

# 81.

Following my creation of a hierarchy aboard my ships I met with my newly appointed lieutenants and advisors to flesh it out. It was important to me that the crews of the two ships be mixed. The old hands from the Death's Consort needed to be mixed with the fresh blood from the Final Internment. It wasn't just about managing crew composition and morale, the Final Internment's crew only had as much experience as I could give them in a few weeks of travel (which aboard the hulk left me less than impressed) while the Consort hands were now my experienced seamen – even if they had been mostly sitting on their hands for the last months.

It was also important to me that I be in command of both vessels that I now oversaw. I was delegating Rhistel to the Death's Consort and I trusted him to the position, but these were all now my men. I would not let it seem like anything else to any of them.

As we worked it out, the Consort would stick next to the Internment and we would periodically tie up together. I was needed aboard the Internment on account of how unwieldy she was and a professional seaman was needed to manage her. I was the only one who truly fit the bill. With Travis's help, Rhistel could keep the Consort apace of us.

Where things got complicated was the fact that Rhistel needed the knowledgeable seamen on board his ship while I could summon constructs aboard the Internment, but that flew in the face of my decision to mix up the crew. After discussing it for long hours of the night – where I had to back down a little on the advise of my appointed lieutenants – we kept the able bodied seamen on the Consort and transferred all passengers over to the Internment where we had more space for them. As it was pointed out to me, the passengers were primarily the ones with the most need to get away from the cursed carrack the most anyway.

Before arranging all this, I'd tried to un-claim the Death's Consort. If I could drop the ship the worst case scenario would be taking everyone on board the hulk, while at best I could reclaim it with some much better perks. Unfortunately, my 'Slaver' questline was still interfering. The quest had been updated with my return and the choices I'd given my crew, but apparently it wasn't enough to complete it until I'd followed through with my promise to return all those who'd requested it.

What had changed was the perk that everyone in the world knew about:

*Voice of the Crew: the commander of this ship sacrificed himself in order to give a voice to the lowliest of its occupants. That principle has been integrated into the essence of the ship, making this the primary cursed status.*

*This is a variable status.*

*Status effect: Based upon crew morale and attitude, imparts a weak trait within the ships sphere of influence.*

That status had previously been set as 'mutineers' with harsh penalties. It hadn't gone away; either because I had full claim on the ship or because Rhistel and Burdette kept everyone from moving on. Either way, I was glad to see the new status!

*Voice of the Crew Status set: Inspired*

*The crew has a fresh outlook and high hopes in the Captain's leadership. +3% morale per day; +10% crew efficiency; +5% skill growth.*

*Warning! If 'Inspired' turns into 'Betrayed' all bonuses will be lost with a 300% penalty.*

The status had often given me a trade-off; such as improving learning speed but also increasing fatigue. This time it was a straight bonus with a warning that things would be worse than when I started if I didn't follow through with my word. I already knew that much and intended to follow through if it meant fighting past Jones and the Perdition, so the warning didn't disturb me. Having such positive morale was only possible thanks to selectively retaining optimistic crew and playing the 'savior' after months away.

The crew status effect prompted some more changes in who would sail on which ship as we debated the merits of the perk bonus compared to the more nebulous bonus of learning from a master, a.k.a. me.

The crew status had me happy, but what really put me in a good mood was leveling a skill that mattered a lot to me these days!

*You have advanced to skill level 10 in Leadership. People are more likely to follow your direction; your team receives a 0.5% boost to effectiveness per level.*

*Level 10 customized perk: Sea Commander! Those under your command will gain a bonus to nautical abilities and skill growth. Subordinates have an increased chance of learning uncommon skills with your direction.*

*Land Penalty: your specialization in naval command has left you inept in alternative terrain, and Leadership boosts do not apply on land.*

Every 5 levels in a skill brought a special bonus. When I'd hit level 10 in traps, I'd gotten the ability to sense and use magical triggers – a major bonus, but a standard one. With my Leadership, I'd walked a unique enough path to trigger a customized bonus. My crew were instantly granted a bit of intuition into naval matters, and the typical skill growth that slowed drastically as you passed the journeymen phases were getting a boost. My crew were getting stronger.

Not only stronger, but they all had more potential! They could learn uncommon skills more easily, and with the direction that was leading I had high hopes of being able to bestow unique professions when I hit my level 15 bonus.

The skill didn't do anything for me specifically, but that wasn't the point of the skill. Anyone who pursued the skill for what it could do for them was doomed to nothing higher than the journeyman ranks. My skill was for my crew, and they were getting an amazing bonus out of this.

As for the land penalty? Ha! My curse had harsher repercussions associated with it than a loss of boosted effectiveness.

I'd gained the level in Leadership after returning to my old crew and setting things right. The bonus was a serendipitous sign that I'd be able to follow through.

I caught two hours of sleep before getting to work on the next day. The Death's Consort needed to be cleaned up and put in order before we set sail, and that was no small task. At one point I did with the carrack what I'd done with the hulk when it was a filthy mess: raise and lower it repeatedly like I was doing laundry and let the flooding/receding waters do a good cleaning.

Gnar took the opportunity to have some of his war band practice storming the coasts of the uninhabited island we were situated by. He left enough professionals behind to handle security as I needed them. It turns out that was wise, as immediately after we transferred the passengers my Domain sensed a small group split off for a clandestine discussion. I sent Arnaith to eavesdrop and he confirmed they were discussing if they should try any sabotage or assassination prior to disembarking.

I sent Mirash to loom menacingly as they scurried out of their corner, but besides noting their identities made no move. They were not my crew anymore, they were passengers. I would stomp on any hostile activities they tried, but there wasn't a positive way I could make an example out of them. They were my former crew who had chosen not to forgive me and get an advantage where they could, I could accept that. As long as I discouraged them from making trouble before land, I'd consider my mission a success and my hands clean of them.

Rhistel worked in my shadow, seeing how I dealt with issues and how I wanted things handled. Arnaith also trailed behind me, but I'd promised him I'd work him hard and followed through on that. I often sent him on another errand as soon as he returned from his last one.

I found the opportunity to have a side conversation with Rhistel about Cherry. He told me how she was doing, being semi-attached to him and this area. She was the dominant predator in the area and had attacked two different ships when she found no other prey, but hadn't earned a bounty yet for two reasons.

The first was because of Rhistel's voice of caution and the lack of meat for her aboard most ships - she hadn't been very motivated to see ships as a viable source of food. Honestly, I wasn't sure how to feel about that. I supposed it was all to the good?

The second reason was because after my previous reign of terror through the Isles, naval mines had been deployed here by the thousands. Every port and waterway of significance was protected from undersea incursion by a net of explosive boxes. Cherry could bulldoze her way through, but the logic of the mines wasn't about one mine ending a threat, but dozens added together. Even Cherry couldn't shrug off a whole minefield and had no reason to try without a promise of a substantial reward.

Rhistel told me this to alert me to a major concern in the area, but I remained unconcerned. When I first saw them I'd noticed a flaw in the naval mines' design that I was simply waiting for a good opportunity to exploit.

Having gotten Rhistel's report, I informed him that I wished to spend some time with Cherry myself. I did not share the bond with her that Rhistel did, and wanted to gauge if either her temperament or Rhistel's might cause future problems. Cherry was a ship-destroying calamity, and while I might take a prepared crew against her the fact remained that having her capability in the hands of Rhistel impacted the power dynamic between me and my subordinate. I wanted to trust Rhistel, but it was difficult to simply do so after being mutinied against once.

"You know lad, I was curious if I just stayed out of the way if you'd find an opportunity to speak with me." Marcus said, striding up to me as I finished my discussion with Rhistel. "I don't know that I expected you to appoint an old teacher as a trusted lieutenant, but I'll admit I was hoping for a formal advisory role? Perhaps a word on whether you intended to drop me off with the other passengers?"

"Marcus," I said. "It's good to see you've finally gotten the first level of Sea Legs!"

"Hrmph. It's not polite to point out the elderly's shortcomings."

"I wouldn't call you elderly, gray hair or no. My real reason for not speaking with you earlier is because I haven't decided."

"Decided what to do with me? Or decided whether a cripple is worth retaining?" He lifted his scarred wrists - without his hands. Drese was an amazing healer and reattaching limbs wasn't outside his wheelhouse, but re-growing them wasn't as simple.

"I hadn't yet decided whether I'd require you to join my crew or not."

He gave me a level look. "Domenic, I made it clear when we spoke before that I wanted to help you, but don't want to take on this curse."

"And I accepted your wish; you are here today instead of in Andros with the other prisoners from the Internment. I have to decide whether I can let it stay that way. I want you with me, Marcus, I

really do! For friendships' sake if nothing else. But if you don't have the benefits of the curse, than you could be a liability rather than an asset."

"I challenge you to pose a scenario I could not overcome!"

"Alright," I said, genuinely interested and hopeful that he'd have realistic solutions. "Breathing underwater."

"Pshaw! A water-breathing spell is rudimentary!"

"Keeping yourself from hypothermia in cold water."

He nodded, considering it a more difficult challenge. "A close-fitting suit with enchantments would be ideal, I think; but in a pinch I could invigorate myself – that would warm the blood well enough."

"I'm not sure you realize how cold the water gets, but we'll come back to that. What about handling the crushing water pressure?"

"Hmm, how strong is this pressure?"

"It gets worse and worse the deeper you go. The entire ocean above you is bearing down on you."

He shuddered. Marcus Renshaw was a very talented and skilled man, but a seaman he was not. "I have spells to fortify my strength and constitution as well as resist debuffs."

"Do you have the mana to cast all these spells simultaneously? For extended periods of time?"

"No one does."

"That's my conundrum, Marcus. I could help you out by keeping atmosphere in part of the ship, but that's a bandage instead of a fix. You've seen that I can release my crew, it would be easier if you accepted my curse!"

"That is something I'm not willing to do, Domenic. That is still my choice, is it not?"

"Yes," I said. "But if you are a liability, then I'll put you ashore and task you with babysitting the others leaving!"

He clapped his hands together – or he tried, getting a shocked and disturbed look on his face when the habitual mannerism resulted in his scarred wrists bumping together. He recovered quickly, forcing a bright smile on his face. "I'm sure the atmosphere in my quarters will be fine, then!"

"Don't think I won't put you ashore because you're my friend," I warned, though I wasn't sure how much I meant it.

“Oh, no. I realize you’d put an old man aside. But a beautiful young lady?” He smirked. “Hali has a similar mindset about the curse, and if you’re maintaining an atmosphere in one room it wouldn’t be any problem to have me there, now would it?”

With a gleam in his eye, he sauntered off and I realized I’d been had.

Ah, well. He wasn’t wrong. Hali had also been determined to remain free of my curse, and given her situation I wasn’t going to put her ashore. My worries over Marcus weren’t unfounded, but they were somewhat moot.

Rhistel watched him leave with the same equanimity that he’d watched all of my dealings, so his words caught me completely off guard.

“I will not be the one to spread dissension amongst your crew. However, for your ears alone, I ask if you trust this wizard and spymistress.”

When I recovered my wits and caught up to his question I answered immediately “I trust them implicitly! Why?”

“They are refusing to allow you control over them. They were also rescued from a ship given to you by your enemies. There are stories amongst the elves of humans who try to smuggle warriors and spies to their enemies through gifts.”

“They were brutalized.”

“A convincing cover? Or perhaps they remain unaware that they are a hook for you?”

“Their rescue was a trap. They were bait. Once we made it away from the vampires that tried to ambush us, we’d gotten away free.”

Rhistel inclined his head. “I apologize for upsetting you, and promise you again that I will not be a dissenter again.”

I took a breath. I did have to think about this rationally, without my emotions or preconceptions in the mix. That was always easier said than done. “You handled your concerns correctly, Rhistel. Thank you for voicing your concerns to me and for doing so only with me. I will keep the matter in mind, but expect there to be no rumors. Understand?”

“Yes, Captain.”

I nodded and we left it at that, but Rhistel had planted a seed in my mind. The vampires had been the trap we’d sprung, but they were a trap that could only be deployed at night. We had never discovered what the ship guarding the prisoners had planned for if I’d attacked during daylight.

What if the daylight plan hadn’t been overwhelming strength, but a long-term plot?

Domenic the seaman wanted to dismiss such thought out of hand, but Domenic the Captain believed that if either of my friends was a liability to my crew, I had a responsibility to keep an open mind on the possibility.

Bloody fishguts, I hadn't gotten anywhere the first time I'd suspected Hali of something either.

Suspended in the water, half-encircled by arms that would match any mature kraken, I stared at the toothy mouth of destruction before me and asked myself if I felt fear.

It was a rather dumb question.

The better question was whether I felt a measure of trust. Rhistel had brought me to Cherry and explained why I was there as best as could be communicated before retreating to give us space. Cherry had assumed the position she now held, studying me as I did her. She sometimes quirked a limb like she wished to extend it to me, but had no problem with patient observation.

I realized and appreciated for the first time that she was an ambush predator. While she'd been forced from the deep for reasons unknown and traveled to find food for her growing form, her build and abilities were much better suited to finding an ideal spot and waiting there, as patient as she was now. I could see her establishing herself permanently in these isles, letting ships pass above unharmed until one was unlucky. She'd be a folklore myth in a few years. It could take a decade or two before she was exposed as a sea creature, and then the island jarls would have to coordinate a force capable of driving her off.

She was a fearsome beast. She was an ally of Rhistel, not a bonded companion. That had perks and disadvantages. I could pressure Rhistel to have her leave us alone, and thus remove the issue entirely, but that would also deprive us of a potentially incredible resource.

A juvenile Charybdis was a match for a grown kraken. What would Cherry be like when she reached maturity? Did I want the risk? Could I afford not to take it?

My position in command had created a need to always be doing something, because there were always things that needed doing. My quiet moments were spent on personal study and training. The brief periods I took solely for the joy of sailing or an experience were measured in seconds or minutes before the need to work came up again.

Yet here, I spent over an hour floating with a sea creature that had a greater mass than both my ships, most likely. Making a judgment call.

The question wasn't so much if I trusted Rhistel, but if I trusted Cherry.

She seemed to understand that, but for an hour simply watched me unconcerned of my opinion. Rhistel had conveyed the power I wielded, but to her I was a small sack of flesh that a squeeze or a bite would drain all the HP from. She wasn't cowering for my approval.

She was what she was, and she'd never repent. She had a pride that might rival dragonkin with time.

And she also had a juvenile's cruelty – or maybe just a humorous streak.

After that first hour, Cherry activated an ability. The water around her mouth began to swirl and a funnel appeared, sucking everything in it towards her mouth. Including me.

Wondering if I'd missed some sign of hostility, I turned and swam for all I was worth. Pulling away from her, she increased the power of her whirlpool. I started to burn stamina for a sudden boost to get me away, but her vast arms were wrapping around my path like a fishnet.

My stamina was dropping fast. I couldn't maintain my struggle against her suction and dodge her. Seeing no other option, I flipped around as fast as a seal and burned a few more point of stamina heading towards her, the suction aiding my speed.

I wasn't aiming for her mouth, there was no hope for me there. I was aiming just to the side, where there was a gap between tentacles. I hoped with my sudden speed and change in direction I'd squeak by ...

I didn't.

Cherry stopped her ability and swam deeper, away from me and our meeting place.

Just like that, I'd been played with and let go.

I had a wave of anger and frustration over the experience, but I let it pass over me as I considered why she'd done it. I felt like she was saying "yes, I could eat you all, but I won't."

By the time my stamina had recovered, Rhistel had joined me. "Captain, I beg you not to make a rash decision. She was amused and happy when she left, she was ..."

"Yes, Rhistel, I figured it out."

My calm reply derailed the elf. "Ah, um ... I see. And your decision?"

"The seas are capricious and dangerous," I said. "Far be it from me to reject an ally so much like the thing that captured my heart." I turned and began swimming towards the ship. "But Rhistel ... tell Cherry that I'll have teeth of my own when I get the ship I've been wanting to claim."



Author's Note:

A bit of a shorter chapter, but I tend to hang onto them too long for the sake of making chapters that are too long, so I'm working on addressing that habit.

How do you think I've done with plot threads? Special thanks to ARHHH on discord for the idea for leadership, and I appreciate everyone who suggested ideas!