, that makes her weaker. It might even be killing her..."

Ryder remained silent, keeping his watchful eyes on Gwen. Something about her posture at the front of the boat told him she knew exactly what they were saying about her. Perhaps it was that slight movement of her whole body that hinted at a small chuckle at their guess. He knew she was listening to

them just as she knew Ryder was watching her.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Skylana asked.

"With the luck I've been having before this trip," Talis continued, "I suspect everything is a trap. Perhaps that's why I've lasted as long as I have. What I don't understand is if this is a trap and she knows it, why board this ship and take her entire crew? Wouldn't it make more sense to just leave them on the ship?"

As the two mages questioned and the third watched her, Gwen took a long deep breath. There were times throughout this journey where she debated telling them outright. Even as they spoke of her, they still had no idea what they were getting into. But as came her prejudices with mages, so did ones from mages. They saw her as nothing but a ruthless killer, the enemy, and rightly so. If it was difficult to trust her as she was, would they even trust her knowing what she was?

It's easier this way, she thought to herself. If I can make this whole journey without letting them see, perhaps it would be easier for them...

"Captain?" The words almost startled Gwen (which was a first in a long time). She turned her head slightly towards her first mate. Nemo tried to look her in the eyes, but she refused to meet his. He knew her long enough to know what it meant. She was filled with guilt. It wasn't often that she felt guilt, let alone acknowledge it.

Warmth suddenly enveloped her hand. She looked down to see Nemo's hand covering hers. "We're with you. You know this, Gwen."

She wanted to let out a smile, if only to tell him not to worry about her. She missed smiling for him. Not a devilish smile that hinted at wickedness, but a genuine, happy smile. There were times when she

wondered how long it would be before she smiled like that again... if she would ever smile like that again.

Soon enough, the longboats came within reach of the ghost ship. Carefully, Gwen stood upright, looking for the footholds in the ship as the rest of her crew drew out grappling hooks. Though night had already fallen, Gwen's eyes were able to find what she needed. She climbed up the side of the Deimos quietly yet quickly.

Ryder never took his eyes off of her and tried to follow quickly behind her. He was impressed with her grace as she climbed. The waves were increasing in strength, making the ship rock slightly. Yet as Gwen scaled the dark ship, her form did not falter. She didn't need to adjust for a rogue wave that would hit the side of the dark ship. She climbed almost fluidly upwards and effortlessly pulled herself over the side and disappeared onto the ship.

Skylana and Talis followed afterward, watching the rest of the crew scale beside them as silently and as deftly as their captain did. For a brief moment, Skylana felt a bit of competitive spirit and tried to climb faster. A sudden jolt from the ocean caused her hand to slip. With her other hand, she caught herself and clung to the ship's hull.

"Are you well?" Talis called after her. She nodded quickly before resuming her journey upwards more cautiously. Talis quickened his pace in case she slipped again.

As the two reached the ship's edge, Ryder's hand met Skylana's and pulled her over onto the main deck. The moment she set foot upon the ship, she froze instantly. Once Talis did the same, he also went stiff. A dense, unseen shroud of energy seemed to envelop them. "You feel it too, Talis?" she whispered.

"Aye," he whispered back. This feeling unnerved both of them. Both mages felt their magic dampening. Gwen, hearing their whispers, turned to face them. Talis tried to ignite fire in his hand, but nothing happened. He gave Gwen a look asking if this was her doing. It felt the same way he felt when she slipped him the coin, only it was a heavier presence on the ship. Gwen slowly shook her head.

Skylana and Talis gravely looked at each other. Ryder removed an arrow from his quiver and nocked it to his bow.

The winds howled softly as the clouded skies began to turn black. One by one, the rest of Gwen's crew set foot on the Deimos. By the time Nemo had made it on the deck, Gwen had turned to face her crew and the mages. "Gentlemen... and milady," she nodded to Skylana, "be alert." Without raising her voice, she gave her commands. "Search this ship but touch nothing. Go in groups of three and do not let each other out of your sight. Nemo, you and Hands are with Skylana -"

"She stays with us," Ryder snarled. Skylana twitched, expecting another fight as the crew spun to face him.

Gwen merely shrugged her shoulders. "Fine. She can stay with you." Ryder was taken aback by her response. He did not expect any compliance. "And Talis can stay with you both. If you run into trouble, I'm certain you'll be able to handle it all by yourself, won't you, Swiftarrow?" Ryder found himself struggling to answer her, but she was right. Without their magic, Skylana and Talis would be almost useless in a fight.

"Talis can stay with Ryder," Skylana chimed in. Ryder almost protested before she quickly continued. "I will be fine with Hands and Nemo." Gwen gave an acknowledging nod. Ryder and Talis still tried to argue, but Skylana returned with an assuring gaze. Once she saw them slowly withdraw, she turned her gaze back to Gwen and nodded.

"Very well. No matter what happens, do not separate from each other. We shall regroup within fifteen min time." Everyone nodded in acknowledgment before separating into their collective groups before separating. One of the groups traveled to the forecandle while others ventured below towards the holds. Ryder and Talis lingered a moment before one of the crewmen approached them and offered to take them below deck

Skylana remained between Hands and Nemo as they climbed up towards the forecandle. She kept her

eyes on Ryder and Talis until they disappeared, then her gaze wandered to Gwen, who stood alone on the deck.

"She'll be fine on her own." Skylana didn't turn to Nemo that time. She was too curious. Soon enough, Gwen caught her gaze, but Skylana didn't turn away.

"I thought she said that no one should be alone?"

"Cap'n's a diff'ren' story, love," Hands called back. "Besides, she can take care o' 'erself. I'm surprised ye 'aven't learned tha' by now."

She did learn. She asked to see if their answers would be anything different aside from "she's a tough girl who can handle her own in a fight." Skylana assumed that the same could be said for all of the Fenris' men as well and yet they had to stay in groups.

"I get it," she smirked. "Do as I say, not as I do, right?"

Nemo let out a small chuckle. "Something like that." Something about that remark made the situation seem more dire than it already was. She wanted to keep an eye on Gwen while she was still on the main deck. But night seemed to be getting darker (though it had already fallen) and she was on a potentially trapped ship. She needed to focus on herself first. Skylana broke her gaze with Gwen and began her search on the forecastle.

After most of her crew had traveled down to the lower levels, Gwen remained on the deck. She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly and sharply for several moments. A multitude of scents rushed through her nostrils. The burning oil from the lanterns her crew had brought with them stung the most. Next came the smell of the wood, rotted and warped by the sea. This was an old ship, something that should not last much longer. She was even surprised that she was still sailing (or rather that someone

had chosen to sail her).

There were other scents that entered her nostrils. Ones that continued to burn her senses. They were exotic scents, but not something that hinted at spices like she would expect. No cinnamon or curry. Every time she inhaled this scent, she felt herself wanting to cough or gag. It was almost volatile, but it was also faint. It had to be contained somewhere on this ship. Poison, perhaps? No. It was something else. This had a bit more of a charcoal scent to it. If this is a merchant ship, I'd hate to meet the clientele, she mused to herself.

Though it was odd to have vile contents stocked on a ship, it didn't necessarily mean much. She knew better than to assume the worst already. She needed more evidence before she could make any judgments. Frustrated and tense, she let out a deep exhalation before continuing her search on the main deck.

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The gun deck reeked of mold and gunpowder. Talis wrinkled his nose as he and Ryder passed through along with the rest of the crew. Soon enough, they reached the steps and asked each other who would go to the lower decks.

Ryder already knew where he wanted to be: as close to the main deck as humanly possible. The further away he left Skylana with her "protectors", the more uncomfortable and worried he became. Before any of them had their say, Talis spoke his choice, as if to read Ryder's mind.

"We'll search this deck. The rest of you can go below." Though he meant it as a suggestion, it came off in an authoritative manner. The crew turned to face him, but Scarbeth spun on him sharply. He twitched at the thought of a mage telling them what should happen. However, as he took slow steps to confront Talis, a skinny and dingy man with weasel-like features stepped between the two men.

"Fine. I'll stay with them. The rest of ye can head down below," he stated in a matter-of-fact tone. He eyed Scarbeth defiantly and it was apparent that Scarbeth wanted to act. Harsh breath hissed through his teeth as the two stared each other down. Another crewman tried to get Scarbeth to come with him, but before his hand could touch his shoulder, Scarbeth spun around and stormed to the lower decks. One by one, the rest followed except for the man who stood against him. The remaining crewman turned to face his new companions.

"Thank you," Ryder acknowledged.

"Someone had to stay with ye," the man replied. "No one else will."

"You speak as if we are horrid children that someone needs to keep an eye on," Talis huffed as they began their search on the gun deck. The man let out a small laugh.

"No offense meant, but we don't exactly trust ye."

"Really? You think so?" Talis snorted.

"I guess it's too much to ask if you trust us then...?" Ryder asked, letting the end of his sentence hang after realizing this was a crewman whose name he did not know.

"Call me Crow." Ryder tried not to laugh. A jolly pirate club with jolly pirate nicknames, he thought to himself. "And ye haven't tried to kill us yet. S'good enough for me, anyway."

"How kind of you," Talis sneered. The three men skulked around the gun deck, cautious of each cannon that was in their path. They had been brought back and the gunports were sealed away, which slightly eased the tension, knowing that this ship wasn't quite prepared to destroy their own.

"Can ye at least understand why?" Crow asked. Talis paused his search as Ryder's eyes wandered about the deck looking for something out of place. "We be in a bit of an awkward situation. We've hunted the likes of ye for years..."

"Why?" Talis barked. "Why hunt mages? What have we done to you that we need to be hunted down like animals?"

"I'm sure ye have enemies as well. People ye've been raised to hate?" Instantly, the two mages thought of the Draco Disciples. "And yer experiences with them never once hinted at any sign of goodness?"

"But that doesn't mean that we are all evil!" Talis almost shouted. "Mages are found everywhere, even in the company of good men. Surely you know of this!"

"Some of us do." Crow kept his voice hushed; it contrasted with Talis' booming voice and forced him to listen. "But every one of us has seen what mages can do to innocent people. Mothers who were used as puppets for twisted necromancers to bring their loved one from the grave. Fathers who were compelled by enchanter's to kill their whole families. Brothers and sisters used by sorcerers as ritualistic sacrifices. All of us have witnessed it firsthand. It destroyed a lot of us. Made us believe that mages shouldn't even exist in this world anymore.

"The mages we hunted were ones that took advantage of innocents. Those who did those unspeakable acts for selfish reasons. I do believe we did make the world better by eliminatin' these mages, but I know better than to think all mages are alike. S'like sayin' every person acts exactly the same. Some of the crew realizes this, but..." Crow stopped moving and turned ominously towards Talis.



"The majority... doesn't."

Without warning, Crow drew his pistol and aimed it straight at Talis. Responding quickly, Ryder aimed his bow at his throat, ready to shoot as Talis stood wide-eyed and gripped his staff tighter. "Move slowly," he almost whispered. "Do not make a sound."

Before Talis could react, he caught how the pistol was pointed. Crow was only a few feet away and yet he could see that the barrel was facing him, but not pointed towards him. Slowly, he turned his head to see what was behind him, fearing someone who was already holding him hostage. In the dark, he was able to make out an object made of wood. As he slowly inched to the left, he saw the handle and hinges of a door. Ryder noticed how Crow's pistol lingered on what looked like a closet next to one of the cannons. He followed suit and turned his arrow towards the door, waiting for something to pop out.

Without uttering a word, Crow nodded to Talis to very slowly open the door. A cautious hand inched towards the handle and gripped it without making a sound. Ryder tightened his grip on his bow. Talis let out a few breaths before counting down with his remaining hand. Crow synchronized his own steady breathing with Talis' counting.

At that final moment, Talis pulled the door open as Crow and Ryder prepared to release their shots. He stumbled over something behind him as a loud thud erupted before him. However, no human figure fell out, but the cannonball that had dropped began rolling along the deck. The three let out a sigh of relief as the cannonball stopped near one of the cannons. Crow uncocked his pistol and placed it back in the holster.

"Do ye understand?" Crow asked as he extended a helping hand towards Talis. He was thankful that both his skin and the deck were dark so that Crow would not see his face flush red in embarrassment. Nevertheless, he grasped Crow's hand and pulled himself up.

"Right then, shall we?"

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Gwen slowly climbed the stairs towards the stern. She paused when she heard the loud thud, but continued after hearing no sign of a fight. Whatever it was, it was not a threat to her or her crew (at least not anymore). She had heard the sound of iron rolling along. A cannonball, perhaps? Careless, she thought to herself, or clever. It certainly added tension every time there was an unfamiliar sound. Either way, she resumed her journey until she reached the ship's helm.

Keeping her eyes closed, she grasped the wheel and stood still, letting sounds fill her ears. When she concentrated all of her effort into listening, it was easy for her to get lost in the moment. Mostly, all she could hear was the waves beating against the ship's hull and the whistling wind that had gotten stronger and colder since they boarded. From how the skies were almost pitch, she gathered there was a storm approaching. She felt the shift in the wind from eastbound to west. It was coming soon.

But there was something else that was riding on the winds. Some kind of rhythmic wind softly echoed throughout the ship. Very controlled. She heard several different beats throughout the ship. Five... no, six... seven? The more she concentrated, the more of these sounds she heard. Some of these beats seemed to even have more than one being following it.

She sniffed once more, expecting to find a sharp, cold scent that most people couldn't even sense. To her surprise, she didn't find that scent. Whoever these people were, they were not hiding out of fear. They were waiting.

Gwen let out a heavy breath. She hated her senses, sometimes. Though she had learned to adapt with them over time, it was always nothing more than a constant reminder of...

"What say you, Captain?" Her eyes slowly opened as Nemo approached her. She looked behind him to see Hands and Skylana coming down from the forecastle. "This ship is too good to be a prize. We

found no soul on board."

"Then they're very good at hiding." Nemo barely shifted. He knew it. Shame. It was a good ship. "I know there are men here. They're watching us."

"How many do you figure?"

"I'd say as many as we have," Gwen scanned the deck as the rest of her crew, Ryder and Talis began to emerge from below. "What I'm unsure of is why they haven't shown themselves yet. What are they waiting for?"

Gwen tried to find the answer herself. Her crew has done raids before on other pirates, but never once on an "abandoned ship". If it were her, she would have waited until everyone was separated and then begin making their moves. Her and her crew had been searching this ship for some time now and almost everyone was back up on the main deck already. Why were they waiting so long?

"Perhaps they need a trigger?", Nemo answered.

That thought clicked in her head. It somewhat made sense. If there were enough men on this ship to take them out, why pick them off one at a time and risk suspicion? Better to take everyone out all at once. It seemed like a sloppy plan to Gwen, but if executed properly, it could work. Fortunately for her, she knew they were here. That might give her an advantage.

When she saw that everyone was back on the main deck, she stood at the top of the stairs and addressed her crew.

"Anything?" Grunts and "nays" filled the ship as some shook their heads. She was afraid of this, but she knew what she had to do. "Very well. Take what we need back to the longboats. You find anything unusual, tell me about it before touching it! Leave them next to the longboats."

As the crew slowly went to scavenge the Deimos, Ryder, Skylana and Talis remained unconvinced. They stared at each other and instantly knew what the other was thinking. If there was one thing their Lunar and Sun bloodlines shared, it was the distinct and palpable feeling that something was very wrong.

Skylana turned to Hands who still remained near her before everyone started moving about. She tugged at his sleeve to catch his attention. Hands turned towards her, but before he could say a word, Skylana beat him to it.

"So that's it? No one's here so we just take all this stuff?"

"Aye. Tha's generally 'ow it works." Hands, responded. He attempted to sound lighthearted, but his concern was plain as day.

"We haven't even searched the ship for long. That doesn't necessarily mean that this isn't a trap," Ryder retorted. "I think we should do a more thorough search before we take anything. Just a few more minutes..."

"We be on a schedule, lad," Hands interrupted. "We been searchin' this ship long enough. Unless ye found somethin', we ain't got no more need to look abou' 'er anymore."

Ryder steeped in anger. Why weren't they listening to them? Everything about this ship screamed that it was a trap. He could feel it. Even Talis somehow knew that there was more to this ship than met the eye. Skylana took Hand's arm before he could walk away.

"Hands, please," she begged. "Just let us look around for a little while longer. Just a few minutes."

A moment lingered between them before Hands made a single move. Once he turned to Skylana, he almost wanted to obey those huge eyes of hers. But he knew what had to be done. He took both of his massive hands and enveloped her petite ones within. Skylana slightly recoiled when she realized that she felt more than just sweat and skin in his hands.

"I understand tha' this is difficult to accept, but all we ask now is for ye to trust us." With that, he took his hands away from hers's and rejoined the rest of his crew.

Skylana looked down at her hands and saw that three white strips of cloth remained in her hand. She cocked her head to the side, confused. Ryder and Talis came forward to see what she held, each of them taking one cloth.

"They know it's trapped," Ryder breathed.

"So if it's trapped, why are they taking everything?" Talis questioned.

"I think... they want to trigger the trap." Ryder didn't agree with the method, but he understood what the crew might be attempting to do.

"I don't like this," Talis thought aloud.

"Maybe this is a good thing," Skylana replied in an effort to comfort him. "If she knows about them then maybe she can turn this around."

"Unless she has more men, I doubt it."

As the mages argued and the men began to gather materials, Gwen sauntered about the deck. She let everyone do what was needed. One of them might trigger the trap. If so, her crew had done this trick enough times to know how to react. She trusted them to do what was necessary for themselves and for her purpose. Still, she couldn't deny that she relished finding the trap before anyone else. It was almost like a game to her. It showed how many times they had played their own games against unsuspecting pirates. But this was still a unique scenario. She had expected them to have attacked already instead of waiting for a trap to be sprung.

Then she saw it. She was surprised that she didn't see it before. A lone, old, ornate chest sat at the base of the main mast. It was dull enough not to catch too much attention and seem obvious yet its subtle and rusted design on the cover was enough to entice someone. She inhaled sharply and she smelled the same scent she caught earlier. This had to be it.

Gwen carefully knelt down next to the chest and ran her fingers over the whole of it. Instinctively, they went for the latch that had no lock to secure its contents. It was an obvious trap to her. An unlocked chest? Even a novice thief would think twice before touching it.

Her gut told her not to unlatch it. For her purpose, she chose to ignore it, but something was wrong. The feeling was stronger than it normally was. Every impulse told her not to open that chest. It told her to take her crew back to the ship and continue their journey to Carnac. Something told her that if she opened that chest, she would be endangering her crew and the mages.

She shook the thought away quickly. This had to be done. She took one more sigh before flipping the latch on the chest. Gently, she began to lift the cover until she heard a soft \*click\*. There it is. That was the trigger to the trap. There was no turning back anymore.

"LOOK OUT!" she screamed as the chest flew open and dark smoke erupted from the chest and crates littered the ship. Ryder, Skylana and Talis had little time to react, but were able to cover their mouths and noses with the cloth Hands had given them. The smoke was thick; they could barely see five feet in front of them. They heard the rest of the crew coughing, trying to stay conscious.

They had to get out quickly. Talis grabbed Skylana's hand and pulled her to one of the sides of the ship with Ryder following close behind. Unfortunately, they didn't get far.

Talis was soon face to face with another flintlock pistol. As Skylana kept coming forward, she met her own pistol just before Ryder met one as well. His bow shot up and his arrow was nocked quickly, but he couldn't shoot. The standoff was very one-sided in the enemy's favor. The three mages backed away as the smoke began to clear.

Soon, they rejoined the Fenris crew. Their blades were drawn but no one was fighting. When the smoke completely dissipated, they saw what seemed like a score of men of different builds and sizes, but all of them had a diabolical look in their eye. They had their crew completely surrounded with pistols drawn and ready to fire.

"Stand down, men!" Gwen roared over the screams. Her crewmen halted at her command, but Talis and Ryder still tried to find an enemy they could attack. "I said stand down!" she howled again after they refused to listen. "They've overpowered us."

They didn't want to believe it, but she was right. The derelict crew held the men at gunpoint. Each man who sailed on the Fenris knew that even if they all moved, there were more guns on them. It was a fool's errand to try to escape. Even Skylana and Talis were helpless without their magic aboard, and Ryder would only be able to do so much before he ran out of arrows. They had no choice but to surrender. Gwen's crew eased their posture and dropped all their weapons, allowing the enemies to advance close enough to apprehend them.

To their surprise, the Deimos crew didn't even touch the intruders. Gwen took this opportunity to address her captors.

"We wish to parlay. I demand to speak to your superior." The Deimos crew remained silent, but that wasn't what made her shiver. In fact, everyone who wasn't a member of the Deimos felt that chilling sensation. Their smiles made her want to scream out.

Then a thunderous noise erupted from the doors of the captain's cabin. The Fenris crew then realized the reason why they didn't need to be held...