

I'd seen men with more alcohol in their bodies than blood turn cold sober when faced with something that scared them. I didn't have anything to scare me that badly – nor did I *want* something to suddenly appear for the sake of sobriety – but I wasn't as sloshed as I should have been after finishing off an entire bottle of whiskey in an evening. Maybe my body was resisting the alcohol, maybe my conversation with Hali had shook me a little. Either way, I was rational enough to come up with a plan before I left my table.

The bartender glared at me when I motioned him closer. People had various initial reactions to my imbalance. While my crew seemed to be getting more or less used to me, everyone else either turned up their noses or glared.

"Whattaya want?" he demanded. He'd made me pay up front, so he didn't even have the promise of incoming money to motivate him to be helpful.

I tried to change that by placing a silver on the counter. It was worth more than my liquor had been. "I'm looking for a place to pick up magical items."

"I recommend the market in the morning," he replied, though he eyed the silver.

"If I was interested in market stalls, I'd do that." I said. "I need the sort of operation that'd open its doors for me tonight."

I was gambling. I'd never purchased magical goods on the black market before, but was trying to sound like I at least knew what I wanted. My bluff seemed to work, because the barkeep picked up my silver and eyed it.

"What kind of goods would you be lookin' fer?"

"Concealment. Not stealth stuff, I mean stat concealment."

He snorted. "Pity."

"I know, I know. I'm no one's favorite patron. But I'm trying to change that. Wouldn't you like to see me without magic convincing you I'm ugly?"

"You are ugly, ya snot! Doesn't matter what kind of magic is to blame. No magic item is gonna fix you up, neither." He rolled my silver across his knuckles and made it disappear in his palm. "But iffin' you've got the coin, I've got the friends."

"Then we have business."

A short while later, I was in a normal armorers' store. I could guess at the operation that was going on based off the details.

The clerk who opened the store for us and laid out the type of items I requested no doubt worked here during the day – the key ring he had looked official enough. Judging by the way he moved through the place, he wasn't worried about his 'boss' the armorer finding out, so he was probably the true boss of the place despite his seemingly low position.

I wasn't given the chance to peruse the shelves or check out wherever they had their illicit goods hidden. First time customers weren't given that level of trust, even if I was rich and something else might have caught my eye.

Speaking of riches, I hoped this wouldn't be too expensive. I'd had quite a bit of gold for one person not too long ago, but I'd divvied a lot of it up to have my crew make purchases. Only what we'd taken from the schooner allowed me to consider such an investment.

But it should be a worthwhile investment. I'd started thinking after seeing Hali's necklace again. The usefulness of my *Hide True Nature* ability was nearing its end – people were learning my name. My ability only hid my curse and ocean magic.

And if people knew who I was, the analyze skill level required to see through me went down considerable.

An item like Hali's though ... it had disadvantages, she'd pointed them out to me before, but it could give me a chance at a different name.

So here I was in the middle of the night, with people the local guard would love to get their hands on, perusing goods that could not have been obtained honestly. I wasn't sure whether to be impressed or disappointed with the selection.

I'd half expected the black market to have a stall full of trinkets to choose from. Instead, I was looking at two small trays filled with jewelry. What was impressive, was that each piece of jewelry had some function like what I'd asked for.

*Ring of veiled character, ring of anonymity, necklace of obscurity, necklace of persona ...* all of them related to hiding my stats.

But, I wasn't just trying to hide them. I was trying to create an illusion, like the one that had convinced me Hali was a sailor.

That took most of the goods off the table. I quickly narrowed down the rest by my disliking rings – too many sailors lost fingers due to the darned things. Burdette himself was an example, though the man still persisted in wearing them. That left me with a choice of two necklaces. I chose the one that didn't look like a gaudy bauble.

"The chain on this, can it be changed without affecting the item?" The clerk nodded. I unclasped the fine silver, diamond studded chain and dropped it in the tray. I was left with a rather plain looking medallion shaped like a compass rose. "Do you have a simple leather cord I could use?" I asked. "I'll take this one."

The clerk retrieved a cord for me and named a price in silver. I was relieved – I'd been worried something like this would cost gold. It was a fair weight of silver, but still.

I guess there were benefits of goods acquired cheaply and without any tax applied.

My bartering attempts got me nowhere, and feeling more than a little uncomfortable at whether I was even supposed to barter with this man, I paid the asking price. It was worth it.

I slipped out to the street and almost immediately began to duck down an alley to avoid a gang of men patrolling the streets. That is, until I recognized them.

"What has you lot wound up?" I asked.

Surprised at seeing their Captain, the group stammered and made way for Burdette.

"Captain," the man said. "It would seem I've made a mistake ..."

"You sure that we are missing 16?" I hissed through my teeth as I followed Burdette. "What, you conducted a muster in the town square?"

"Those men were in a group that asked to explore the waterfront night life," Burdette said. "The other group leaders accounted for themselves."

"You've contacted each group?" I demanded. "You said you heard of this not an hour ago, yet you met with every group in the port?"

He hesitated. "Not every group, but the vast majority all have ..."

I cursed. "Recall the men to the ship. No! Wait twenty minutes, then give the signals. I want you to have a proper count waiting for me when I arrive."

"When you arrive?" Burdette said. "But sir ..."

"No buts, Burdette! You return to the ship immediately with the rest of these men," I said as the crew around us ground to a halt. "You said Phillip knows where this fort is?"

"Yes," he said, still wavering.

I named Phillip and four others – all fighters – who would accompany me. The rest I ordered back to the ship.

This port call was a mistake.

16 men had asked Burdette to visit a brothel. Burdette had let them go. Later, another one of my crew spotted them not carousing with soiled doves, but stealthily making their way towards the local garrison.

There might be something sly going on, but to me it spoke of a coordinated desertion. 16 men had decided they would rather try their luck with the local authorities than serve under me on my doomed mission to turn the waters red.

For all that I pitied my crew and what I made them do, this desertion made me angry. Furious. They'd abandoned their fellows. They'd abandoned me.

Phillip guided me towards where the men were last seen. The size of the garrison unsettled me. We were supposed to be visiting a town just large enough to accommodate us – either the town had grown quite a bit since Burdette had last visited or my first mate hadn't shared my cautious viewpoint.

There was a two story stone hall making one end of the rectangular garrison. Long, narrow barracks extended from this hall like legs on a stool. With this arrangement, only short sections needed to be dedicated walls, as the buildings themselves served the purpose. It was no castle, but it was more than enough. The gates were barred, and there were no windows in the outer wall. At least, not on the ground level. There were windows on the second story of the hall, but even they were designed to allow archers to fire through and deny intruders.

I pointed towards them anyway. My small gang and I weren't enough to break into an armed garrison and drag 16 unwilling people away, but I could at least learn more.

I summoned water against the northern wall of the town hall, away from prying eyes at the gate. Freezing the water and shaping it, I formed handholds. They were not strong handholds, and would disappear without my magical focus, but for my 11 levels in climbing? Kids stuff.

Ascending to the second story porthole – I suppose army people called windows in a fort something different, but darned if I knew the terminology – I peered through. It was a spartan if cheerily lit mess hall, with logs cracking on the fire and glow-rocks sitting in polished sconces along the wall. Seated at one of the tables were my 16 crewman.

They were eagerly tucking into a stew, while the commander of the garrison questioned them.

“And your Captain has no way of sailing his ship without the aid of a crew, such as yourselves?”

“No,” the crew spokeswoman said. I was surprised to see that it was Debra, the former slave consort-turned cook. “He gives orders, but nothing happens unless we do it. If we messed something up, the ship went the wrong way.”

“He can raise and submerge the ship on his own,” someone else popped in. “No clue how he does it, though.”

“Interesting,” the commander said. “What about ship effects? What do you know of those?”

“I remember he talked of this bleeding effect when we were butchering those monsters,” another voice cheerfully supplied.

“Any wound bleeds far more around that ship than it should,” Debra said. “A simple cut making meals could be life-threatening to a low levelled person without medical care.”

“Seaborn could not control this effect to not include you?”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t,” someone muttered, to the agreement of others.

A large white flare appeared over the wharf with a crack. Exactly 15 seconds later, another sunburst and crack sounded. The deserters had heard it and went silent. A moment later a guard entered and reported the signal to the commander, though there didn’t seem to be any urgency in the report. Such signals were matters of interest, but most crew had some means of disturbing the peace to recall their men.

The commander dismissed the guard with orders not to investigate. Turning to the deserters, he calmly said “I take it that was for you?”

“He’s noticed we’re gone,” one of the former slaves whimpered. “He’s going to come for us ...”

“He’s welcome to try,” the commander said. “Breaking his teeth here would make the job of the confederacy much simpler.”

The man didn’t find the commander’s bravado reassuring.

“Commander,” Debra said. “I don’t mean to be rude, but surely you can see our sincerity and our helpfulness. You must sent for someone to break our curse immediately! Or in less than a day we’ll be of no more use to you at all.”

“I took the liberty of sending a message to the appropriate authorities the moment I admitted you lot, miss.” The Commander replied. “If there is a way to break your curse, I’m sure we’ll find it.”

While I watched my crew betray every secret they knew, my anger faded. Yes, they’d turned their back on me, but they were just trying to be free. Didn’t I appreciate what that meant anymore?

I dropped down beside Phillip, who waited below. I pulled out a pen and paper, scribbling a note while I gave him instructions. A minute later he was off, and I was repeating my climbing trick. Shouted commands to stop from the gate around the corner indicated Phillip hadn’t been stealthy enough in his approach, but it didn’t sound like he was caught.

Soon, another guard appeared in the hall with a message. “Commander, this was just thrown at one of our sentries, it was wrapped around a rock. It’s ...” he glanced at the deserters. “It may be of interest.”

The commander accepted the note I’d just penned and read it, then deigned to read it aloud to my crew.

“To my wayward crewmen; I know the challenges and doubts in your minds. I know the struggle you feel and sympathize with your attempts to be free. For that reason, anyone who returns to my ship within an hour will be welcomed back without reprisal. After that hour, the *Death’s Consort* will sail. You will be left behind, at the whims and in the graces of whomever you’ve attempted to make deals with for your life. May they have more mercy on you than mine did.” The commander folded the letter and placed it in a pocket. “It is signed Captain Domenic Seaborn.”

“We’re doomed,” the same woe-sayer spoke. “He’ll sail away and doom us!”

“We knew he’d sail before we left!” Debra snapped at him. “The commander now has an hour to do whatever he plans. Well, commander? I don’t think any of us desire to return, but I suppose you want us to sabotage him or spy for you?”

Bloody stars, when had my cook become so calloused?

“I think not,” the commander said. “Tempting as it is, I’d have no control over you once gone, and you’d be surely watched. Better at this point to deny him the crewmen.”

“I want to go back!” The woe-sayer exclaimed to my surprise. “You’ve only got so many hours to free all of us from this curse, and you don’t seem in a rush to do it. If you won’t free me, then I’ll take my chances another time!”

“No,” the commander said. “Regardless of whether you’re of any more use, I will at least deprive this Captain Seaborn of your able hands – even if it seems he has more than enough. Besides, for the next day you all can point directly to wherever the *Death’s Consort* is, yes? Do you know how valuable that ability is these days? Finding the ship when it’s beneath the waves is nearly impossible – it’s a costly magic that only gets results once the cursed ship is already moving once again. I will have each one of you pointing towards it for as long as I can!”

“We will help you,” Debra said, forestalling the outraged cries. “Just please help us so that when our usefulness starts to expire, we can be saved!”

“Of course,” the commander said. “As promised.”

I dropped from the window, having heard as much as I needed – or could stomach. “Let’s go,” I said to the man keeping watch. We slipped around the town and into the ocean, swimming to the ship to avoid any potential trap on the shore.

We left without 16 people.

Having eavesdropped on the conversation between the deserters and local guard – who I now had no doubt was in contact with a broader network – I saw no reason to stick around for the hour I'd promised. There'd be no one coming.

Still angry at Burdette, I sent him to work below decks while I gave the orders for preparing to sail. He'd had a proper muster waiting for me when I came aboard, and was doing a decent job looking penitent for his mistakes, but his mistakes were things that wouldn't just be forgiven even on a merchant ship, much less my ship!

If those pursuing us were able to break the deserters curse – if they deigned to try – than this port visit will have cost me the service of those people. If they were not able to be freed and they couldn't return the ship in the hours that remained ... those 16 would be dead, killed by the curse that tied them to the ship.

The crew knew that we were leaving people behind. They were no doubt wondering whether it would have been better to make a break for it too. Wouldn't that have been something? Davy Jones lieutenant caught when his crew deserted him en masse, leaving him high and dry?

"Captain," Rhistel said. "I heard something that may be of interest to us at some point ..."

"Not now." I snapped. I wouldn't mind sitting down to chat with the elf but he really should know better than to introduce an irrelevant topic when we were setting sail. The *Death's Consort* could strike a shoal as easily as another ship.

When we were away, I could feel indicators towards each of my lost crewmen. I couldn't feel anything of the sort earlier. It seemed that the further I got from them, the more distinctive the indicators became. Right now they were all in an clump vaguely that direction, and only my knowledge they were on the island let me say with confidence exactly where.

"Set your course 030," I instructed the helmsman, turning northwards around the island. A minute later I cursed and was forced to surface by 40 feet to avoid a reef. I ordered Arnaith to retrieve my charts from my cabin, as I couldn't remember the local waters well enough to take the risk navigating blind. I wasn't happy with what I saw: the Broken Isles were known for chaotic seismic activity, ground breaking and shifting regularly with new islands forming in magnificent eruptions. These charts were out of date, but even they indicated large shallows between islands and reef growths making channels dangerous unless they were broken up.

I guided the ship to a depth just below the surface, the crow's nest nearly peeking into the troughs of the waves. Then I left standing orders with the helmsman to have 'reef' yelled to me if anything came up that we risked a collision with due to depth. As the only person who could alter the depth of the ship, I'd do so immediately for the surface with that message.

I went to my cabin, and sent Arnaith to bring Burdette. When the former Captain entered, it was with his hands behind his back and his shoulder's squared.

"That will be all, Arnaith." I said. The half elf shot dirty looks at the first mate while he closed the door behind him. "Well Burdette," I said quietly. "Tell me what in the forsaken depths happened on that island."

"It was my mistake, sir." Burdette said. "The town had grown larger than I thought since I last saw it, I should have called off the whole thing, but I feared what that might mean for the crew! They were already in town you see, and to deny them then ... it might have driven them all away."

"And so with this fear of rebellion so freshly in your mind, you authorized a splinter group to go off alone?"

"It was Debra, Captain! We both knew and trusted her," as if Burdette ever trusted any of the former slaves. "Their group just wanted to visit the brothels on the pier, that was all! Why should I deny them that?"

"It was Debra," I said. "Debra the former consort was going to lead the rest of them out whoring. Is that what you're telling me?"

Burdette's mouth opened silently at first. When he found the words, they were quieter, less sure. "There's no accounting for taste? I recall she was very successful as a consort when she still had the trade ..."

I kicked over my chair and cursed the man. "They're as good as dead now! Dead! Do you hear me? Because there's no way they're getting back to the ship before their time runs out. And what's more, until their time runs out, they can point straight at us for all our pursuers!"

Burdette's face lightened a shade at that news, but what he said was "Are you sure they can't be freed?"

A nasty chill stuck to my spine. "Are you *curious*, Mr. Burdette?" I asked softly. "Holding out for your own chances to break for it?"

He swallowed. "I'm in it for the seamanship levels," he said. "I know what I get if I stick with you."

"And are you content with that?" I asked, no longer sure if my hook truly had him. "Would you sail with me for eternity if I guaranteed you a hundred levels? Or does your pride demand you sail under your own flag?"

His jaw clenched. His Adam's apple bobbed as he worked his throat in an attempt to swallow and find the right words. "You get me past even level 30 in seamanship," he said hoarsely. "And I'll swallow my pride enough to work for an elf, you mark me."

I sighed, suddenly incredibly tired. “Get out.”

“Captain, allow me to say that I’m truly ...”

“GET OUT!” I yelled, sending him flying against my cabin door with a water push. The man scrambled to unlatch it flew through, closing it behind him faster than he’d opened it. Weary, I collapsed to my bunk. When was the last time I’d slept soundly? It seemed like so much had happened since then, with the promise of pursuit sure to come with the rays of dawn as ships tried to utilize their new homing-beacon hostages to point towards me.

I pitied Debra and the others. I’m sure they’d try to study their curse, but I didn’t believe for a minute that my enemies would surrender any time that the deserters could be pointing at me.

Without even taking my boots off, I closed my eyes for just a few moments.

“REEF!” Came the shout at my cabin door. Bolting awake, I immediately began surfacing the ship. A moment passed. Two. Three. All quiet. Then a bump and a scrape along the hull as we hit it at an angle and dragged across it. Then we were above the waves, greeting the pre-dawn morning.

Scrambling out of my cabin, I gave the order to have Abner check the damage even as Arnaith fell into my shadow. Burdette was at the bow cursing, but though he saw me he didn’t approach. It was a bad move to have a first mate too afraid to approach his Captain, but what I really wanted to do was have him lashed with *Promise of Misery*, and that would be even worse for the crew.

“Get Varinya in the crow’s nest,” I ordered. “Tell us what her eyes can see.”

I went to the quarterdeck and looked behind us – not seeing any visible sign of what we’d struck but my seamanship abilities highlighting movements in the water around a large reef. The water depth here wasn’t anything to speak of either, diving back down wouldn’t benefit us much because it wouldn’t be long before we had to surface again. We were making our way between to large islands, and there were more – if smaller ones – on the horizon. That would be even worse for diving.

When I’d looked at this chart before, I’d known we would have to sail on the surface for parts of it. That was before I’d realized how much sailing below the waves frustrated my enemies. I had no doubt they had means of detecting us if I stayed here too long, especially since they already had an idea where to look.

Thinking of my crewmen, I was able to feel their indicators. They weren’t all on the island anymore. They weren’t even in the same place anymore. In fact ...

“Sails on the horizon!” Varinya yelled from the crow’s nest. “Three, and at least two have Antarus colors. One is real big!”

Those weren’t the only ships. Judging by the indicators of my crewmen, they had ships sailing around the islands we were passing through, trying to cut us off. This was a coordinated attack ... too coordinated and large scale for the Broken Isles to muster so quickly.

Climbing the rigging to the royals gave me nearly as good a view as Varinya, and even if it was too far to analyze the ships I was able to recognize two of them through my spyglass.

The *Emerald* and the *Athair*. No sooner had I heard about their Captain’s from Hali than they were right on my tail.