

Moments ago...

What were only minutes after Gwen and Malocchio left felt like hours. The moonlight was not covered until moments after the crew could see the two boarding the Fenris. The absence of its light reflected the mage's dwindling hope of escape. Despite how skilled Gwen might have been, this was the Evil Eye. Ignoring his size, he was cunning as he was cruel and could very easily dispatch her. Yet as disturbing a thought it was, Nemo's gaze never strayed from the dark ship.

Behind the guns all pointing towards them, the Deimos' men began wagering. Despite how it would have made them more nervous if they stayed silent, the manner of their wager made them more and more uncomfortable.

"Ow long do ye figure she'll last?" one of the crewmen blurted out as he kept his pistol on the crew.

"Dunno," another replied. "She seems like the fiery type. She might put up a bit of a tussle."

"Aye, but ye know 'ow the Admiral loves a good fight."

"Ye hafta admit tha' captain's a fine lass. 'Tis a shame tha' he gets her all to hisself."

"Worry not, brother," a man from behind Skylana replied. She felt icy fingers trailing down the back of her shoulders and the hand that held Ryder's tightened. Though the thought of one of them touching her was disgusting enough, but she was at least glad that her wool cloak prevented him from touching skin. "S'not as if we cannae have our own fun here, right?"

"Don't you touch her!" Ryder hissed. Heads snapped towards his direction. "If you do, I promise you I will —"

"You'll what?" The voice was oddly quiet yet it still had enough strength in it to stop Ryder in his tracks. A tall man sneered in his direction as he sauntered slowly towards him and Skylana. "By all means, please tell me what you intend to do with a pistol at your back and no powers to rely on. You have me very curious."

This man had an air to him that obviously placed him as the one in charge for more reasons than just rank. The scars that littered his entire head down to his neck only added to the intimidation. Even the men of the Deimos seemed to acknowledge his leadership as they cleared a path for him towards Ryder, who could only remain silent.

“I didn’t think so,” the man growled. “Whatever heroic notions you have, you’d best just keep silent. You’ll live longer that way.”

“Only until you kill us, I assume?” Talis replied with venom in his voice. The man’s lips curled.

“I never said how much longer you’d live.”

“Hey Bastian!” one of the crewmen who approached Skylana shouted. “You think that the captain will let us keep this one?”

The man called Bastian let his eye linger on Talis for an extra second before turning towards the elf surrounded by two of the Deimos crew. As the men around her shrunk away, Skylana still felt as if something vile was coating her entire body. She wanted to scream as his hand grasped her chin, moving it around to inspect her.

“Well, she’s certainly pretty enough,” he commented. In his black eyes, Skylana was still able to see them somehow grow darker. She almost didn’t watch his hand wander to the back of her head and snatch a handful of her hair. “But remember who she is, men. Remember who these three are! These three are the ones that are responsible for the fate of our Lady and corrupting the Dragonborn to their side. And that moor has already killed scores of us! That trophy around his neck carries the blood of our honored Souldrinker! I can smell the filth that their bloodlines carry.” Repulsively, he pushed Skylana into Ryder as his face twisted into disgust.

“And this crew,” he pointed out. “This crew not only invaded our home, but is now harboring these pieces of filth. Once Malocchio is done with your precious captain, we’ll see to it that each one of you is sent to Davy Jones’ locker!”

The Fenris stood stoic and bold while the three mages tried to hide their anxiety. Bastian had named each of their crimes almost to

the letter. Talis had clutched the Spirit Stone tightly as soon as it was mentioned. They had every reason to fear these men.

“What exactly is he going to do to her?” Skylana meekly asked, though she soon regretted it as rotten teeth sneered back at her.

“That all depends on her, knife-ears.” A shiver crawled up her spine as she was re-introduced to that slang word again. “Unless there’s something the Admiral wants, we just kill them. Though the way we do it depends on how well they fought back. If we won too quickly, we just slice everyone’s throats all at the same time. But if they gave us a good challenge...” sneers and chuckles drew forth as soon as he said the word.

“Well, the Admiral likes to do a special thing. Something of a ritual.” He paced through the ranks of the Fenris crew as he slowly drew a dagger from his side. “See, he takes the captain to his side and takes away the sword he used against us. Then he goes around asking the survivors one by one who would like to join us. They say no and the Admiral runs them through with their own captain’s blade all while he’s forced to watch. If he looks away, they don’t even get a choice. But if the crew says yes, then we welcome the new sheep into our flock.”

His hand snatched Talis’ wrist like a viper’s. Reflexively he tried to wrench his hand free, until he felt something at the back of his head that felt like the barrel of a flintlock. Bastian’s blade danced close to his skin, threatening to break it. “So I take my blade here and I carve our insignia.” The tip of the dagger grazed Talis’ skin, but never drew blood, forming the same symbol they saw on Malocchio’s wrist. “When you become one of us, you’re in for life, but you knew that, didn’t you?” He smiled languidly at Talis, his face frozen in rage, before turning back to the rest of the Fenris crew.

“Once we’re done recruiting, we go back to the captain and show him what’s left of his crew, if there is anyone left,” he laughed. “There was one time we slowly had to kill a ship of thirty men, all one by one. But then we get to the captain and the Admiral decides that killing him is too good. So he ties them to the figurehead until the gulls grow fat on him.”

A mixture of shudders and gags ran through the collective crew

as the Deimos still chortled and sneered.

“But this is a first,” Bastian quickly interrupted. “We’ve never encountered a lady captain before. To be honest, we didn’t think this sort of negotiations would happen. So we wait on the Admiral to give us a signal. You’re insurance so she doesn’t try something stupid and she’s insurance so that you don’t. And who knows, maybe after the he’s done, he’ll keep her as the ship’s concubine.” Lecherous cheers erupted on the ship. It was a miracle no one had vomited yet. “Maybe if we’re lucky, we won’t have to wait long to see what he saw...”

“Vile pigs!” The insult came after the loud thud of Scarbeth’s head against the one who restrained him. He was lucky enough to not have a pistol at his back, but soon enough came the fists of the Deimos crew. A mix of cheers and shouts erupted from the ship for several moments before Bastian shot up his hand to silence them.

Scarbeth kneeled on the deck spitting up blood until Bastian grabbed his hair and pulled him up to eye level. Despite the fattening lip, that rebellious glare still remained on his face. “Your loyalty to your captain truly knows no bounds,” he mordantly replied, “but think about your good captain here. Do you really think that she even has a chance against our Admiral?”

“You... do not know... our captain,” Scarbeth panted before he spat in Bastian’s face. Without a beat, a fist met Scarbeth’s stomach and he doubled-over helplessly on the deck.

“You’re greater fools if you think you can survive this!” Bastian spat right back. “That ship might be cursed and you may be her crew, but you’re not on it. You’re far away from any monsters inside it. We have you trapped like animals and as soon as we get the word, we will shoot you like the dogs that you are!”

“You’re right,” Nemo interrupted calmly. Every face aboard the ship turned towards his stoic demeanor. “We’re not on this ship. We’re on yours. A ship that has as much of a reputation as ours does. That alone should be reason enough for us to surrender to you. As I recall, you take no prisoners. Why should we believe that we would ever see our fair captain again?”

As Nemo spoke, Ryder, Skylana, and Talis noticed that the Deimos

crew paid great heed to his words. They were too focused on Nemo to even notice that the entire Fenris crew had tensed, as if to prepare for something. It also gave Hands the opportunity to steal a glance from Skylana. Once her eyes met his, he shut them for a few seconds before looking back to her, silently asking if she understood. Skylana repeated the gesture before nodding her head towards Ryder and Talis. A nod from Hands gave her permission and a small glimmer of hope.

Moving slowly so as not to attract attention from the Deimos crew, she repeated the gesture towards the remaining two mages. Though the motive eluded the three of them, they were in no position (nor had they the opportunity) to question the act. Each of the three mages closed their eyes, letting only their ears paint the story that their eyes could not.

“But it’s true what they say,” Nemo’s words rang in their ears. “Our ship is dangerous...”

A shrill scream erupted from the Fenris mere moments before lightning had illuminated her. There was no mistaking whose voice it was. Talis struggled as thunder began to roll across the skies.

Before Talis could protest, he felt the enemy pistol at his back once again. “Just wait,” he thought he heard Crow whisper to him. It wasn’t enough to resolve the current issue at hand, but there was nothing else he could do. Still, he closed his eyes and obeyed Crow’s command.

Nemo’s words did less to make any of the three feel any more secure.

“There’s a reason we are the crew that pirates and mages should fear. Instead of us fearing for our captain, perhaps you should fear for yours. Does he even know what he has gotten himself into? Our captain may not seem so imposing when compared to the Evil Eye, but to think that going back to her ship alone makes him safe is asking for death.”

The ship suddenly fell eerily silent. For moments, it seemed like everyone was holding their breath, waiting for the inevitable plunge. No one was moving or even whispering. Even the wind seemed hushed as if to watch the drama unfolding.

A deafening crack erupted from the skies along with a quick flash of light. The three could hear the men let out an anxious yelp before the thunder gave them permission to breathe. Once it seemed that everyone was composed, they could have sworn they heard faint laughter. They knew exactly who it belonged too and they could see the twisted smile on his face.

“Or perhaps instead of your captain... you should worry about yourselves.”

It may as well as sufficed for a command.

What happened next occurred within the span of a few breaths. With their sight barred, all they heard were the brief and startled cries that (they assumed) came from the crew of the Deimos. A loud bang erupted in their ears accompanied by a bright flash of light that would have blinded them had their eyes remained open. Before the three mages could even react, each of them felt a body force them to the ground, narrowly avoiding the gunshots that might have gone off as a surprise. When the sound to clanking steel reached their ears, they opened their eyes to the chaos that had just erupted on the ship.

Each man that had once been called pirate were now engrossed in a brawl that was slowly spreading across the ship. Soon, reflex and instinct took over the mages actions as they grabbed what could be considered a weapon. Ryder seized his bows and arrows along with a cutlass he quickly tossed to Skylana. Talis snatched back his staff, resisting the urge to join in the fray.

Before any of the three could make any sort of an escape attempt, a Deimos crewman appeared before each of them, separating them into their own battle. Ryder was able to end his by deftly sidestepping his charging opponent and pushing him headfirst into another enemy. Quickly, he joined Skylana as she kept her weapon close to herself. Wielding it had very little in common with daggers, which she was proficient in fighting with.

“We have to get back!” Ryder shouted with Skylana at his back.

“What about what Malocchio said?” she asked, kicking a pirate that charged beside her, causing him to tumble sideways. “The Fenris is cursed. What if there really is something on the ship?”

“Sky, normally I would agree with you on that.” Another shot off his bow caught another Deimos crewman in the knee, causing him to drop his blade. “But we searched that area pretty well and we didn’t find anything.” The next arrow loosed struck a foe in his bicep. “Besides, you heard her screaming! We need to get to Gwen now! Once we get her, we can get let Gwen handle it!”

Another crewman blindsided Skylana, causing her to drop her cutlass and pinned her against the wall. Before Ryder could assist her, another pirate flanked him and sliced for his neck. He was able to recoil backwards in time, but not before the blade sliced his cheek. Ryder hissed, the only way he would acknowledge the pain.

As their battle ensued with a continuation of attacks and dodges, Skylana struggled with her captor. He had her arm tightly with one hand while he choked the life out of her with his other. Her free hand desperately reached for his face in a futile attempt to claw his eyes, but his arm was longer than hers was. As he sneered at her, joyfully watching her struggle for breath, she let her instincts take over. Her leg thrust out powerfully, almost acting entirely on its own, and critically hit its mark between his legs. It was enough to loosen the grip on her throat, but it took a second hit for him to let go of her arm and fall to the ground.

Ryder’s own scuffle didn’t last long. All it took was a thrust for the ranger to disarm him before aiming his knee for the stomach. As his foe doubled over, he turned back to Skylana just in time to watch her shatter a discarded bottle on her assailant’s face.

Skylana huffed as Ryder looked on both amazed and proud. “All right, I’m convinced. Let’s go!” she grunted as she brushed her battle-tousled hair from her eyes.

Meanwhile, Talis seemed to have better luck as he used his staff as a primarily defensive weapon. Despite not being trained in the martial ways, he recalled his battle with Gwen when he stayed on the offensive and how well that ended up for him. He would only hope that the oak would be strong enough not to be cleaved by their blades. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Nemo holding his own, matching his adversary blow for blow. Talis kept his focus on his attacker while slowly making his way towards the first mate.

“Nemo!” Talis shouted as he blocked a downward blow with his staff.

“Aye?” Nemo responded while dodging a cleave that would have easily decapitated him.

“Do you think your men can handle the rest of these men?” With a quick sweep of his staff and a well-placed kick to the face, his foe tumbled backwards towards the stairs leading to the lower decks.

“You think we haven’t done this before, Riverwind?” The first mate of the Fenris made a riposte with his cutlass, stabbing his foe square in the shoulder before pushing him over the side of the ship.

“Good. Since Ryder, Skylana and I can’t do much else, we’re going after Gwen.” Before he heard a response from Nemo, he felt a hand tighten around his wrist, pulling him backwards as Nemo’s blade took Talis’ place to intercept a flanking crewman. Once the foe’s blade was parried, he pushed as hard as he could, sending the crewman headfirst into the base of the main mast. Before Talis could even think of thanking him, Nemo’s words cut him off.

“Don’t you dare! She told you to stay and that’s exactly what you’re gonna do!”

If safety weren’t such a high priority at the moment, Talis would have flinched. It was the first time Talis had heard Nemo’s voice sound like a legitimate threat to him. He didn’t understand. His captain was in danger. They had heard her screaming all the way from the Fenris. Why wouldn’t her crew go to help her?

But Talis had little time to debate. Despite his suspicions about Gwen, she needed help.

“I don’t know what sort of operation you run here, but your captain is alone with the most notorious pirate – nay, Draco Disciple that any of us have ever encountered, and we’ve come across our fair share. Besides, I have an agreement to uphold with your captain and I’ll be damned if I don’t see it through to the end! We’re going after her!”

“You can’t go back! You don’t know what you’re doing!” Nemo tried to shout as he chased after Talis. He would have stopped him if



it weren't for the Deimos blade that obstructed his path and its wielder that pushed back against Nemo.

"I wasn't asking permission." Talis had no more time to waste. As he made his way towards the starboard side of the ship, he scanned for his compatriots. "Ryder! Sky!"

The elven couple waited for him at the starboard side near the longboats. As Talis began to prepare one for their rescue attempt, Ryder grabbed his wrist.

"What?!" he nearly screamed. Despite the scuffle, he was growing irritated at how many times his wrist had been grabbed within the last five minutes.

"We don't have time for that!" Ryder shouted back.

"The hell are you talking about?!" Talis scoffed. "We need to get to Gwen now!"

"I know that! So let's go!" Ryder pointed, not to the longboat as Talis was hoping for, but over the edge. It didn't take him long to understand what he meant.

"Are you MAD?!"

"If we jump off the ship now, we just might get our magic back and it will take less time than to prepare the longboat!" Skylana quickly replied.

"The water's freezing!" Talis protested. "We won't last a minute!"

"Then we hurry," Ryder suggested. "And judging from what we heard from the Fenris, that sounds like a good idea!"

Damn that half-elf, Talis cursed to himself. I hate it when he's right! Talis had his own apprehensions of jumping into the unknown waters, icy temperatures notwithstanding. But as he had recently pointed out to Nemo, if Gwen's safety was paramount to their mission, they could no longer stand idly by and let that fiend have his way with her. Talis finally decided to throw every caution to the winds.

“This is going to be so unpleasant.”

He was the first to take that leap of faith into the frigid Channel waters. Ryder didn't hesitate to follow suit as Skylana went after him with a graceful dive. Even if they had braced for impact, the icy sting caused each one to let out an anguished scream underwater as their temperature severely dropped.

Fortunately, this was not the only sensation they felt. As soon as their feet left the chaos of the enemy ship, a rush of energy flowed through their bodies. Sadly, it was accompanied by the sharp, needle-like pain that wracked their bodies, nearly forcing the rest of their breath out of them. They had to resurface before thinking about using magic again.

“R-R-Ryder!” Skylana cried out through chattered teeth. “T-T-Talis!”

“Here!” Talis' head popped out of the water several feet away, gasping for breath. His head kept bobbing up and down in the water. For a brief moment, panic settled in. His arms paddled in front of him as he tried to remain above the surface of the water. Suddenly, he felt something wrap underneath his arms, pulling his face out of the water and backwards.

“Don't tell me you've n-n-never learned to swim,” Ryder asked.

“N-n-now do you s-s-see why I wanted to use the b-b-boats?!”

“I think w-w-we have our magic back!” Skylana called out. Adrenaline began to fuel her body, allowing her to ignore the chill and swim over to Talis and Ryder. “We must get to the Fenris! Gwen needs us!”

“Good!” Ryder shouted. “I'd rather not f-f-freeze to death!” He focused on keeping Talis above water as Skylana came from the front to hold Talis' hand. It was difficult for Ryder to tread using just his legs and supporting two people while Talis concentrated on teleporting them away. His chattering teeth made the act of speaking the spell just as tedious. He was never one who liked the cold very much. Nevertheless, he managed to find the will to teleport the three out of the frigid waters and onto the Fenris.

Nemo watched from the edge of the ship, cursing under his breath as he saw the flash of light from the waters below. She told them not to come for her, he muttered to himself. Why didn't they listen? None of them had any clue what they were getting themselves into. If they went after Gwen and they saw...

But now was not the time for worrying. They had to act fast. After wrenching a pistol out of his adversary's hand, he knocked the man out cold with it before turning back to his crew. They had already overpowered the Deimos and could have taken her over easily. Hell, they could kill every man on this ship if they had the time, but they had more pressing matters to worry about now.

"Back to the boats, men! Post haste!" The crew scurried back to the longboats after the Deimos crew had been completely dispatched. In less than a minute, they gathered in the boats and were lowered into the wild black waters below.

As the rain began to pour down on the two ships, Nemo prayed to whomever chose to listen that they would not arrive too late.

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When the three appeared, the waves had become fierce and rocked the ship. A moment passed before they regained their footing on the swaying vessel. A flash of lightning illuminated the area, revealing an ominous, deserted ship.

Skylana was practically convulsing from the cold and the freezing rain wasn't helping either. She conjured a small flame in her hands to help with illumination. Trying to dry herself off (which was her initial thought) was now a futile attempt with the rain.

"Don't waste your magic," Talis warned, indicating her flame. "We're dealing with Dracos now. We need to make sure we use magic where it counts. Besides, can't you see in the dark?"

"I can," she quipped back. "Can you?"

"I don't need to. We know where they are. She suggested that they go to her cabin."

“Do we have a plan?” Ryder asked as he quickly drew an arrow.

“If it’s just Malocchio, he shouldn’t be suspecting an ambush, let alone us with our magic back. We should keep things simple and quick.” After a confirming nod from Ryder and Skylana, Talis turned towards the door with a clenched hand. Invisible energy swirled between his fingers as he prepared the spell. Ryder stayed close behind him as cover with his eyes and arrow pointing at the door. “I’ll use my Force magic to push him away. Ryder, you keep your arrows locked to him. If he moves, shoot to immobilize until Sky gets Gwen out of the way, then you can shoot to kill.”

“What about the curse?” Skylana was almost inaudible with the downpour.

“Like I said,” Ryder sighed with a hint of annoyance, “if there is a curse, Gwen can probably handle it after we rescue—”

Before he could finish his sentence, the doors to the captain’s cabin burst open and spat out something large. Ryder, fortunately, pulled Talis out of the way just in time as it flew past him. The strange mass hit the base of the main mast with a loud crunch that could be heard over the rain. The darkness and deluge made it hard to see what it was, but before any of them could rush to find out, that lump no longer became their concern.

A low growling emerged from the cabin as the three slowly turned to face it. Any lights that still remained lit in the cabin ominously outlined a recognizable yet menacing silhouette. In the frame of the doorway stood a creature that none of them expected to see out at sea. Its fur was a dark and matted brown. In some areas, traces of scars could be seen all along its body. Golden eyes pierced through the darkness as it stared at the intruders.

“Is that...?” Talis gasped in disbelief.

“Yes,” Ryder confirmed as the beast emerged onto the main deck snarling at the three.

“How did—”

“I hardly think this is the time to ask—”

Skylana hardly had time to finish before the creature lunged out towards her with claws and fangs gleaming in the lightning.