

The Tale of Pietra Van Riese

The smoky silence of the Benbow Inn breaks with the wave, its noise crashing through the opened door. A moment later, it recedes upon the hinges, silenced by the slamming door. The fire crackles once more, but the dark windows still rattle, blurred and distorted by the droplets that batter the roof. Your ale surges before it settles on the table, but the innkeeper's wife is more gentle with the broth. As she always is, judging by the stains on the rough wood table. The old man doesn't wait, taking a long, deep drink of his own mug.

"Aye. You heard right. And I'll tell ye, if ye've an ear to listen with.

Y'might have seen it on your way, bit south o' Saltmarsh town a few miles is a stately old house, high up on th' cliff. Fine looking place, once upon a time. Most folk avoid it on account of the hauntings, as it were, but the story's older than those. Last one to live there was an old sorcerer, till one day he was there no more. That's when the haunted tales started. But it was before that, the great house was home to the Van Riese widow.

And there was born she. Pietra Van Riese. An old Galemont name, that, going right back to the time o' th' three ships. The widow always said the father was lost at sea, but the time was all wrong. Folk didn't believe for a moment that this was her lost husband's daughter. And even then darker rumours was whisper'd. See the widow had always been alone out there, even when her husband was alive, away at sea. But for the loyal servants. And they say now that they saw the widow down amongst the rocks, sitting pretty like a seal on the shoals. And the creatures of the sea would come to her. And they weren't always seals, dolphins or fish; sometimes they was men, then beasts, then men again. And they... knew her. And so was the girl born. Pietra Van Riese.

Might have been those rumours were true, because the girl had the sea in her blood. She left the great house, and her mother, young. Set out to sea. Sailed with fishermen, merchantmen, smugglers all. Learning as she went, and fast too. Soon, she was known in Saltmarsh, Galemont, even as far as Seahawks as one of the finest sailors on the Sea o' Sighs, and even beyond. Wasn't long before folks called her Captain, and she was sailing on her own ship out of Galemont, back when the city still lived. In its golden years, she was one of its greatest. The guilds, the wealthy folk, the venturers, they prospered thanks to her. She who was explorer, merchant, whaler. A Sea Captain.

The sea was kind to her. She had luck about her that gave her spirit. Even the mists that haunt the Sea of Sighs did not take her, like it has so many others. They said there was no cargo she wouldn't run, no port she wouldn't sail for, no creature in the sea she wouldn't hunt. The city would turn out to watch her sail from the harbour and watch the horizon with bated breath for the long years until she returned. And each time she did, her voyages were legend. They called her 'Galemont's daughter' And her ship...

Her ship was a liveship. One of the last to be built, back in those days when the secret of the witches' wood was still known. The Vestrit family, another old name, gave it to her as payment, after their fall from wealth and power. It was all they had left, and it was no' yet quickened too. The 'Relentless' it was called, as famous as she was. And moreso, after she took on one of the last Vestrits as mate, in gratitude. Two years later, the ship returned over the bar, quickened, with no Vestrit aboard her. Pietra was the ship's first master, and the bond between them strengthened with each voyage. The figurehead was a woman, pale and pretty, wi' hair black as night. And it liked to sing. The docks o' Galemont were never so busy as the nights that figurehead and the Captain sang together.

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The old man drinks deeply again, and turns in his chair to face the fire better. You lean in closer, to hear him over the sound of the howling wind and lashing rain. A fierce gust hits the cliff, and the whole inn shudders.

"It couldn't last. They didn't know it, but it couldn't last. The voyage that would undo her began like many others. The 'Relentless' had returned to Galemont perhaps a month before, when rumours reached the city of an Ingfell whaler, blown far out into the Wildersea by a terrible storm. Few returned from those treacherous waters, but they did, and spoke of whaling grounds like no other, of seas filled with blowspray as far as the eye can see. They spoke of islands beyond them, with craggy beaches crowded with sea-bears. And little more, the whalers were half mad anyways, let alone after surviving the Wildersea. For most, the stories were only stories, but there were some, just a few, who wanted to know the truth of it, dreaming of untapped riches and hunting grounds in those empty seas.

And who better to ask, than the legendary Captain Van Riese, and the crew of the 'Relentless'? They begged her to seek these islands out, and to chart them, and to hunt there if she could. She didn't accept right away, thinking still of adventures on other, distant shores. They offered her gold and treasure, yet she was rich already. But it gnawed at her. The need for knowin'. She couldn't resist. It drew her back to them, those ambitious venturers. Soon, the 'Relentless' was prepared for a great voyage, heavily laden with provisions and equipment. The city turned out once more, to see the famous ship sail from the harbour, not knowing it would be the last time.

They sailed west. Ever west. Past even Selidor, into the sunset. They marked as their provisions vanished, and foraged what they could of the sea's bounty, feasting on whale and shark, drinking rain. They sailed through waves as tall as cliffs, and gales as fierce as gods. They sailed beyond the charts, until even the stars grew strange. Can you imagine it? To sail so far into the west that even the stars changed? The Relentless sailed on.

It was weeks since the lead had struck the seabed. At night, the water writhed and coiled around the bow glowing in strange colours. Out there, the deep is beyond knowledge. Countless fathoms below, who can say what hides from the sun?

She should not have been there. Those waters should remain uncharted, forever. The 'Relentless' was unwelcome, an invader, a trespasser. And it knew. It came from the abyss. A creature of the deep, as old as the world itself. The sea beneath turned black in its shadow. The water churned as it rose from the dark. Reaching ever upwards, colossal and starving. A deep one! A Kraken!"

He slams his mug back onto the table. When did the room become so silent? The wordless void hangs, broken only by the wind and rain. The old man looks about him with gleaming eyes, watching his captivated audience.

"It struck as night fell. They fought, for they was' fighters all. It was in vain. The beast broke the surface beneath the 'Relentless' and broke the valiant ship's back. It reared its mighty head and roared, and it's breath were a gale reeking with the stench of a thousand rotting corpses. The ship was bound by great tentacles, and the suckers tore flesh clean off. They wrapped around the masts, tearing each one out like weeds. At last, it wrapped those terrible arms around the hull, coiled again and again and again, the strangled ship buckling, and the figurehead screamed, a terrible, forlorn wail, choked and silenced as the water closed over her mouth. The beast dragged her down, to the crushing dark."

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The wind, the rain and the fireplace sing again, as the old man clears his throat, then drains his mug in a long gulp. The innkeeper's wife brings him another. He heaves a great sigh, and no one interrupts him.

"One score and one hundred sailed with the 'Relentless'. Of them, twenty clawed their way into the boats, barely launched before the ship went down. The Captain was among them, though she did not wish it. For three days and three night she gazed over the side, lamenting the loss of her beloved. They say that the Captain goes down with the ship, but a liveship is more than that. It's a part of you. For her, it was her heart. Van Riese gave her leg to survive, but she would have given her life if she could have saved that ship.

They were soaked, bloody and broken, hundreds of miles from land, on an ocean so deep and dark it swallowed the sun. She kept them together, and tried to give them hope. But it was for naught. They were without food, or water, and she was weak from her lost leg. Even if they were strong, the distance was too great. Worst still, the westerly wind Van Riese looked for did not come. Instead, the current dragged them further west, little by little, day by day, to their deaths. They saw sharks as big as ships, circling below. At night, without the shield of the sun, dark things came from the dark deep, and haunted them. Strange lights passed beneath the boats, and strange eyes looked at them from below. And those who thought of taking a peaceful escape, over the side, soon changed their minds.

They held on over the abyss of death, and in that desperate time, they made the desperate choice. They ate the wounded first. Some wept, some prayed, but all feasted. And after they had damned themselves, one and all, it rained. They lived on, pushed west and further west, until one night, the Captain saw something in the western sky. It was a star, luminous and bright like no other. Only when she looked right at it, it seemed to move. Beckoning. The survivors followed.

The star led them on, never closer, never further, until at last, they sighted land. The strange star settled above a rocky island, unknown and uncharted, and as they approached at last, it fell to earth, landing with a green flame atop the single lonely mountain. Of the score who had survived the loss of the 'Relentless', only twelve reached the island. Van Riese was the thirteenth.

*The island offered them some protection, but not salvation. Mostly volcanic, there was little to eat, and no fresh spring sprouted there. They slept on the beach, by fires of driftwood, and looked up at a sky they didn't recognise. And as night fell, the whispers came. Dissonant, distant whispers, only audible on the very edge of sleeping. The words were strange and unknowable, but the meaning was clear. **Go on, Go on, keep going.** Van Riese feared isolation that led to madness, but all the same, she took six, half of her survivors, and set out to climb the mountain where the star had fallen. They scrambled up over the barrens, cutting their hands on jagged rocks as sharp as glass. At noon, they rested in a cave. What they found there hardened their hearts. Skeletons. Two of them. Wearing the tattered remains of foreign clothes. They knew then that this island would be their tomb.*

They sighted the crater just before nightfall. With a driftwood crutch, Van Riese continued alone. No one but her knows what happened up there. Some say that there was someone waiting for her. Others say that she screamed all through the night. But at dawn on the next day, she returned with the star, a great hunk of metal of scintillating colours like a merfolk's tail. She held it in one hand, with the other on her crutch, but it took two sailors together to

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carry it back down. And when they slept, the whispers got louder and louder and louder, till all they heard were screaming."

Nobody was prepared for the innkeeper's wife to cry out. After the spilt drinks are cleared, the innkeeper excuses himself and makes his way upstairs, to silence the howling wind and creaking hinges of the window, blown open by the storm. The gleam in the old man's eyes is bright, and he smiles.

"They waited, hidden among the rocks, for night to fall. When it was dark, they struck. Murdered the survivors who'd stayed on the beach. Quick, quiet and violent. There were no screams, just blood soaking into the sand. They flayed them and stretched the skin for parchment. They mixed the blood with seawater and sand, and dust from the star, for ink. They broke up the two boats, cannibalised them to make repairs to the last, and weatherproof it for their long voyage. And at night, Pietra Van Riese would wander out into the surf, to speak to the wind and the waves. When they looked at her, she was muttering alone, scrawling onto the hide parchment. But when they looked away, just for a moment, they could see figures standing with her in the breakers, whispering. Things that came from the sea.

The moon turned, and the betrayed men's meat ran out. But she had finished. On parchment made from her own sailor's skin, written in their bloody ink, she had drawn a chart like no other. Courses and bearings that changed depending on the sky, and celestial knowledge of stars no man had heard of. Hadar, Acamar, Gibbeth, and others, each more unknowable and unnameable as the last. And they whispered to her. On the chart was a passage, leading everywhere and nowhere.

And so that cursed seven set out, in a reinforced boat. They sailed east, keeping their position with the strange stars, watching as their voyage defied all laws of nature, distance and time. When they were at last free of the Wildersea, the mists closed in around them, but for the first time, Pietra Van Riese knew the secret of their navigation, and charted her course through. They sailed over sunless seas, calling at impossible islands and passing stranger shores. This was the other sea. An endless expanse choked with debris and sargassum, and eerie creatures. Without that chart, it could not be found except by accident, or by ships swallowed by the mists, and it could never be escaped. Armed with it, they navigated the mist ways, following their yearning, and at last, years after they had left, returned to fair Galemont. They returned home.

The years had changed them all. Those who lived when all the rest were dead came back to find their home occupied by strangers. They knew them by name and by face, but the place they once held in their hearts was filled by the sea. There was a wrongness to them, and all folk knew it. They never spoke of their crimes, but somehow others knew. It was written in their eyes, and across their empty smiles. They had left something behind, and it had left them hollow. Lovers had remarried. Parents had grieved and moved on. There was no joyful welcome for these strangers, washed in by the sea.

None had lost like Pietra Van Riese, bereft of her leg, her ship and her heart. She had loved. Beautiful years had eroded that which separated her and her ship. Two lives that had been joined as intricately and intimately as threads in a tapestry. And when one of those lives ends? What remains of the other? The wound would never heal. Then, it was a fresh wound, as red as it was when she lost her. The grief was raw, ravaging like a wolf howl on a winter's night. In time, it sullenly slunk away, waiting for a reason – any reason, to lift its head

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and howl again. Wherever the Captain went, she would look up and around, and then remember that they will never be there.

The room is lit suddenly by the last log falling into the embers of the fire. The innkeeper, startled back to awareness, begins to relight the guttered candles against the darkening room. One of the enraptured listeners wipes away a tear.

"The voyage, the grief and the loss had changed them. Van Riese held onto the only thing that was left to her. Revenge. And she had the fallen star. The metal was dense, heavy, and only the hottest forge could work it. She forged the star into the vicious head of a harpoon. It was sharper than steel, razor sharp, like black glass only stronger. She took her boat upriver, into the Dreadwood, and returned with a haft of Witchwood, carved with strange symbols. And on that harpoon, she cut her hand, along with the last six of the crew, and each swore revenge on the Kraken that had taken everything from them. A vow bound in blood.

*But the deed was far from done, for they were but seven without a ship. The fame, regard and fortune were all gone, poisoned and soured by the fate of her ship. And they would need a mighty ship indeed, to return to the Wildersea and hunt a kraken. And so, they took what they needed from the people who had forgotten them, thieving and robbing at first. But they were one and all changed. There was a hunger in them, a lust not of man. They had tasted the meat most red, and they were **starving**. The bloodlust drove them to kill, again and again, and their evil reputation grew. Others came, drawn by the dreadful legend, but few ever discovered the true extent of their leaders' crimes and lived.*

Years passed as Pietra Van Riese became the most feared pirate on the western seas. With her profane chart, she could trap her prey in fog, and emerge from the mist as if from nowhere at all, then vanish again. She could resupply and hide at shifting islands no one else could sail to, and strike again elsewhere, impossibly fast. And she was murderous, driven by the madness that had festered in her since that cursed voyage. She captained many ships through the years, but all were sleek and fast, and she terrified sailors everywhere by fastening her captives to the bow, drowning them, and leaving their corpses there to mock her next victims. The bow grew so choked in corpses that they began to writhe and moan, and returned to horrific unlife, screaming out across the waves.

The legend of the murderous pirate far eclipsed the fame she once held dear, and heroes came from across the coast to hunt her down, becoming hunted themselves as they strayed too far into the haunted mists. But so too did her legend grow with older, darker things. The sea hags. The deep folk. The Pale Lady and the fathomless spirits. One by one, she sought them out, and they courted her. Until one night, she stood upon a lonesome rock, battered by the gale, and howled.

She cried out into the sea, calling for her lost ship, demanding that the sea return her love to her. And bound by the fell, profane power of those deep things, it did. The 'Relentless' rose from the depths to reunite with her captain. After years down in the crushing depths, she was broken. Her masts were restored, but her sails lay black and tattered. Her keel was whole once more, but her planks were slick with green, and bent around her ribs like a starved thing. And the beautiful figurehead, once so full of life, hung limp and rotted, until the Captain strode out into the surf and bade her wake. She lifted her head, and the whole hulk groaned. Her eyes flickered open. And when she saw Pietra Van Riese standing before her, she screamed.

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The 'Relentless' howled and wailed, covering her face with her hands. The Captain's fury was fierce. The madness seized her. If the 'Relentless' would not look upon her, so be it. She ordered her crew to blind the ship, hacking out the figurehead's eyes with axes. When they were finished, the ship could no longer weep. The Captain claimed her ship once again, and the mighty 'Relentless' sailed the seas once more. She was no sleek pirate galley, but at sea she was a fortress, a leviathan of wood and iron. And a liveship moves uncannily fast, bending her sails and moving with a will behind her. It was only when the moon shone full, silver and bright that her true nature showed. Moonlight shone right through her ribs, and when it shone upon the figurehead, her skin would disappear and show the skeleton beneath, with her bones cracked and warped like the ancient dead.

The storm settled across the western seas. The oceans ran clear and blue once again. Some began to believe that Van Riese was dead, or had moved on to stranger shores. She was not. She was waiting. Preparing. She gathered her six sworn sailors to serve as the ship's mates, and a crew of the most vicious killers on the sea. They provisioned for the longest of voyages and armed themselves for the hunt. They sailed west.

They braved the winds and the waves once again, but this time they had the chart, and the Captain who could read it. The mists returned them to the abyss where so many had died, but the Kraken did not rise. But Captain Van Riese did not despair, for she knew things that others could not. She knew the Kraken by sight, and her harpoon whispered, spurring her on. They gave chase.

They sailed through the mist, through the moving rocks and reefs filled with sea beasts, cutting the ship free of the great swathes of sargassum that bound it. They followed the leviathan's trail, through stranger and stranger seas, but it would not come to them. Her crew began to lose their heart, and Van Riese forced them on with heartless cruelty. The bold captain was long gone, and all that was left was vengeance. Some starved, some were taken by the sea. Others were bound to the bow beneath the figurehead, to drown and rise again as living corpses. Soon, only the zealous and the terrified were left. The trail led them to a sea of ice and snow, and it grew wonderous cold. The ship was bound in pack ice as hard as stone, and they laboured in the freezing wind to free her. As more and more succumbed to the cold, the terrified crew realised that they would die here. Pietra Van Riese would drive them ever onward until none were left. They would never slay a Kraken. They would never go home, to fame and glory. There was only the Captain's madness.

These thoughts festered even in one of the sworn sailors. The youngest survivor of Van Riese's original crew, they thought on their vow, and of home. In desperation, they led a vicious mutiny, seeking to kill their Captain, and turn back for the sunlit seas of this world while they still could. They struck in the dark, but the figurehead cried out, warning Van Riese and her remaining crew, and the icy decks were soon bathed in steaming blood. And as they fought, the ice beneath them began to move, and creak. Something moved in the depths below.

It had led them further and further away from hope and land. It had worn them down against the trials that led there. And then, when the ship was helpless in the ice, the Kraken attacked. The ice began to creak and groan, shuddering as the leviathan surged beneath. For a moment, there was silence as the fighting on deck stopped. It burst through the ice sheet, shattering it with a deafening crack. The 'Relentless' lurched, almost capsized, as chunks of ice twice her size crashed into the water around her.

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The air was filled with icy spears, soundlessly slicing through skin and flesh. Ice slammed onto the deck, felling men in a single blow. The beast heaved its body out of the water, lashing out with tentacles thicker than masts. One struck the deck, hurling the few left standing into the water. The bow vanished beneath the broken ice, then surged back up again streaming frigid water.

The leviathan pulled itself up, towering over the ship. It opened its maw and it roared. A terrible, maddening roar, riddled with that choking stench. And there was one who roared right back. Captain Pietra Van Riese stood on the deck, screaming her defiance at the all-consuming colossus. She stood steady, her wooden leg lodged into a rent in the deck. In her hand she held the star metal harpoon, poised to strike. When the monster surged forward to devour the ship whole, she let the harpoon fly, and guided by an unnatural hand, plunged it deep into the Kraken's Eye. The Kraken recoiled, writhing and flailing as if struck by lightning and glittering black veins spread from its wounded eye. But in its death throes, it slammed the 'Relentless' with its arms, over and over again, wrapping its tentacles around the ship and captain in desperate mortality. At last, its colossal bulk fell, enveloping the ship. The Captain, her ship, and her bane all fell into the crushing depths.

The ice closed in, and the waves subsided. Only the creaking ice and lonely wind broke the silence of the sea. One man lived to bear witness. The oathbreaker. The mutineer. Before the ship went down, he fought his way to the Captain's cabin. He took everything he could, the chart, the tools and the captain's log. He bundled them into a boat and jumped after them. And so, he survived the sinking of that ship once more. With the chart, he followed their course back into the mist, until it brought him home. Fishermen found his boat, and him inside, consumed by madness, shrunk and starved. They took him and dug a grave ready for him. But he endured. Long past the endurance of a man. He had not drunk or eaten or slept in the countless days of his voyage home. But he could not die.

When his mind returned, he tore the chart into pieces and took the pages from the logbook, casting them into the sea so that no one could go back to the Sea of Sorrow. But the parchment would not take the water, and when he picked the pieces back out of the surf, they were dry. He wandered the coasts in the years that came after, and in time each of the pieces was lost, and Van Riese's things passed into new hands. But he never ventured back out into the ocean, for he knew the terrible truth in his dark dreams."

He leans forward in his chair, his leathery face and glittering eyes shadowed in the embers of the long forgotten hearthfire. The listeners hold their breath, helpless.

"Death was not the end. For any of them. Captain Van Riese awoke on the seabed, water in her lungs and all manner of sea creatures feasting on her flesh. Her crew stirred with her, every single one who'd been lost at sea under her command. Some were fish eaten corpses, like she, whilst others were only bones, or ghostly things. All were damned. The Captain called out, and her ship answered, sunken but whole. Of the Kraken, there was no sign.

They have roamed, just beyond the fog, ever since. Without her chart, she is lost in the mists, but on some nights, when the moon hides away and the wind blows, her ship appears in these seas, searching for what was stolen. The sea's dead answer to her, and she conjures storms and long-lost ghost ships to do her bidding. She preys on ships that stray into the mists, striking fast, betrayed only by the moaning corpses that adorn the bow of her ship. Now and then, she spares a crew that takes her interest, for she is the sea's creature, and cannot walk above the tide.

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She follows the ships that take her whim, even helping some, and should they prove to be true sailors, she bids them to keep watch for children born at the highest of tides, who know the sea and its creatures like no child should. And should they find such a child, they must take them to sea by any means. Like her, she tells them, they are its creatures.

The Krakens are older than memory itself, and in those eternal fathoms even death may die. The leviathan was poisoned by that fell harpoon, and its body sunk to the seafloor. But it's said that when the tide is right, there's those born with a part of the Kraken's soul inside them. Odd folk, who speak to the wind and the sea, and know of things before they come to pass. Those pieces are scattered now, through the years and tides. But like the Captain's chart, they could be restored. Pray, then, that Captain Van Riese should never find her way back to these seas, for she would never relent in her hunt."

He leans back, his chair groaning like a ship's timbers, and drinks from the fresh mug brought to him.

"*Gods, what a tale*" says the innkeeper, shaking his head as he goes to relight the candles once more. The others shuffle away to their rooms for the night. The old man waits until you are alone before he meets your eye again.

"I was twenty when we sailed from Galemont. I should have died on that voyage, and a hundred times since, but I can't. I am bound to her, just like the rest of the crew. It has been so long, but the memories won't fade. I remember every scream, every word. I remember everything we did."