

230: Chum

Tek lounged under the light of early dawn, humming the tune of *The Fishwife's Daughter* as he whittled a scrap of wood. Two days had passed since the last-minute announcement of the southern cut, and one could only maintain a constant state of terror for so long. That first night, with the lights off, he'd been confident they were all going to die. All of them had, all the sailors who'd spent a lifetime tempting the sea's wrath. When the sun had risen, it had felt like nothing but a stay of execution. When the first monsters had found them, banging and clattering against the hull, he'd again thought that was it.

But they'd merely sailed on.

The metal hull had proven proof against claw and tentacle. Whether by the dark gods' luck or the ship's mysterious stealth field, nothing big enough to change that had appeared. The rare monsters that made it over the railing were ones he was familiar with. Scratchlings, Oetena, Toothy Stars, and the like. Fortunately, such weak monsters could be dealt with. Clearing the table, it was called in the business.

His team consisted of himself, Roan, and Nemet. They were one of a half-dozen teams on rotation, tasked with sweeping the deck as *Temerity* sailed in waters no ship should ever have dared. Granted, this was no ordinary ship. Beside him rested a long wooden catchpole. It was one of the few familiar things on this voyage. Gone was the stink of rotting fish and unwashed bodies. Gone was the yelling of the deck master, replaced with the quiet efficiency of hands that knew their business without needing to be told.

When they weren't just waiting, that was.

"How fast you reckon we're going now?" Roan asked.

Tek shrugged, not looking up from his carving, which was starting to look disappointingly like a seagull. He was trying for an eagle.

"Tek?"

"Heard ya," Tek said. "Don't know more than you do."

"You both know more than me," Nemet said.

This time, Tek looked up. He didn't know Nemet like he knew Roan, having crewed on and off with the latter for more than ten years. Nemet was from Eastspar. He seemed an okay sort, but he wasn't a sailor. He was a fisherman, at least, which was better than some limp-legged inlander.

"Well?" Nemet asked, looking between him and Roan. "Just take a guess, one of you."

With one last look at his half-completed carving, Tek clicked his tongue and tossed it to him.

"You guess."

"I don't even know what unit to use," Nemet admitted, catching the easy lob with no trouble.

"The engines are louder than before, so...faster?"

"There you go then," Tek said.

"Is this supposed to be a turtle?" Nemet asked, inspecting the carving.

"Never claimed to be an ar—" Tek began.

"Look alive!" Roan shouted as he leapt to his feet.

Tek cursed, realizing that the distinctive clicking he'd been hearing had grown quite close. Too close. It sounded like a Clacker, but a Clacker shouldn't have been able to climb the hull, so he'd been ignoring it. Levering himself up, he sheathed his knife and reached for the catchpole. Whatever was coming, bloodshed was something to be avoided. Nemet had gotten up as well, hefting a shield and a hooked hammer.

"Sounds like a Clacker!" Roan called.

"Probably something else!" Tek shouted back, airing his thought. "A Clacker couldn't climb—never mind!"

Clearly it could. A head-sized claw had clamped onto the railing, and the overgrown crab creature's body rose into view a moment later, legs scrabbling for purchase on the metal bars.

"Red Clacker!" Lyn's voice rang out behind them. "Level three! Full health!" She was the awakened on watch, but any intervention from her—even being a Defender—risked attracting yet more attention from the deep.

"We've got it!" Roan called, rushing forward. He'd dropped his net, knowing as Tek did that the Clacker would just snip through it. In its place, he drew a cudgel from his belt. "Nemet, move, damn it!"

"Coming!" Nemet shouted.

Tek was already there, reaching with the catchpole. He slipped the hempen noose over one of the Clacker's eye stalks, then yanked the cord tight. Clackers couldn't scream, but its immediate spasm told him how unhappy it was with this development.

"Let go, you gullshit!" Roan yelled, hammering at the claw grasping the railing. After three solid thunks from his cudgel and two from Nemet's hammer, his next hit landed with a crack. The claw opened, the creature tumbling away. Rather than be tugged over, Tek released the catchpole. They had spares.

"Toothy Star! Level two! Full health!" Lyn called, and Tek glanced over his shoulder. There was indeed a Toothy Star, but another team was already moving to engage it.

"We've got it!" Nemet cried.

Confused as to why Nemet had called out, Tek looked back at him, then his eyes went wide. A *second* Toothy Star was hauling itself over the railing beside them, right where the Clacker had been. Its main body was about the size of a dog, with six long, whiplike tentacles ending in fangs. The only detail that mattered, though, was the crimson, ragged wound carved into its back.

Tek dove for the net, but he knew it was already too late. "Blood! Blood in the water!"

The Clacker climbed over it! That's how it got up!

"Second Toothy Star!" Lyn called. "Level two! Quarter health!"

"It's a frenzy!" Tek yelled, cold certainty creeping into his bones despite the fire in his blood. It looked like they'd be dying after all. "It's the start of frenzy!"

"Oi! Here!" Nemet yelled. "I'm right here...you...thing!"

While he needed to work on his sailorly insults, his provocation proved effective. The Stinger Star reared back, revealing its mouth, from which launched a trio of barbed teeth, stabbing harmlessly into Nemet's shield. Roan took advantage of its distraction, slamming his club brutally against its backside and flattening it to the decking with a sickening squelch. Blood went everywhere, but at this point, it hardly mattered. Another was already clambering over the railing to replace it. A rising chittering told him there were Scratchlings not far behind.

He drew his own cudgel from his belt, shifting the net to his free hand.

Not without a fight.

“Tighten up!” Lyn bellowed over the cries of the unawakened, drumming the butt of her staff against the decking as yet more monsters crawled over the railings. “All teams, fall back to me! Form a shield wall!”

Grinding her teeth, she watched impotently. As the unawakened gathered around her, two more starfish monsters slung themselves aboard, followed by one of the twisted rat-fish things. She stepped out of the way as a bony tooth flew through the space where her head had just been. She didn’t bother to call out the new arrivals. People had eyes.

The PA crackled, Samson’s voice cutting through the clamor. “Lyn, do not engage! Unawakened, hold the line! Reinforcements are coming!”

“You heard him!” Lyn shouted. “Shields up, like I told you! You! Where the *FUCK* is your helmet!?”

“Here!” the helmetless man cried, rushing for the pile of equipment.

Anxiously, Lyn took her eyes from the battle to look up at the tower. She could see nothing through the glare of the floodlights. Rain could end this in an instant if he was there, and yet he could not—for the same reason she was grinding her staff into the wooden deck instead of a monster’s skull. If her skills were a torch, his would be a bonfire.

No, if hers were a candle, his would be a conflagration—an entire city on fire.

A tremor ran through the deck, and the distant rumble of the ship’s engines swelled as they put on speed.

"What do we do?!" one of the sailors bellowed before abruptly yelping at the sound of bone striking wood. He ducked behind his shield after the fact. The woman beside him wasn't so lucky, screaming as a flying tooth grazed her cheek.

"Keep those shields up!" Lyn hollered, brought back to her surroundings. She increased her volume, cutting through the din. "SPEARS!"

"LYN!" a voice cried, and she turned to see Tek waving at her. "FRENZY!"

"I FUCKING KNOW!" she screamed back, rising angrily onto the balls of her feet. Power filled her legs. It was all she could do not to hurl herself into the fray.

"Healer!" a man shouted, crouching over the woman whose cheek had been grazed, now crumpled to the ground. "Healer! Poison!"

"POTION!" Lyn screamed over him, pointing. Toothy Star poison was bad, but a Healing spell would kill them all.

The Scratchlings charged, turned back by the growing shield wall. One of the fish-rat-things screeched in agony, its health dropping as someone skewered it from within the formation. Lyn was forced to dodge again, another tooth whipping past her to clatter off the tower. Thunks of dozens more striking shields filled the air.

There were no more screams, though.

We've got this. They've got this.

Lyn's knuckles went white, gripping the wood of her staff. She fully expected the universe to rise and prove her wrong immediately. Astonishingly, it didn't.

First one, then another Scratchling died, unable to break the formation. The Toothy Stars kept launching teeth, but heavy gambesons, leather caps, and quickly administered potions proved protection enough. The monsters had no such defenses against crossbows. They battled for equilibrium, not gaining ground nor losing it as *Temerity's* speed continued to increase.

And then it all went wrong.

"Aiiiiiiii!" a man shrieked, his pitch rising to a strangled gurgle as he staggered back, dropping his shield and clutching at his eye. There was a jagged tooth lodged in it. As bad as that was, worse was the Scratchling that managed to wriggle in through the gap.

"Kill it!" someone cried, and spears followed, but it was too late. The monster had already sunk its teeth into the back of the downed man's neck and torn it wide open.

"FUCK!" Lyn swore.

More would die. More would die, and she couldn't do a thing about it. If she did, it would be the end of them all.

Unless...the sailors are wrong. Unless I could have saved him.

The thought died as a tremor ran through the hull. A white scythe-like blade hooked over the railing and stabbed into the deck. A health bar and a name appeared a moment later. "Grave Angler," she shouted, tasting ashes. "Level seven!"

The PA crackled. "Lyn, go."

She went.

The crackle of Samson's voice continued, speaking more orders, but she was already soaring over the line of shields. Projectile Deflection guided her staff in a blinding twirl, sending teeth scattering every which way. She landed, her calves taut with elastic energy, then bounded forward, breaking a Scratchling's spine with Gazelle Four-Three. Gazelle Two-One let her keep her momentum, dodging a slash from a Toothy Star's tentacle. She responded with Forceful Sweep, her wooden weapon tearing through its fleshy body and shattering the iron-hard scales of the Scratchling behind it like glass.

Two more quick steps, and she was clear of the press, having given the unawakened as much of a breather as she could afford. It had only been a few seconds, but the Grave Angler was already up over the railing. It was a...fish. A fish the size of a bear, bristling with bony spines. The scythe blade came at the end of an articulated arm of yet more bone that sprouted from the back of its head. It had driven the point of the weapon into the wooden deck like a nail and used it to lower itself like cargo.

Before its body touched down, her staff speared into the center of one of its dinner plate-sized eyes. Despite having her body's entire weight behind the strike, the gelatinous orb didn't pop, and she rebounded to land nimbly on her feet. Wood cracked as the fish settled its body, then ripped its blade free. It launched itself forward with a flick of its spines, faster than something so large and ill-suited to land should have been able to move. It wasn't faster than Samson, though.

Lyn slammed the flat of the monster's blade with her staff, shifting her hands out of the way to avoid losing her fingers as the sharpened bone slid down the weapon without managing to bite. Planting her feet and thanking Shena's skills for the preternatural resilience of the wood, she whipped the weapon around in another Forceful Sweep. The steel cap chimed as it rang against the fish's scales, its health bar dropping by a noticeable sliver.

There was no time to celebrate. Lyn jumped back, a great jet of water appearing from nowhere and scouring the deck where she'd just been standing. In the air, she could only block as the bladed arm slashed at her. The staff held, but the bony scythe bit deep into the wood, and the force of it sent her flying.

"Ah!" she cried, turning her fall into a handspring as her legs tumbled over her head. She landed on her feet, then threw herself into a desperate dive. The fish slammed down where she'd just been, its spines cracking the planks. There was nothing she could do to dodge the next blast of water, though, and it slammed into her back with the force of a charging horse. Her face was driven into the decking as she was sent grinding along the rough wood. Only her Health saved her from having her skin sanded from her skull. As if that wasn't enough of the problem, as the pressure relented, she could already tell that whatever the fish had hit her with wasn't *just* water. It clung to her like oil.

Struggling to get an elbow in place without it slipping out from under her, Lyn managed to look up in time to see the scythe spearing straight for her chest. She began a dodge, knowing that it was already too late.

Time seemed to slow with the rushing approach of death.

But before it arrived, a great cold washed over her, and a crystalline wall snapped into existence, filling the entirety of her vision. Instead of a spike of bone, she was stabbed by hundreds of icy chips, spall from the impact of the blade on the other side.

"Having trouble?" Mahria asked, offering her a hand.

"Some," Lyn admitted with a grin. A chill ran through her, and slimy water coating her gambeson froze and cracked away as the Ice Mage hauled her to her feet.

"You're welcome," Mahria said with a smirk.

A sudden plume of fire lit the night from beyond the wall, followed by a mad cackling. "Burn, fishies! Burn, HAHAAAAHA!"

"Damn it, Kettel," Mahria muttered, releasing Lyn's hand to retrieve her fallen staff. "We're all going to die. Could you at least *try* to act cool?"

"I don't plan on dying today," Lyn said, laying a hand on Mahria's shoulder as she rose. She smiled, then darted forward to kiss her on the cheek. "Just in case things don't go to plan."

Mahria snorted. "At least make it count, then," she said with a smile, then kissed her back. On the lips. When she pulled away a moment later, it was to offer her her weapon. "Ready?"

"Ready," Lyn replied, fighting not to blush. She hadn't thought they were there yet. She took the staff as the entire ship shook with a massive clang. "Come what may."

“What was that!?” Bluewash shrieked, her shrill voice cutting through the ringing that filled Tallheart’s ears.

“Step aside,” he said calmly, pushing past her to spread his hands against the wall. Her expertise in the past few days had been welcome, but it was of no use here, not with metal. He frowned, feeling the broken enchantments. Whatever had struck the ship had done so at the damage limit. Given its position, the engine room benefited from the protection of the original hull, but that protection wouldn’t last long under this kind of attack.

Another blow shook the ship, and the plate under his right hand was dented inward with enough force to launch his arm behind his back.

“Oh, gods, is it a Whale?” Bluewash asked.

“No,” Tallheart said, returning his hand to the spot only for it to be blasted back again. The brief contact told him the enchantment on the entire section had failed. It was not a Whale, but it *was* a problem.

Another clang resounded, and a silver-blue, chitinous spike punched through the metal a few centimeters to the left of his head. Without flinching, he diverted his fist into a sweeping haymaker, striking the spike just where it had punched through the titanium. The spike didn’t shatter as he had hoped, and the rent in the hull was torn wider, a high-pressure spray of water blasting him in the face. The monster—whatever it was—attempted to pull its weapon free, but that was not allowed. Grabbing the spike with both hands, he braced his legs on the hull, then pulled. The water stopped. Metal twisted as he drew more and more of the creature

through the tiny hole. A health bar appeared, followed by armor-like scales and the corner of a gigantic eye. A Chivalrous Carp, the system named it.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Bluewash shrieked. "L-I-I-level fourteen!"

Tallheart rumbled, pulling harder. Scales shattered. The monster's health began to drop precipitously. It was clear the fish was suffering from essence starvation, to be wounded from just this. It was also clear that Bluewash had never seen combat. No one else in the compartment was screaming.

Stiffening his fingers into a blade, he punched them into the monster's eye, now fully through the rent in the hull. It took four hits before the gelatinous flesh yielded, the creature's health dropping to zero as he found its fleshy brain. He grasped, twisted, then pulled, whipping his arm free and painting the wall with a spray of steaming blood and gore.

"How?!" Bluewash screamed.

Ignoring her, Tallheart slapped a hand on the wall beside the fish's head.

Planarity

Metal shrieked, barely hot enough for the skill, but knowledge of titanium's rune and his Strength made up the difference. The hole slowly irised closed, biting through the dead Carp's neck and snipping its head off completely. The repaired plate was perfectly flat and did not match the concave interior of the compartment, but perfection could come later. He looked down to inspect the creature he had killed, then frowned. It did not look much like a carp, really.

Bluewash screamed again as another clang shook the compartment. "We're all going to die!"

"Be helpful or be silent," Tallheart rumbled, again placing his hands against the wall. Dimly, he felt impacts of increasing strength all over the ship. He couldn't do anything about them, though, not from here. Not like this. Not without the ability to see.

"Help how?!" Bluewash yelled back. "I'm just a crafter!"

"So am I," Tallheart rumbled. He closed his eyes, knowing what he was about to do would take everything he had, perhaps more. Not concerned about disrupting enchantments that were already failing, he *pushed*.

Soul of Metal

Knowledge exploded in Tallheart's mind, and with it, pain. The Metalworking capstone allowed a crafter to feel what they were working on as if it were an extension of their own body, be it a sword, a piece of armor, or something as honest as a plow. With the perfect knowledge it gave, he would be able to target any of his skills on any part of it without having to move from this spot.

Though only if he could endure.

Temerity grew in his mind; more than just his creation, it swelled to encompass the entirety of his being. The skill was not meant to be used on something remotely this large or complex. Anyone would have said it was impossible. He did it anyway. The pain continued to grow, and not just from the wounds inflicted upon the vessel. He ground his teeth, listening to the

metal's wants, knowing its needs, feeling its aches and stresses. Already, the skill had begun exacting its toll on his body, though his armor was intercepting the bulk of the damage. It would protect him. For a time.

Removing one hand from the wall, he reached for his hammer.

Temerity would not break.

He would not break.

Not ever.

Impact after impact shook the ship, and Rain rode with them, clinging to the flagpole atop the roof of the bridge with one hand. The engines were screaming, pushed beyond maximum as wind whipped Ascension's flag above his head. The battle on the deck behind him raged hot and hard. Ascension was doing well, but it wasn't enough.

The gamble had failed. He had likely doomed them all.

Off the stern, a plume of water exploded high into the air. The waves swelled, breaking as the back of a colossal gray form breached through. Though it was still over a kilometer behind them, a name appeared. The health bar that accompanied it seemed to span from horizon to horizon.

Whale - Level 43