

I clapped my hands over my ears and shouted deafly into the ocean's expanse as the barrage of sonic-enchanted bolts screamed under the surface of the water. My hands did little to muffle the noise and nothing to stop the drain on my health. The effect and noise were both dimming, however. Sonic attacks were usually used to drive off sea monsters, but the enchantments were almost always tied to the speed of the enchanted projectile. As every sailor knew, that bolt was very effective when it first hit the water, sound doing nasty things in a liquid to whatever was in proximity. As the water slowed the bolt down, however, you had to hope that what you did had driven the creature off rather than just make it mad.

The sonic attack was not the only danger. Our pursuit had coated the surface with a fire that the sea didn't extinguish, and the water temperature just below the surface reflected that. However, the heat of the flames were nothing to the temperature of an entire ocean of water and just a couple feet below the surface you wouldn't even know there was heat source above.

I'd feared that Gerald and Travis had been caught in the fire – that they hadn't dived quickly enough. Thankfully my fears were unfounded. They hadn't known to anchor themselves for a quick drop, but they'd both put their feet over their heads and swam down like their lives depended on it. Good for them. They were still caught in the sonic damage, but would discover the first benefit of being one of my crew: resistances to most damage types. Blessed weapons would be anathema, but right now what mattered was the sonic damage didn't take as much HP as it would have.

Neither of them had yet tried to fill their lungs, their instincts screaming at them that to do so was death. So, I gave them their first order – the first word I seemed to say to those whom I rescued this way:

“Breathe!”

Travis had accepted my offer of crewmanship before Gerald, but it was the Tarish who knew me and trusted me well enough to breathe first. He was quickly taking deep, gulping breaths as he continued deeper down, away from further danger.

Jorgagu was now blindly crawling up towards the flames, still desperate for air. Either orcs didn't swim well, or this particular enchanter avoided water. I'd had experience with saving drowning victims before, and moved around his back to grab him. This would be the first time I used my lifesaving skills to drag someone deeper ...

I forgot about the orc's strength. I knew desperate people could be wild and harm their rescuer, but they didn't normally have 35 points in strength! He grabbed me and the next thing I knew he was kicking off me, scrambling upwards as I spun in dizzying circles.

Growling, I reoriented myself and saw the orc was nearly at the burning surface. I didn't think that if he splashed up into those flames that they would go out once he submerged again. I burned through stamina to streak upwards through the water. I wrapped myself around both of

his legs and anchored myself. He tried to kick and struggle, but my own strength was enough to hold his legs together and he didn't use his arms except to claw at the water.

I dragged him deeper with me, seeing the keel of the ship that had fired at us approaching. I suspected they would drop teams of fighters at the edges of the burning water to make sure we were dead. I had a hysterical orc enchanter, a Tarish cook and a human sailor – no way was I sticking around to fight whatever high-level team they'd brought to the fight.

One of Jorgagu's legs broke free from me and he stomped on my chest. I felt ribs break and let go of the maddened orc as he once again fought upwards towards the danger.

"Enough," I said, or tried to say, it came out as a wheezing gasp. I did what I'd only done once before when my crew mutinied against me – I took away their free will. Jorgagu immediately froze in the water. While I was sure that with his intelligence and wisdom stopping him any other time would have been as hard as stopping 10 of my other crewmen, not being in his right mind worked in my favor at this moment.

"Breathe," I said again, this time making it an order he couldn't refuse. He did, and though his mind was still panicking his body was able to get what it needed. I didn't wait for him to finish calming down, grabbing his heel and dragging him down once more, favoring my broken ribs. "To me!" I yelled to the other two. They followed me into the blackness.

I didn't stop until I could see the bottom, and then only returned Jorgagu's will to him so that he could swim of his own accord. We moved laterally so that if any of the teams above followed our drop straight down they wouldn't land on top of us.

I was using my cleansing waters spell to patch myself up because the low mana cost let me keep a full pool ready for combat. However, my broken ribs made me a cripple while swimming. I switched my spell to the more powerful replenishing waters. It zapped my entire mana pool but fixed all my injuries immediately rather than taking over a day of constant healing.

We travelled for over an hour without a word. I wasn't sure if the others didn't want to break the silence or if they didn't realize they could speak. It didn't matter to me either way, I appreciated it.

Finally, I stopped swimming and turned to my three new crewmen.

"First lesson; you're all currently swimming. Level the skill as much as you can, abuse the heck out of not needing to surface for air. But you're also my crewmen, and that means you're not just stuck swimming through the water." I anchored myself and dropped to the sea floor below, my legs cushioning the impact. "Now, the sea floor is the earth below your feet, and you are in the sky." I called. "Anchor yourself to the earth!"

I'd found with my crew aboard the *Death's Consort* that the illustration of being in the sky helped them understand the switch better – anyone in the air naturally thought of themselves as falling to the ground with gravity. To my surprise, Jorgagu was the first to crash to the sea floor besides me, followed by Gerald. Travis took a minute, needing a bit more coaching.

“Alright, you can breathe, swim, and march. Since you can’t swim as fast as you can walk, we march.”

“Where are we headed?” Gerald asked, the first to find his voice.

“Bandarn,” I said. “It’s the closest land, and these waters are dangerous.”

“Sir,” Travis said tentatively, as if testing that he could indeed speak. Once that was done, he posed his question confidently. “I never heard of monster attacks on the coast of Bandarn being any worse than elsewhere.”

“You’re not on the surface, Travis.” I said. “Even where we’re standing isn’t the bottom of these depths. We’re on a mountaintop. While the pressure here would kill you if you weren’t cursed, there’s depths in the valleys that would have crushed you and compressed you down to half your size.”

“But ...” the sailor said. “Now we don’t have to worry about that?”

“Not the crushing part, no. What you do need to keep in mind is that all depths like this are home to the monsters who don’t consider it worth their time to breach the waves. People might think I’m a terror on the seas, but even I’m a small fry down here. You are too, so keep close and we’ll try and push through these deeps without lingering.”

I hadn’t lied or exaggerated, but my short speech had put more fear into them than I’d intended. As we moved forward and I instructed them on how best to switch between jogging and swimming to best cover the terrain, I also told them of the sphere I had with *domain*, and how I should be able to see things coming. It wasn’t a perfect defense, however. There were upgrades to the skill that spoke of room for growth.

We covered several miles before I halted us and gave everyone some food from the rations saved in my bag. Eating underwater was not an experience they seemed to enjoy, but they didn’t complain. I made a point to answer any questions they had and instructed them on the ramifications of their curses as best I could, but most of our journey was spent in silence.

I did learn that among the notifications they all received was a note about them being tied to me until they stepped foot on my ship. Something similar had happened to Sadeo when I’d recruited him without having a ship. I was glad for that, as my crew had 24 hours of life away from my ship, and there was no way I could have possibly gotten these three to the *Death’s Consort* in time.

We passed by or circumnavigated a lot of creatures. I didn’t know how many of them were dangerous to us besides the very big ones, but it was a constant thing. I was frankly amazed given the quantity of life down here that more things hadn’t been seen broaching the surface. It made me wonder if there was an ecological or magical deterrent from them doing so.

With no light reaching this far down, it was anyone’s guess when sunset was. My crew all shared my vision ability, and with the number of creatures I was seeing just with my sphere I spared a few thousand XP to invest in bumping up the distance we could all see.

I called a stop after we'd swam across a long 'canyon' and reached the other side. There wasn't a cave or anything for us to shelter in, but there was an overhang of rock that at least let us focus on fewer directions for threats.

"Alright. Travis, you're in charge of the campfire."

"Yes sir! Uh ..." His look turned blank and only when I cracked a grin did his mind catch up. Three of us chuckled at the necessary joviality. Jorgagu didn't, simply sitting down and pulling a necklace out of a bag that held many. A moment later he was concentrating.

I was deeply curious about the process of enchantment, but he was still tight lipped about his secrets. The human enchanters I knew of were simply part of a production chain: the crown supplied them with the materials and paid a commission for the result. I hadn't really heard of enchanters striking out on their own, they were always financed by the government. It had built the perception in my mind that enchanting things was an expensive, difficult and labor intensive process, and the price of most enchanted items bore that out. Yet somehow, Jorgagu seemed to be able to do without having crates of resources at his disposal. How?

Seeing he wanted to be left alone, I let him be and made idle, quiet conversation with the other two. I had a rapport with Gerald, and after chatting for a few minutes and convincing him that I wasn't going to turn evil now that he was in my crew, he loosened up and we bantered easily.

Travis felt awkward, unsure of how familiar or formal to be with me. Before, I would have told anyone to relax, that I was just another mate. However, I'd learned some things since then, lots of which was during my conversations with my father. A Captain had an image to maintain. It wasn't about vanity, like I'd always thought. It was part of an agreement with his crew. They wanted to be able to look to you in times of trouble and lean on your authority. Some might think during times of peace that they'd wish for you to be 'just one of the mates' but they wouldn't thank you for it in the end.

So, as much as I disliked watching Travis mentally scramble, I let him. I didn't tell him to tighten up, and I didn't tell him to relax. I talked with him a bit formally, but with personal interest. I'd seen Captain Coe and Captain Graves do that. He responded well to it.

Right about the time I was thinking of setting up a watch schedule so we could sleep, Jorgagu let out an explosive curse and bolted to his feet. We all did the same, scanning for threats or enemies, but the orc wasn't looking outwards. He was looking at me with murderous fury.

I cautiously adjusted my stance towards him. "What's going on, big guy?"

He didn't respond. He held out a fist clenched around a necklace that was shaking in anger, then threw the jewelry to the ground. He stormed off without a word, descending into the valley.

I huffed out a breath, debating the merits of following him, when I picked up the necklace he'd thrown down and analyzed it.

Cursed Necklace of Swift Swimming

Effect: improves the swimming speed of the wearer by 10 feet per minute at the permanent cost of 20% of the wearer's stamina.

Would you like to bind this item?

I dropped the necklace faster than a toddler dropped an eel-fish, then wiped my hands on my pants as though to remove any further traces of the thing from me. That item was worse than worthless! It was such a bad exchange for the effect, that it may as well ... well, it did curse the wearer. It was a cursed item.

I had a feeling Jorgagu hadn't intended that part.

I could see him in my mind's eye; extremely uncomfortable with his situation and being in this new environment, he realized he was the slowest one out of our group. He sits down to enchant an item that might help him bridge the gap. Instead of crafting a useful – or even mediocre – enchanted necklace, he created this abomination and knew just who was to blame for its state.

“Jorgagu,” I whispered. “I'm truly sorry for the impact I've had on your creation.”

I followed him.

He may have wished to be alone, but I knew where all my crew were – even those still on the *Death's Consort*. Add to that he couldn't go too far before being prompted he was too far from me and was now on a timer ... yeah, I didn't foresee him being in a better mood when I caught up to him.

He was standing at the edge of a cliff, or rather a channel. The stone cut off quite abruptly, and the inky darkness stretched from above to below in a continuous shade of black, only penetrated by my professional abilities.

I didn't say anything at first, not quite sure how to proceed. Did I lay down the law, tell him that I'd saved his life and he should be thanking me rather than sulking? Did I apologize, tell him that I had no idea that sharing my curse with him would affect his work?

I decided to start with something that wasn't just about me.

“You know, the first enchanted item I ever saw was an Atlas harpoon,” I said in orcish, just loud enough for him to hear. “I saw that and I thought, ‘Wow! That's amazing! Somehow someone took a normal harpoon’ – which I was already fascinated by as a kid – ‘they took a normal harpoon, and they made it magical! That harpoon is going to freeze what it hits.’ And it was amazing. The crew though ... well, it was just another tool for them. A more expensive, valuable tool, sure, but a tool. So I copied their attitude and eventually the novelty wore off. Enchanted items were just ... tools.” I could see he was listening, but he didn't turn away from the darkness.

“And would you believe it, I’ve spent most of my life with that attitude. Yet when I saw you, then I saw how you were taking mundane, worthless things and turning them into valuable weapons that had saved my life before ... a bit of that wonder came back.”

Jorgagu took a deep breath and released it, his shoulders slumping. “That wonder you speak of ... it has always been there for me. Most young orcs plan to take a combat profession, or at least pursue something that would support their martial prowess but I ... even as a tiny little one, enchantments held my eye. My peers mocked me because they were children, but the elders saw the potential of my gift. I sacrificed a lot to pursue my path. Of the things I sacrificed, though, I never contaminated the wonder of creating something magical.” He shook his head. “What your curse has done to my profession ... it is the first time I have ever loathed something I created.”

Coming from the orc who’d spent the last weeks making enchanted weapons for his enemies, that hurt. It was justified and I agreed, but it hurt all the same.

“I am sorry for what sharing my curse has done. Come back to the others, we’ll talk about it. Maybe we’ll find a way to keep the effect from corrupting everything.”

“NO!” Jorgagu shouted, his voice ringing in the stillness of the deep without an echo. I felt a chill as an awareness of danger crept on my mind, but the orc was heedless of my sudden trepidation as he started pacing.

“No, I will never enchant another item! I don’t care if it means the loss of all I’ve pursued. I will NEVER create such an atrocity again!”

“Stop!” I hissed, desperately pantomiming for his silence. Suddenly I felt ... a lack. Where I had been desperately scanning the edge of my domain for something approaching, I now sensed nothing. My domain had been ... pushed back.

“Jorgagu ...” I said, about to take his will away again just to keep him quiet. He saw me quailing, though, and stopped his tirade. He opened his mouth to ask a question when whatever was pushing my domain back pushed its aura over both of us. His question as to why I was suddenly afraid was answered.

Absently, I noted that I had a fear debuff afflicting me. I forcefully tried to get myself together and come up with a plan to escape whatever was causing this. ‘Swim away really fast’ was the best I could come up with, and even then I couldn’t force my legs to move.

The darkness before us never changed. It was just as dark over that empty expanse now as it was two minutes ago. We both felt there was something there though.

And then an eye opened. A glowing green eye with a slitted black pupil, which watched us with focused intent. The eye was at least three feet in diameter.

And then another eye opened, its twin ... only spaced several feet apart, giving us the picture of a very, *very* big head looking at us.

“Jorgagu,” I said softly. “Back away from the cliff.”

The orc did, stumbling on his first step as his legs didn't bend right. The eyes continued to float in the inky darkness; analyzing us, weighing us. As soon as the orc reached me I grabbed his arm and started walking backwards with him. The eyes didn't pursue, just watched. That wasn't much comfort, as we were certainly still well within the strike range of anything that large. I could only hope we looked too insignificant to be a meal.

The creature flared out its domain, crushing my own ability beneath it like a flea, then the eyes closed and the aura disappeared.

Jorgagu and I stared at the empty blackness for a moment, not quite daring to believe we were off the hook, then turned as one and scrambled away.

Gerald and Travis had felt the aura too, and didn't take any convincing that this was not the place to stay.