

## 84.

Five casualties from Jones' attack. All of them had been artillerymen aboard the Death's Consort. I felt guilty at my relief that the tally was so low, and that I'd felt relief Sadeo and Rhistel had pulled through. My first sound defeat as a Captain I'd lost nearly half of my crew. Since then I'd experienced the navy's bloody arithmetic where only 5 non-professional casualties was considered a good battle. Each of those five had only recently decided to stick with me though, and before they'd even had the chance to see the results of their choice they'd been killed by an overwhelming foe.

It irked me that the deceased couldn't get their retribution on Jones, that I would have to have further dealings with him. But then, if we'd had a grand battle with Jones and achieved the same result of forcing him to the depths and claiming the surface, they'd be hailed as the victorious dead.

There was also trouble that brewed from results like this. The seeds of bitterness would be planted and I'd have to nip them early if I wished to avoid a repetition of my previous mistakes.

Hence, the ceremony we were holding here in the waters. The remains of the fallen, such as they were, had been wrapped in the sailcloth from the Death's Consort. I'd taken us down, and dropped the Internment's anchor. There we buried each of the men and left memorial tokens on the graves. Stirred up sediment from the process still floated in the water, making it murkier.

Burial at sea was a time honored tradition, but having sailed beneath the waves for so long my crew had begun to see it as less of a separate realm and more like different scenery. Just like it felt wrong for townspeople to simply drag bodies out to the countryside, it now felt wrong to us to simply release bodies to the sea.

I said words commending each of the fallen and thanking them for following me. I then opened the floor for all to share stories and remembrances. Some were stories told from the times before the curse, when they were simple sailors. Other stories were told about their time under Burdette and the brave moments they'd had or even tiny things that had lightened spirits for a minute.

After the crew had a chance to have their say, I finished the ceremony with a dirge – as solemn a shanty as I'd ever heard in my years on the sea.

I said farewell to the port and the land

I sailed away from their ill-treating hands

To search for my long ago forgotten friends  
To search for the place I hear all sailors end

As the faces of the dead fill the space of my mind  
I'll search on and on 'til peace I can find  
I fear not the monsters, I fear not the storm  
I remember the fallen, do they think of me?  
When their bones in the ocean forever will be

Plot a course to the night, to a place I once knew  
To a place where my hope died along with my crew  
So I swallow my grief and face life's final test  
T' find promise of peace and the solace of rest

As the voices of the dead fill the space of my ears  
Their laughter like children, their beckoning cheers  
My heart longs to join them, sing songs of the sea  
I remember the living, do they think of me?  
When my bones in the ocean forever will be

Now that I'm staring down at the darkest of depths  
I'm not sure what I want, but I know it's not this  
As my comrades call me to stand fast and go on  
I make sail for dawn 'til the darkness has gone

As the souls of the dead live fore'er in my mind  
As I live all the years that they left me behind  
I'll stay to the course but still live with mem'ry  
I remember the fallen and they think of me  
For our souls in the ocean together will be

Once sung, Sadeo asked if the rest of the crew could repeat it, which I of course permitted. Those that had the ear and memory sang it much better than my two levels in singing could manage, and more than one tear was shed.

And what mattered greatly to me was the overall morale moved upwards quickly. It had taken a dive and the sudden attack and loss could explain that, but I suspected that it was averaging a overall moderate optimism with a handful of sharp dissenters. They'd only just seen off their previous comrades on shore and then lost five more ... I wouldn't blame them for having doubts. It was my job to assuage them. Recognizing the dead went a long way in that, and it seemed that I'd softened the bitterness of those who'd held it against me.

It didn't hurt that I'd gotten a sharp, unexpected boost to my leadership levels after facing off with Davy Jones. It seemed that standing up to such a powerful being was recognized.

You have advanced to skill level 13 in Leadership. People are more likely to follow your direction; your team receives a 0.5% boost to effectiveness per level.

Three levels in one go – and advanced levels at that. Once I'd hit level 10, I'd thought the next landmark of 15 would take a decade or more. Now I was optimistic it wouldn't take so long - the half-percent boosts to effectiveness each level added up over time.

Following the burial ceremony, I addressed all the hands where I intended to outline clearly what my goals were. I was interrupted. Slithering past us out of the depths came a sea serpent, black as night. In fractions of a second weapons were in hands of the professionals and all were ready to fight this newest challenge, but it ignored us, heading towards shallower waters.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Deep Sea Serpent</b>

Level	13
Health	2,200
Mana	1,800
Stamina	1,000

The length of its body was several hundred feet.

“I seen serpents ‘efore,” Travis whispered into the stillness as we watched its tail slip out of our vision range. “But I ain’t ever seen one ‘at big at such a low level!”

“The sea’s warning,” I explained at normal volume – which was clearly heard by all. “She’s made the ocean a much more dangerous place, and I expect that means more monsters than different weather. To go with that, all should earn more XP riding the waves than before.”

“And where do we stand, Captain?” Rhistel asked. “You spoke earlier of trying to save lives and hunting powerful beasts.”

“That hasn’t changed. It’s become more necessary. It’s going to take the world years to adapt to this challenge – if they can manage it at all. We’re going to protect and save whoever we can from the influx of sea creatures, and if the navies still want their pound of flesh from us we’ll see to it they don’t live to enjoy the sea’s improved XP!”

That got a ragged cheer, as some – my warriors – were more than willing to sink human ships while others were still hesitant about it.

Truth be told, I was more hesitant about it now. I expected a lot more ships and ship’s hands would be lost to creatures in the coming months and years than had been seen in decades, and even the unsavory would be needed. Knowing what dangers they faced and having standard countermeasures was how people dealt with the sea; but they’d just lost that advantage. It would be a free-for-all as trial-and-error exposed vulnerabilities – with each error courting death.

“I have a destination for us to make our way to,” I said without giving details. “We’ll look for trouble on the route, and I know of a local sea serpent around here that looked like trouble!” That got a whole-hearted cheer, and I set to arranging the crew with my lieutenants.

I had 117 crewmembers under me, following the departure of those who wished to leave for land and the recent demise of five. A chunk were from the Death’s Consort, others from the Internment, and a handful from before when I was sailing the Roc’s Eye. I’d had them mostly

sorted out prior to the passengers departing, but ... well, we were one ship down. Consolidation brought adjustments.

I saw in action some things that would become tradition, and others that I might have to speak with my officers about later to avoid repeats of. The shuffle we had to do because of Gnar and Sadeo both wanting their divisions front and center earned a snort and chuckle this once, but not again. I didn't insist the men keep the navy's rank and file, one-half arm distance from your neighbor and covered-down arrangement. I did expect them to be organized by group and not meander while being addressed. We'd have to work a bit more on that.

What I surprisingly enjoyed was my lieutenants arguing publically over which recruits they wanted. They were all self-aware, so the arguing didn't turn nasty but it did get loud. Rather than feel the need to step in, I saw the men bolstering with pride over having the lieutenants proclaim their merits.

The discussion over William Thorpe was particularly interesting, as the lad truly was an unfortunate adventurer at heart and had an enthusiastic talent for everything and a jack-of-all-trades skillset. Gnar wanted him for his promise and Rhistel for his seamanship but both backed down before Sadeo and Drese who wanted him as their pupils. Will – the peacock – was enjoying everything about being argued over and I stepped in before his ego grew enough to burst. He would train with the artillerists but be assigned as a medico. It wasn't as dedicated towards healing as a novice mage or surgeon's assistant would be, but it would split the difference and likely be the most needed use of his talents.

There was some disappointment among assignments. Varinya wanted to join the fighters, but Gnar wouldn't take her yet. The leonid had a natural ferocity but minimal training. He agreed that she could train for the role, her other duties permitting, but she wouldn't mesh with his warband as she was. In my mind that meant she'd serve as a deck hand with her journeyman seamanship skills, but Hali piped up for the first and only time to request the leonid work with her. I allowed it, curious what the former spy would do with the former consort.

There wound up being 60 in Gnar's warband – easily covered by his upgraded 'tribe leader' level of the war leader skill. 31 artillerists or trainees went to Sadeo. Most of the rest were sea hands, with my summoned constructs pulling up the slack in that department.

Of course there was overlap. Drese had his division of medicos, healers, and surgeons-in-training, but they were all filling a role in the warband or as a deckhand as well. Except for Mouse. I put him under Drese's supervision because the patient, dry-witted Madu master could best communicate with him and endure his ... idiosyncrasies. As a side benefit, if any of Mouse's potions harmed anyone too badly, they were already in the medical quarters.

The question came up if the extra responsibilities assigned came with commensurate pay. Several looked askance at the questioner but I easily agreed. My arrangement with each crewmember was different. Some wished to spend some time sailing for me and then retire. I

supported this, largely because it gave me a chance to show I'd learned my lessons and hoped they'd continue on longer. However, my minimum service was a year.

For what I was offering, some whaling companies wouldn't add any pay on top. I was training their skills and promising to level them at a rate nearly too good to be true. That could be considered compensation enough. But we'd taken a fair number of ships now and where were we supposed to spend it? I'd dumped it into my adventurer's bag until the weight-reduction properties of the spatial bag simply weren't enough, then I'd taken to caching it along with the other useful supplies we'd raided. I had enough gold in my bag for a young man to comfortably retire on, and though I didn't have very good record keeping skills I suspected I had enough scattered across the ocean to buy out a merchant company.

It was also comfortably safe. Our funds would be frozen if we used a bank, and could be stolen by certain types if we hid it on land. Buried deep at sea? Fish had no reason to filch coins.

Rather than promise my men a mountain of wealth, I treated the coin as cheap and expendable, spontaneously handing out fistfuls and joking about using them as poker chips. The greed didn't die in all, but the absurdity did sink in. We weren't your average privateers hunting funds.

"Domenic," Sadeo asked, standing in front of his artillerists. "I have high hopes that you'll bring me the glorious battles I've been looking for now, but you seem to have forgotten something!"

"I know, Sadeo ..."

"The ship has no artillery." We said in sync.

"For now let's look and see if we can salvage something from the Consort's flotsam. We won't be able to outfit this hulk, but we can give you some opportunities to practice. At least until we upgrade ships and I get around to one of our caches."

"Caches, you say?"

"Did I forget to mention those to you?" I said with a grin. "Well let me tell you all about them ..."

I was interrupted from my descriptions of plunder before I made Sadeo salivate as a commotion rose on the deck with people pointing towards the top of the mainmast. I looked as well and saw that the generic flag of Antarus – I'd seen no reason to take it down before – had disappeared. In its place was our own flag. My flag.

The flag that had flown above the Death's Consort had grown from the mast and been impossible to remove. It had been a black field with a pair of skeletal white arms crossed below a skull, bony fists clenched and shackles hung on the wrists with a looped chain connecting them.

It had changed. It still bore the natural menace of a threatening display, but the crossed arms had been opened and now a dagger was clenched in each hand. Broken links of chain fell from the manacled wrists.

Once I'd looked upon my own flag and felt like it was a judgment on me. Now I looked on it and felt a swelling in my chest. This ... this was a proclamation of freedom!

Your title 'Slaver' has been removed.

Oh, what joy such simple messages brought. "A cheer for slaves freed!" I bellowed. "A cheer for the cursed released ... and the curse willingly taken!"

Carried in the moment, the crew did give several cheers, enthusiasm carrying over any awkwardness of how many cheers I'd called for.

"Now," I said, expending more mana and creating watery constructs around me to swarm the rigging. "Let's sail!"

With help, Sadeo was able to salvage three ballistae and fit them on the Internment. Even getting three had involved piecing together parts. Jones' attack had been thorough in ripping the inanimate ship apart.

Jorgagu had fallen in with Sadeo, never mind that the kitsune barely came up to the orc's thigh. The enchanter had made ballistae bolts by the dozen, but wasn't an artillerist himself. Sadeo was happy enough to teach of course, but his agreeableness transitioned to exuberance when Jorgagu started asking about variable tensions serving as a conditional trigger for enchantments.

They were going to be friends.

Rhistel shadowed me with Arnaith. The elf was once again in a unique position since the Consort sank and was demoted from his position as commander to my first mate. He slipped into the support role easily enough, but I needed qualities in my first mate that he wasn't yet prepared for. He was acting as more of a personal assistant than a second-in-command, and I needed to spend time cultivating him like I had been cultivated.

I asked him how Cherry was doing after her tangle with the kraken. He assured me she would be fine with time, but had taken more damage than first glance showed and withdrawn to recuperate. Her pride had been wounded even more severely. He expected she would carry an eternal grudge against the kraken species.

I checked with him to make sure he had no objection to my plan of culling sea creatures, given his perk Nature's Empathy.

“You’ll recall our adventure on the island of Cuffmagin, where we first met Cherry,” Rhistel replied. “Our goal was not to save the animals, but restore nature’s balance. We did so through slaughter. I would never say that is the answer each time, but to my understanding the natural environment of the sea is undergoing a forced alteration that involves an influx of predators. Stymying the flood seems logical. I only ask that you listen if it seems the evidence has changed, or if there is a connection I feel is worth exploring.”

“Agreed. You mention a surge of predators, that makes me wonder whether more prey animals will appear too?”

We discussed our suppositions and theories but ultimately agreed we’d have to wait and see. The changes that were occurring would undoubtedly cause some surprise.

Such as our elusive Deep Sea Serpent.

“It was heading this way, where could it have gone?” I mused.

Gnar snorted. “Anywhere it liked.”

“We have to ask ourselves what its motivation was,” Rhistel said. “Was it acting on an impulse from the sea to head towards shallow waters on the chance of conflict? Or was it instilled with a deep hunger that it was looking to fill?”

“Looked focused to me,” said Gnar. “Didn’t even glance at us, so it couldn’t have been too hungry.”

“Or we have a status that’s off limits,” I said. “My perk’s upgraded and I’m something of the sea’s authority on the surface – there could be hidden benefits to that.”

“So we don’t know anything and it could have gone anywhere.” Gnar repeated.

“Keep an eye out – if it was hardly a small ...” I didn’t see it, I sensed it on the edges of my Domain. “There!”

“Where?” Came querying voices as they peered in the direction I indicated.

“Prepare for battle!” I ordered as I gave the commands to bring the ship about. We turned and I trimmed the sails to make the most of a current that wasn’t particularly convenient.

We closed in on the serpent and it adjusted course to avoid us – not directly running but sidestepping us. I changed course again.

No one had laid eyes on it yet. Not even me. If not for my Domain telling me exactly where it was, we wouldn’t have had a chance of spotting it.

“Camouflage,” Gnar said, and Rhistel agreed.



“This is beyond simple coloration matching its surroundings – we all share the Captain’s vision ability to penetrate through the dark. This is an active ability. The serpent can hide from prying eyes.”

“It may or may not depend on mana,” I said. “If it does, we’ll wear it out. If not, I’ll point it out to Sadeo and he can take his best ... wait.”

“What is it?”

“It’s coiling up, twisting its whole length into a tight coil.”

“Strike preparation!” Rhistel said, which made Gnar immediately bellow “take cover!”

The serpent suddenly uncoiled and ... nothing. It didn’t strike. It didn’t attack. It stretched out its body again and disappeared.

It disappeared from my Domain!

After an hour of preparing for an ambush that never came, we decided that the creature had left the area rather than attack us. Somehow its camouflage ability could be amplified to hide it even from my Domain, but then my ability was only in early development.

Somehow, failing to catch the deep sea serpent had brought the new dangers of the sea home to us in a way that combat wouldn’t have. We were supposed to be the new major power of the sea – surely we could take on a level 13 threat!

Yet that simple threat had eluded us completely, surprised us with an unexpected skill. What surprises and dangers might every new creature hold?

Author’s Note:

Apologies for the late release.

I made some adjustments to it, but here’s the link to the Longest Johns shanty that my funeral dirge was based off of:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=bones+in+the+ocean+longest+johns+youtube&view=detail&mid=C670ECF5C70595B1D227C670ECF5C70595B1D227&FORM=VIRE>