

“I’ve heard tales of the *Fenris*. 'The most dangerous ship of the seven seas,' people call her.”

The massive voice boomed from the captain’s cabin. Every head that was unfamiliar with the voice turned towards the open doors to the captain's cabin. There appeared a Goliath of a man suited in the finest Captain’s regalia (or at least “finest” by a pirate’s standards), bathed in deep reds and blacks. Each step felt like an earthquake as he advanced to the interlopers of his ship. His face was covered by thick, dark and matted hair, tangled in braids that reached down to his chest. He let the hair on his head cascade down past his shoulders. A thick hand rested on the hilt of the gold-plated cavalry blade that swung at his hips with every step.

But the most menacing aspect about this man that caused the warmth to escape every man’s body was his left eye. While his right eye was as dark and clear as the night sky, his left was pale and milky. Logic would dictate that he was blind in that eye, but the deep crimson mote that masqueraded as a pupil made onlookers believe otherwise. None of this man’s crew dared to look into their diabolical captain’s eye and none of them could be blamed. Even some of Gwen’s men felt a sense of terror upon them once his eye gazed upon them. Gwen, herself, seemed to feel its icy grip.

Talis froze. Suddenly, he realized how grave a mistake Gwen had made when she decided to board this ship. Rumors about this man had been whispered on the wind amongst sailors and travelers alike. This man was a danger, not only to every sailor who crossed his path, but to those of the Oder and the Tribe as well. Talis was fully aware of this man's reputation. He tried to stop Gwen from stepping forward and addressing herself as the leader, but it was too late. She spoke before he could object.

"I am Gwendolyn Gwilt, captain of the *Fenris*," she introduced. It was a wonder that there was no tremor in her voice after gazing upon that eye. "I am here to negotiate the terms of our parlay."

The man let out a hearty laugh after her request. “ So this is the crew of the ‘cursed ship’? I can see that the only danger is that she lets a woman command her.”

*Cursed*, each mage thought. Hushed breaths escaped from them as they looked around the crew and then to each other. None of them had never expected to hear this. They had already known Gwen and her crew were dangerous, but cursed?

“Choose your insults wisely, sirrah.” Gwen said in a calm and collected voice. “You never know when they’ll turn on you.” The *Deimos* crew stirred, bloodthirsty and ready for action. They were expecting a duel to emerge from the two leaders until theirs held his hand up high to silence them and smiled devilishly.

“You’ve as much courage as any man, I’ll give you that.”

Ryder’s eyes suddenly went wide with shock. Beneath the captain’s raised hand, he recognized an emblem that was burned into his skin just below his hand. An emblem he knew very well: an upside-down triangle with three intersecting lines.

“He’s a Draco Disciple,” he breathed softly. He didn’t need to turn to Skylana to see her go pale.

“Not just any Draco Disciple,” Talis spoke somberly. Ryder looked to Talis’ grim face only to see more contempt. “His full title is Fleet Admiral Diego Malocchio... also known as the Evil Eye of the sea.” The man’s laugh cut Talis off instantly.

“I can see my reputation precedes me.” He advanced to Talis until he was mere inches away from his face. It took Talis every ounce of restraint not to spit at him. “What else can you tell about me, mage?” His grin spread across his face like an eager child fishing for praise. Talis tried to resist his glare but could not break his gaze. “Come now, mage. Weave the tale,” the giant Admiral beckoned. Hesitant, Talis took a deep, hesitant breath.

“Any ship that has crossed the Evil Eye has disappeared into the sea, never to be seen again. Some say he is the sea and is descended from Davy Jones himself. Others say that he is the right hand of the Devil. But they all say that he can command the sea with but a word and is the one who will usher any who cross his path into the depths of Hell. That’s as far as the legend goes.”

Admiral Malocchio closed his eyes as Talis spoke, savoring each word that signified his terrible reign. It gave him great pleasure to hear the fear in Talis' voice as he spoke of his dreadful reputation. When the words ceased to come out, Malocchio opened his eyes towards Talis, waiting for the rest of the story. Talis had no desire to keep speaking of his accounts and tried to remain silent. Malocchio stepped towards Talis, glaring at him as he did so. Being of the Order, he stared back defiantly in an attempt to refuse his request while showing that he did not fear him. But that eye... that crimson mote almost forced him to keep going.

“For those who don’t believe in the tales, he is the most ruthless pirate on the seas, never once taking prisoner. As for his official rank, he is the Fleet Admiral of the Leviathan's Charge, the Naval Army of the Draco Disciples, appointed by Lady Tso, herself.”

“Impossible. We defeated them in Bristol. How can they still thrive?” Skylana whispered to them.

“Wrong, little elf,” his voice boomed. Skylana froze to the fullest extent, down to the chill that enveloped her body. “We are everywhere and anywhere.”

“For the Disciples and Druscilla!” the crew shouted. That familiar chant evoked so much discomfort within the three.

“And it would seem this pillaging was more fortuitous than I could ever have imagined,” he sneered as he turned towards Ryder and Skylana. A sinister, toothless laugh emerged from him as he took his giant hand to Skylana's face and tried to caress it gently. She flinched backwards before he could touch her. She shot him a disgusted glare towards him and darted to Ryder, who took her under his arm.

“Oh yes, I know who you are, Paragon Defenders.” Horrid laughter emerged from the ship. Ryder and Skylana found themselves unable to move at the mention of their title. Neither of them could determine whether it was out of fear or fury. It might have been the eerie omniscience that Malocchio had, making them wonder if the descendants of Druscilla were all

connected to each other somehow. Perhaps it was the idea that though the Draco Disciples were a secretive organization, their numbers in this world were truly immeasurable.

Malocchio soon began to ominously advance towards the elven-blooded mages. “Think you not that we would hear of the demise of our Lady’s plan? Did you honestly think that if she failed it would have left us weak? That her plan was the only plan we had of restoring the world to the glory of Tiamat? The Draco Disciples are not a hive mind, crippled by the loss of our human queen. We have agencies that reach the ends of the earth and beyond. Just because you defeated a small, minuscule, dare I say, insignificant portion of our army, it does not put us out of commission. We may have been wounded, but our legacy shall endure. You will know our wrath.”

“So what happens when the crew of the cursed ship meets the most dangerous pirates of the seven seas? What happens then, Admiral?” Gwen’s voice shot out. Malocchio turned back to the voice that he nearly forgot about and walked over to her. As Skylana breathed a sigh of relief, Ryder noticed how it wasn’t a normal swagger like he expected most pirates to walk. Malocchio walked with a certain grace to him, not unlike how he watched Lady Tso “glide” wherever she walked. There was some sort of otherworldliness to him that Ryder couldn’t describe. Perhaps it was a trait of those who descended from Druscilla.

“You really think that you are in a position to bargain, Gwilt? I have your entire crew at gunpoint. I’ve even disabled your pet mages.” Gwen tried not to look back as she heard Talis shuffling behind her. Fortunately, Skylana was able to quiet him before he did something he would later regret.

“Even so, you can adhere to the code, especially if it is of profit to you.” She made sure she used that word. It was the one word that would cause any pirate to listen. Malocchio’s eyes narrowed as a slimy sneer curled across his lips. Slowly he turned like a serpent and began circling Gwen, who never once moved from her spot.

“I’m listening, Gwilt.”

“Surely, we can make some sort of an agreement.” Here, she literally shook, like she had just ingested something vile and she desperately wanted to spit it out despite the consequences. “Why don’t we take this back to my cabin...”

The entire crew laughed with Malocchio. It made his laugh all the more thunderous. “So, the sea winds have made your skirts light, have they?”

“And I’m certain you have missed such pleasurable company... unless you find it all around your ship,” she retorted quickly, gazing up at his men. This time, it was Gwen’s men who let out a few snickers of their own. Talis even let out a small chuckle at her wit. Malocchio’s smile nearly vanished, but his lips tightened, which kept it from completely disappearing.

“If you are willing to negotiate, then why not take company in my cabin right here? How do I know you won’t try and have me killed whilst we enjoy each other’s company?” Malocchio asked, leering in her direction. Still, Gwen held her ground.

“First, I would be a fool to try to kill you on my own. You are twice my size and far stronger as well. Secondly, you hold my entire crew hostage. I cannot possibly hope to command a ship all by myself. You don’t come back, what’s to stop your crew from killing mine?” Gwen stepped forward slowly until she was within arm's reach of Malocchio. She glared at him with her own tempting golden eyes before declaring the last point. "Finally, wouldn't you rather have me all to yourself?"

Malocchio leaned back, contemplating the offer. It took him a while before he could break his gaze from those alluring eyes of hers. He paced around her, sizing her up as he went about her. Gwen kept as still as possible, letting him analyze her, but also closing herself off just enough to not accidentally give him clues. She kept her eyes on him and never let him out of her sight, even as he went behind her. Malocchio gazed up to his crew as if to ask what they thought. The *Demios* only responded back with lecherous whistles and smiles.

The crew of the *Fenris* did nothing but stand still. Skylana felt an eerie chill run down her spine. She looked to Nemo hoping that he might have some sort of ace up his sleeve, but she saw him gazing at his captain emotionless. There was not even a sign of rage. She had never seen his

face so somber and it scared her even more. Finally, Malocchio let out an evil chuckle and turned back to Gwen.

"I'll give you this, Gwilt, you drive a foolish bargain, but at least you're not a complete fool." Gwen let out a silent sigh of relief. "Very well. But you will surrender all of your weapons to my crew. Then we go... discuss our arrangements." A forced half-smile curled from Gwen's lips as she nodded in acknowledgment. She slowly undid her belt that carried all of her lethal effects, including her pistol, cutlass, a dirk, and a knife she kept on her boot. One of Malocchio's men stepped forward and gathered her effects, placing them in the triggered chest.

"Anything else I need to get rid of?" she asked sardonically.

"Oh fear not. You will have your chance to get rid of more later." Gwen closed her eyes, focusing as much as she could to prevent herself from gagging. "Right then, shall we, milady?" He politely gestured to a longboat on the port side. Gwen took a heavy sigh before slowly turning to Nemo, still staring at her with cold eyes.

"Allow me one final word to my crew before we depart?"

Malocchio pursed his lips together, but relented with a wave of his hand. "Fine then, but don't take long, my dear girl..." he hissed. "I don't want to waste any time for you." Gwen tried not to visibly shudder by keeping her eyes on Nemo. Her steps were slow as she approached him. Skylana tried to inch forward towards her until she heard the halting grunts of the pirate behind her.

"You don't have to do this. We can find another way," she protested. Gwen gave her a stoic yet somber look.

"Do you have a better plan? Because I would love to hear it right now." Skylana remained silent. There was nothing she could say or do. "I need to do this. It's the best thing for all of you." Ryder scowled at her cryptic message. He was beginning to tire of them and now was not the time for riddles.

"You can't honestly expect to beat him with nothing, can you?" he asked.

"I don't... but this is the only way."

She turned her gaze back to Nemo, who shared her cold face. Gwen looked back up to him with a hint of regret. No one could blame her for not wanting to go through with this, but they knew it had to be done. Before she turned away, her hands traveled to her necklace. Isa, Ryder once called it. She loosened the tie and removed it to place it around Nemo's neck. Talis thought he heard several of her men gasp. His heart began to sink.

This wasn't negotiations. This was sacrifice. She was prepared to give her life for her own men. As noble of an action it seemed to Talis, it still troubled him. This whole journey was about to be for nothing if it all ended now. He watched as Nemo slowly nodded, but kept apathetic. No words needed to be spoken between the two, yet to each other, to the whole crew, it spoke volumes. Her eyes met each of the three mages and she spoke her final words hard.

"Do not come for me."

Before any of them had the time to question her, Gwen turned back towards Malocchio, who was waiting for her inside the longboat. He offered a hand to help her in. She hesitated briefly, not wanting to let him even touch her, but nevertheless, she accepted the gentlemanly offer and took his hand before stepping in the boat. Though their gaze had already broken, Nemo still kept his eyes on his captain even after she was lowered beneath his sight.

"You're just going to let them take your captain like that?" Talis asked, aggravated. He would be damned if he had come this far only to fail now. However, his attempt at rallying was halted at Nemo, who never turned to look at Talis.

"Aye, There's only one thing left for us to do now," Nemo responded. His eyes never strayed from the point where Gwen disappeared. He kept looking towards the *Fenris* with a stoic

expression. The longer Talis looked at Nemo, the less he felt like this whole occurrence was not supposed to happen.

“And what is that?” he asked nervously. Before Nemo even breathed a word, Talis thought he caught a brief hint of his trademark grin before uttering only two words.

“We wait.”

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The captain’s cabin had succumbed to the chill of the wind by the time the two had arrived. Malocchio sauntered into the chambers and grinned as he surveyed it. For a pirate’s ship, it was greatly decorated with paintings, maps and other artifacts he could not identify. Maps to places he had heard of only in stories littered the walls of the cabin, no doubt pointing to treasures waiting to be claimed. He saw a certain beauty to it like he saw it within Gwen. She was entrancing to him, like a prize he coveted. A prize he earned.

Gwen found her place at the window, looking at the night sky. The waxing moon, only days away from its peak, peered from behind the dark clouds. Her breathing became heavy in anticipation.

“Well then,” Malocchio began. She did not have to turn to know that he was sneering. “Shall we begin our negotiations?” Discomfort began to riddle her body, but it wasn’t from the tone of Malocchio’s voice. She could feel her muscles heating. It was her body’s way of preparing for the worst. She hadn’t much time left. She removed the bandanna from her brow and let it fall to her side.

“’Tis very simple,” she replied as she unlaced her bodice. “You and your crew will leave. Immediately. You do this and I can promise you that you will escape with your life.” As her bodice fell to the ground, she noticed that he did not laugh this time. It caught her off guard, but didn’t stop her from undressing.

“You’re very brave, milady,” he crooned. “You honestly think that you could overpower me? If my crew gets even the slightest suspicion that I am injured, your crew will perish.”

“This is not my first dance, Admiral. You honestly think my crew is really that easy to succumb?” Her eyes fell on Malocchio as she began to undo the ties at her skirts. Instantly, he noticed how brilliant they suddenly became. He did not recall her eyes being such a bright gold that they nearly seemed yellow. For an instant, his breath was stilled. Gwen noticed it and turned back to the sea. As she placed one foot on the windowsill to unlace her boot, she continued.

“You said it yourself, Admiral. You’ve heard tales of this ship.” She untied her laces in a meditative and calming way, inhaling and exhaling as she pulled a lace upwards. It helped stall the inevitable for at least a few brief moments. “You enjoyed the tales about you. Now, it’s my turn. Tell me those tales about my ship.”

Malocchio waited until she had taken her sock off and switched to her other boot before breaking the silence. His eyes narrowed in a more defiant way. Control had been taken from him now, but he couldn’t let her know that. He swallowed his pride and answered. “They say *Fenris* lives on the sea. She is like a ghost ship, for no man has ever seen her in port. Any pirate ship that has encountered her only has one survivor to tell the tale. That man always claims that there is a terrible monster that lives within the bowels of the ship that feasts upon the souls of the wicked. A great beast that is believed to have come from Hell, itself...”

Before Malocchio could continue, his contempt turned into awe. As Gwen’s chemise and bloomers were finally removed, she stood naked and still in the moonlight. Malocchio took as much time as he could to view and admire this display. Deep scars decorated her back, with one solitary mark resting on her left shoulder. Marks that looked like they had come from wild animals had littered her shoulder blades down to her calves. There was barely a spot on her back that remained unblemished. He could not even begin to imagine the torture this poor girl had gone through when receiving the scars.

He knew about the cursed ship. Somehow, he had always known that the legends were true. Yet, he could only smile in respect for being able to survive such a horrid ordeal. He also smiled in twisted pleasure of what was to come.

Gwen heard the howling in her head as she recalled the memory. Her muscles began to burn and she felt a familiar ache in her bones. She thought her heart was about to burst from her chest; it was pounding so hard and so fast. Her eyes, now gleaming so brightly they could be seen in the dark, were fixated on the moon that now hid behind the storm clouds.

*"Fenris,"* she growled. "How fitting..."

The sharp pain began in her core, causing her to violently lurch forward. The racing heartbeat she used to feel suddenly exploded within her chest. Her insides began twisting, causing her to writhe and squirm. She tried to grab the windowsill in an effort to remain standing, but it didn't matter. She soon became too focused on screaming to even stand.

Her ribs began cracking inside of her with such intensity that each snap caused her to jerk violently. Extreme heat spread like a torrent throughout her body until the burning reached her extremities as she began to twist in different directions on the floor.

Soon enough, she stopped screaming, but not because the agony had dulled. Far from it. Her torture had barely begun. She stopped screaming because her throat and mouth soon began to mold and pulsate all on their own. Eventually, her throat was tearing and reforming so much inside of her that at that moment, she couldn't have made a sound even if she wanted to.

Her body began to seize until it twisted her around, forcing her to lay prone. She tried to curl her body out of reflex, but she felt her back stretching out as if she were on the rack. Not only was her back extending, but she felt it arching. It was as if something was inside her and wanted to burst out of her back. The points of her vertebrae tried to poke their way out of her skin, but her skin refused to tear. It just kept stretching even as her shoulders grew further and further apart from each other.

Her body reared in suffering, but the moment her torso straightened, she felt it stretching out as well as the rest of her body. As her skin tried to accommodate for the new size, the only relief that she felt was that her insides no longer felt crowded and tight. They still felt like they was on

fire as they also morphed inside of her, but at least it felt like her organs had more room for themselves.

She fell to all fours, still trying to scream. Fingers began clawing and scratching at the wood below her as she felt blades protruding from underneath her fingernails, pushing them further outwards. If her mind could have focused enough, she would have felt the wood gathering underneath her nails as she scratched. The same sensation echoed at her feet, where they began to cramp. Her bones felt like molten steel, burning her muscles and causing them to swell as they were being reforged inside of her.

It was here that she was finally able to breathe again, but instead of a scream came an inhuman roar that continued to cry out in torment. As her skin began to stretch out, she could feel thousands upon thousands of white-hot pinpricks piercing every inch of her as her form grew larger and darker.

Every inch of her body was nearly mutated, but once she thought it was over, her face began to extend outwards as her ears felt like someone was pulling them upwards and backwards. Here was where the cracking of bone was the loudest. It was almost deafening to her. She could taste her own blood as her gums tried to acclimate to her teeth that grew to nearly twice their size.

The pain began to dull after her face had been reconstructed, but she still felt as if she were on fire, both inside and out. Gwen always felt every sensation during the grueling process. It never got any easier for her no matter how many times she had to endure the process. However, as grueling as the process was, there was a certain euphoria that followed after. Her eyes opened wide as soon as the process completed that would express fear, rage, agony, and a bit of masochistic ecstasy. As much as it hurt like hell, she could never deny that little ounce of pleasure that she felt.

But then she felt her consciousness slip away into nothingness. Whatever sense of control she once had was released as soon as the pain ebbed away. At that final moment, Gwen ceased to exist and fell into the dark abyss of her subconscious.

All that was left of her was a dark mass of muscle and hide and a set of bright yellow eyes staring hungrily at its prey...