

“I expect to have the Death’s Consort ready to sail tomorrow.”

“So there’s no problem with me having the lads practice some fighting between the ships in the meantime!”

I sighed and rubbed my face. In front of ordinary crew signs like that were things that I tried to avoid, but in front of my lieutenants – and Gnar in particular – it seemed like a necessity to act more normally.

And Gnar really made me feel like shaking my head sometimes.

“Picture this with me, Gnar ... there’s dozens of people working on the decks, readying us to sail when the Consort hasn’t done anything but some light island hopping for months. Suddenly, there’s a band of orcs tearing through. Does that picture of chaos look like a good training field?”

“It looks like good practice for the chaos of battle,” Gnar said. He was just being stubborn, he wasn’t so dense that he’d completely ignore my point.

“It sounds to me like we won’t get underway by the time I hope to be. You had a good point about practicing mock battles between the two ships and I know that you’re angling to work all those stubborn new orcs into your war party,” he grimaced – the orc prisoners we’d saved from the Internment had needed to be forcibly assimilated through their culture, and some still questioned his experience. “But our priority right now is getting underway!”

“Fine,” he growled. “But allow me to have part of this hulk set aside so I can at least have the maggots practice surprise boardings.”

“Done,” I said. “Run as many drills as you like.”

He grunted and stepped away from the corner where we’d been privately conversing to where he’d left his men donning and doffing armor, yelling about them not having learned to properly dress themselves yet.

Different types of armor had different penalties that were ameliorated by having skill with that armor. Since I only ever wore light armor, I’d never had the sharper movement and dexterity penalties that really came into play with medium and heavy armor. Gnar was having everyone practice so that even if they were working against a penalty, they were still intimately familiar with their equipment and could work with it efficiently.

I knew that despite the heckling he was giving them about having to keep dressing themselves that he was mostly satisfied with their performance, and intended to have them jump over the side and practice some more on the sea floor. He’d thought he was giving them a challenge. I told him if he wanted a real challenge he should make them don and doff it while treading water

– level up their swimming while they were at it. Judging by the gleam in his eye, I'd sentenced the warriors to at least another hour of torment with a sadistic drill sergeant.

None of the drills that Gnar did were things that I'd ever thought of doing. I'd almost fought back against Gnar outfitting some with heavy armor on the reasoning that it was impossible to float or tread water with it.

Really. I think we were past those concerns now, and was glad I'd saved myself some embarrassment by not saying that out loud.

It really highlighted how important it was to have someone around who knew what they were about. Gnar might have been fresh to naval war, but he'd taken to it quickly and his challenging 'why not?' attitude had him overturning several conventions of war. On top of that, we were also developing an entirely new kind of naval warfare with a submersible ship – the kind of warfare that I'd been dabbling in with some success but also many failures.

I chuckled in amusement as the seasoned marines went straight over the side, while the raw recruits – or 'maggots' as Gnar called them – balked. Tarball, the Halfling, screwed his face up tightly and bravely went over the side where he belly-flopped with as much grace as a freshly-caught fish on a dock. Arnaith watched off to the side and followed Gnar into the water when the orc made the plunge, the half-elf boy working with the war leader on developing his tactician skill and collaborating on possibilities.

Before discussing mock battles, I'd illuminated Gnar on my plan for levelling activities. With Hali's help I hoped to get a better understanding of the broader war, but I saw myself as part of the non-human alliance because they'd gone out of their way to help me while the human confederacy had hunted me down even before the Broken Isles. Still, I had been fighting in this war blindly, and wanted to change that. Ships of the human confederacy were still a target of opportunity, but I didn't want to jump straight back into warfare. I had my eyes set on a different prize: one that could give me and my crew XP while showing the world we could do more than just take sides in a conflict.

Monster hunting.

I had a ship that was practically custom made to hunt sea monsters – the Internment was resistant to bludgeoning damage and I could restore durability to it. The Death's Consort was less suited but I'd used its bleeding perk to take down sea creatures before. Ideally I'd be able to drop the Death's Consort once and for all once I'd returned the passengers to land, but if not I'd be able to make the best of it.

They were both temporary anyway.

The number of ships lost to monsters had declined in recent decades as wider civilization brought more resources to bear against sea creatures. My own time whaling might have missed the big industry boom, but I'd been just in time for standardization. Creatures had been studied extensively and their habits, power and abilities were documented and widely disseminated

amongst the community. 'Whaling' itself was a misnomer as whale varieties were only one of the species we'd hunted – though the hunters of the more exotic tended to have a higher disappearance rate.

All of that led to sea travel moving from a perilous venture to merely a dangerous one, established shipping lanes being frequently patrolled and cleared by well-funded experts. War had pushed the numbers down even further since more armed ships were out there.

Or at least war was reducing the talk about sea monsters. As Hali pointed out to me, it was more exciting for folks to talk and speculate about war news than the same troubles with monsters they'd faced their whole lives. If a ship disappeared it must be because of enemy action and not because they'd annoyed a Hammernose or a kraken felt hungry, right?

Yet despite the reduced focus on sea monsters, if we actively started hunting them it would be the most neutral, beneficial thing we could do in the eyes of the world. Not that there was much redemption for me with the human side, but I wasn't a warrior at heart. I was a sailor. I wouldn't actively hunt out human blood to spill.

I recalled the Administrator on Antarus telling me that Davy Jones' origins were supposed to have begun with him as an expert monster hunter. I hoped to chart a different course than he had.

By evening we had the sails of the Consort furled where they should be, the lines inspected and in order, and the crew sorted out. I decided to leave the ship durability where it was at – just over 15,000. Half durability might have meant something bad aboard a normal ship, but aboard mine? It wasn't like it would sink unless I wanted it to – not unless something managed to drop the durability a lot further.

I let the crew rest, and they were all treated to Gerald's kraken fillets in reduced red wine sauce. There were several claims that he was a genius cook. I wouldn't dispute that because he was amazing, but they hadn't sampled his attempts at grilling or roasting the flesh. Cooking it with a batch of wine had been an attempt to moderate the lingering saltwater taste.

With full bellies and hopeful spirits, all that was needed was a solid night's rest to have a terrific start to the next day.

So naturally I found myself unable to sleep in my own cabin, tossing under the blanket. I gave up and stomped my feet into my boots before going topside, motioning to Arnnaith that he wasn't needed and could keep resting. Once, his eyes would have followed me anyway, but between the work I'd been giving him and the exercises Gnar had roped him into he was asleep again before I shut the door behind me.

I breathed deeply of the night air and pulled my senses from my Domain in until it was just my own body experiencing things; just my own nose smelling the air, my own eyes adapting to the light of the moons.

I released my breath and let my awareness of my Domain come flooding back. It wasn't the information that it brought me that was disturbing my sleep, I'd long since adjusted to it.

I nodded to the orc on watch with Tarball and climbed up to the quarterdeck. Here I had a better view of both the moons. The larger Callis cast her white light on the waves while Uropa pulled against her, her smaller form reflecting reddish light. I could sense how they impacted the tide and the swells my ships were bobbing on. I'd had that sense long before my Domain – before I'd even gained my journeyman levels of seamanship. Every sailor learned about how the moons fought and the fickle ocean loved them both. After enough time and experience, it stopped being simple knowledge and evolved into an awareness.

Speaking of awareness ... "You couldn't sleep either?" I said aloud.

Hali stepped off the ladder to the quarterdeck, moving to the gunwale beside me. "It's not easy on a girl when there's a man who can spy on her every minute of the day."

I'd told Hali before about my respect for her – and others' – privacy. It wasn't born out of a noble sense that everyone deserved privacy, I'd practically spent my life on one ship or another where privacy could rarely be granted. It had more to do with my general disinterest in watching over people and enough pride not to pursue any jollies as a peeping Tom. If I had to really think about it, I suppose there was a hint of my mother's influence and what she'd instilled in me.

Because I'd explained it to her twice I knew every time she mentioned it now was just to mess with me, so I messed with her back. "If you were really worried, you'd have asked Jorgagu to enchant you some nightgowns for modesty."

She snickered, but didn't follow up. That was something I'd been noticing since her rescue: she wasn't dragging out quips and she didn't pursue the last word. I didn't know if it was because of her trauma or if those had been mannerisms of a working spy, and this was her being herself.

"It's beautiful out here," she breathed.

"Indeed. Reminds me of a night long ago, aboard a different ship. It was the first time we met officially ..."

"Oh don't remind me!" She said, hiding her face in her hands. "That was the most awkward, stunted questioning I'd ever conducted since I was twelve!"

"You were being pushed into it by Captain Michaels, right?"

"He was pushing for answers right then, sure, but that doesn't excuse my piss-poor performance."

"How about you redeem yourself then? Imagine this is that night and you just came up the ladder, what would you say now?"

She smiled at me but didn't play along. "There was a boy next to you, a boy you were teaching how to fish. I'd have stepped in as your counterpart – a maternal figure would complement your paternal one and you'd have sensed it and opened up. Wouldn't hurt at all knowing in hindsight you had a crush on me."

My smile had faded at the reminder of Redmund and my teasing, semi-flirtatious attitude withered. "I really miss that kid sometimes."

"Are you going to seek out the wreck of the Wind Runner as soon as you're done with your old crew? See if you can raise him?"

I didn't answer. I hadn't shared what my plans were for my next ship with anybody, even Gerald and my lieutenants only had a vague idea of what I wanted – what I needed. It wasn't a matter of trust as it wasn't some hidden secret, but more like if I didn't dare expose my thoughts than fate couldn't intervene.

Hali didn't press me, we'd gotten rather good at knowing when not to press each other. Instead, we leaned on the gunwale together and admired the light of the moons playing on the ocean.

Neither of us had talked about becoming more than friends and I wasn't going to do it now, but even just having her shoulder against my arm ... it was nice.

"I was having nightmares," she said after a few minutes. "During the day I might have flashbacks to one thing or another, but I'm awake and can deal with them. But at night? My nightmares aren't even about what happened. Instead of having a specialist questioning me it's a vampire, or they cut off my hands like what they did to Marcus. And I can't do anything about it!" She shuddered. "My head can't be rational in my sleep like I can in the day. Sleeping draughts only keep me locked in nightmares, they don't help me sleep better."

"For a while I nearly developed a dependency on sleeping potions," I sympathized. "The nightmares that were plaguing me involved the innocents I'd killed. You're right, it wasn't ever a true flashback."

"I thought you still had nightmares?"

I shrugged. "I do. Thankfully not all night anymore, and some nights I don't remember more than vague sensations when I wake up. They're still there, though. Since I can't restore things to before ... I guess they'll always be there."

"Are they always the same people? The same instance?"

"No. It seems like I'm periodically inflicted with a regular nightmare with my father, but I think that's just a side effect of the Patricide title. Everything else ... similar trends, but it's a new nightmare each time."

"It's always the same for me," she admitted. "Not exactly the same, like a script, but I'm always either being questioned or punished."

With her oath of loyalty, they'd been able to get her to spill everything she knew about everything just by having the right person ask. Since she'd still seen herself as a servant of the crown, she hadn't even tried to hide anything.

But because they'd already decided to sacrifice her to the vagaries of politics and wished to be thorough, they'd tortured her for information anyway. In theory, she could have held something back from her oath or there could have been undetected magic in play, so they'd subjected her to the same treatment that could have been expected for regicides. She told me that her mind couldn't even recall days of the worst torments where they'd intrusively tested and examined her for magical influence.

We lapsed into a longer silence. While we'd established a boundary of when not to push, for some reason I got the impression that Hali wanted me to ask her more.

But that simply wasn't done. I wouldn't risk breaching our trust on the impressions of a moment. "If you ever want to talk more," I said instead. "I'm here to listen, and I can be as silent as the deep."

"I can hear the waves on the hull right now, they're not that quiet. In fact, they're rather repetitious. They can be quite a blabbermouth, can't they?"

"No no no, I said I could be as silent as the deep. This here is the surface! Related, but not the same. The surface is like my mother when I was a kid: sometimes just chattering but don't steal her spiced apples or she'll howl like a tempest and make you want to howl too!"

Hali laughed at my comparison and I kept the caricature going, throwing in a few anecdotal examples that may or may not have been true stories. What can I say, I wasn't always strong and dashing. I'd been a bit of a wild child in my youth.

We talked for an hour, sometimes about serious things and other times laughing with each other. She finally excused herself to bed, hoping to have a shot at restful sleep.

I didn't follow her example for a long time. Hali hadn't been able to sleep because of nightmares, but for me it was just nerves. I couldn't help but feel that things had been going too right after having been kicked so many times. All the good news and progress, all the hope shared by my crew ... I felt like I was being set up for failure. Surely there would be some turn of fate that would bring reality crashing down, branding me with another title deserving of a villain.

I'd gifted hope to my crew, but did I have any for myself?

Eventually I grabbed a line and threw it over the side, following it down in a swan dive. I meditated in the embrace of the sea. I accepted whatever would come. My life was not tame; it

could not be with the sea being so unruly, my heart belonging so steadfastly with the unfathomable depths that I had a special perk recognizing just that.

I would prepare, and when the time came to ride out the storm I would do so with joy.

Exhaustion from days of work and minimal sleep eventually settled on me and allowed me to rest before the sun came out. When I woke it was with the same grittiness in my eyes I'd had so often, but I was alert, ready, and best of all ... at peace.

Breakfast porridge wasn't as exciting as kraken meat was, but Gerald did well with it and a stick-to-your-ribs breakfast was as good a way to start the working day as any.

Today, the Death's Consort sailed again!

I started with the Consort and helped Travis and Rhistel break in together as the sails unfurled. Rhistel naturally started to drop into my shadow, but I made it clear that he was to be in command in my absence and I wanted him to start in my presence.

Travis likewise had reservations about being responsible for the sailing of the ship, but as soon as his mind was on how the ship ought to be sailed he forgot about rank and position and spoke his mind – exactly what was needed of him. He'd make a good Bosun someday soon, just needed a few more seamanship levels under his belt.

Soon the sails had caught the wind and the ship was underway. Once I'd satisfied myself that Travis and Burdette had things in hand, I slipped over the side and into the Consort's wake. About a mile of open sea had opened up between my two ships. I cast my movement buffs and burned a steady rate of stamina to propel me through the water, taking around 10 minutes to return to the Internment. There I had my pre-readied constructs assist me and the hulk began crawling after the carrack.

With me and my constructs, the Internment had a higher overall efficiency than the Consort had, but it was the nature of the ship's design that I was still slower and Travis had to work to keep apace of us. In the afternoon I cut him loose to roam ahead and conduct drills and maneuvers with Rhistel. I was happy to see that the elf indeed retained command even with Travis' superior knowledge. That was a standard arrangement, but I'd gotten used to being both the most knowledgeable and the Captain in command, so I'd worried about them being able to split the roles.

I submerged both ships that evening and we tied them together – a feat that was only possible between the two with the stability of controllable depth and the relative stability found in the water under the turbulent waves.

We hadn't made particularly good time, but then we weren't that far from where we would stop. I could have left my passengers off at the first inhabited island and fulfilled my promise, but I

expected them to face challenges of their own and wanted to give them the room of a continent to avoid any potential interested parties.

My passengers had mostly stayed below – there was enough room in the multiple decks for them to spread out comfortably and still not be in the way of the working crew. I did have to convey reassurances that they were not prisoners and had free movement aboard the ship so long as they stayed out of the way of those with jobs.

I considered them passengers and called them that, but the reality was they all knew their way around the deck of a ship and could have pitched in to improve the ship performance beyond my constructs. I neither required or expected them to, though. So it was a surprise when Phillip approached me that evening asking to speak on behalf of the passengers.

“Captain, some of the former crew would like your permission to practice and train skills while we’re underway. Our idea is that life will get complicated when we hit land; either because of people wanting to question us about you or because we hiding from people that would.” It was understood that several of the former crew would go straight to the authorities for a chance to make a deal, and then the names of all who’d left would be outed if the rulers decided to pursue. “Well, you’ve gathered some real experts in your time away and we wanted to get a leg up through more honest means.”

He knew how to speak to me. I wasn’t pleased about those I knew were trying to get ahead through turning coats or contemplating espionage. Phrasing his request as an alternative for that made it hard to turn down.

“I will give my approval for the training, but it’s up to the individual to find a teacher and convince them. If you want to have a professional warrior teach you fighting, they’ll have to agree to it. If you want seamanship practice, I expect to be approached about joining a rotation. Sound fair?”

“Perfectly so, sir!” He saluted even though he wasn’t one of my men and turned on his heel with the precision of someone trained in an army. With his leadership and guidance, I had much higher hopes for more of my crew living free and productive lives.

I was surprised at the number of people who were waiting to approach me later as soon as I slipped below deck. They all wanted to eke out another level of seamanship before making land. The trouble with that was readily obvious as they no longer had my curse and so couldn’t help whenever we sailed underwater. I could push them hard while sailing on the surface and give them tasking below decks that would help establish their expertise, but I had no idea what kind of bonus my Sea Commander would give and if it would be enough to get them another level. They were all past level 10 already.

Gnar let me know that most of the fighters had been approached. He supported his men doing some teaching as it helped them reinforce their basics, but among those who’d sought out weapons skills were those who had immediately plotted against me.



“I won’t make a ban on certain members getting training. That would look bad and create divisions they’re not worth. But,” I gave him a meaningful look. “It is still on each individual to convince a trainer. Each mentor can deny whoever they please.”

“And it would please them greatly to deny scum who’d so readily switched warcamps.” He nodded. “My band will know where the score stands.”

Leadership could be a fine balance between fairness and tyranny, sometimes.

Despite my worries, nothing troubled us as we sailed to the eastern coast. There were surface ships we avoided, naturally, since though I wasn’t opposed to fighting for one side of this war I had no wish to do so in front of those who’d been traumatized by our earlier actions.

Our excitement came in the form of a pack of eel-hounds as we approached the coast. Rhistel noted that varieties of eel-hounds were domesticated for different jobs, but that always meant there were strays being added to the local populations. Rather than be a nuisance, they became an opportunity for Sadeo to open up the Death’s Consorts’ artillery again. If the wild creatures hadn’t been maddened as soon as blood bloomed in the water, they would have realized they were prey. Our artillerists got some XP, Gerald got fresh meat, and Mouse got fresh alchemical reagents.

Getting a kit for Mouse was among the top acquisition priorities we had; the man could make potions out of nearly anything but the simplest creations nearly made the drinker vomit them back up along with everything else in their stomach. He was a genius but had no way to refine any of his components. His attempts at more advanced potions even created trade-offs; such as his strength-buffing potion that removed twice as much dexterity or a water-breathing potion that doubled as a severe diuretic. I still had hopes of retaining a powerful alchemist, but it was a work in progress.

Weather had hit us hard mid-journey which slowed our progress even more but also provided a much-needed crucible for those struggling to advance their seamanship. Judging by their rate of advancement, my Sea Commander perk had boosted all those under me regardless of whether they were my cursed crew or not. I still had concerns over bringing non-cursed people along with me, but we hadn’t run into any unsurmountable issues yet and there were cases being made for the benefits of having such people on board.

The weather gave us a respite after the storm, with a bright sun and clear visibility as we zeroed in on a stretch of uninhabited coastline. The combination made me concerned enough that I had us remain submerged as we approached and waited for nightfall to obscure us.

We’d chosen this location because we wanted to get everyone off at once. If we set people down in two groups like I’d done with the Internment’s prisoners, there was a higher risk of someone tattling and coastal patrols readying traps. However, knowing that everyone disembarking had different priorities, we tried to be fair with the landing placement. It needed to

be far enough away from settlements that someone couldn't rush straight into town and sell his former comrades out, but close enough that groups could travel to one before any rations they carried ran out. I gave every person as muchhardtack as they could carry with jerky from our catches, but there was a point when carrying food was more work than it was worth.

Besides those who we expected to turn coats, there were two other groups: those who planned to disappear entirely and those who planned to slip back into society and restart. All would face challenges, but ideally there would be more than one destination choice so that the town couldn't just go into lockdown until they'd rounded everyone up.

The place we'd picked was supposed to meet all the criteria we'd set. There were two port towns and we were landing about equidistant between them. It was about 3 days of travel to either, though one was more of a fishing village. If some decided they didn't want to risk either, they could cut straight inland. There was a trade route running north-south along the coast and wartime would have meant it saw a lot of traffic. Anyone who wished could slip into that stream and disappear.

Out of an abundance of caution, I ordered Gnar to establish a beachhead. He did so enthusiastically, his men storming out of the surf and making rudimentary fortifications before scouting out the terrain and verifying that no one had somehow predicted our landing site. When he sent back word that the shoreline was secure, I had the pair of rafts on the hulk put overboard and began ferrying my passengers to the shore.

It took several hours as we only had the two rafts and the Internment couldn't get very close to shore, forcing the rowers to fight through the surf with every trip. There were several potential leaders of the different groups but Phillip the recognized authority for now, largely because of my support. Once I pulled out and they were on their own I was sure those who hated me would drop any pretense of listening to him.

I watched as men left. Willy, Abner, Joash, Thaddeus, Myota ... each climbed over the side to a raft and went ashore. Some had words for me, most didn't. Joash made a point of shaking my hand and thanking me for boosting his level once more, which I appreciated. Myota tried to give me 'guidance' which I did not appreciate. I reminded myself I only had to suffer him for a little while longer and would never see him again after that.

I did not go ashore because it made me nervous and because I had no desire to loiter with the men while they waited. Gnar had my instructions, and everyone on shore was held there until all had disembarked. Then he'd pull out with his war party and all the passengers would be on their own.

It was a good plan, but it left me feeling a bit unfinished. I had no last words for the group, no set goodbye. It was a drawn out affair that scratched at my mind like a task perpetually on a to-do list. Yet it was important that I remain present and visible as each former crewman went to shore, so I resisted the urge to go practice my cartography skill.

Then, it was done. I watched the oarsmen change out with those with refreshed stamina and the last of the passengers climbed into the raft with Phillip.

Phillip didn't have any parting words for me either, but he didn't avoid my gaze. He seemed to struggle to find words to say and not discovering any adequate ones, he simply nodded once. I nodded back.

And he was away.

I wondered what was in store for him in the future, where his own tale would go. Many of the passengers would splinter into their separate ways, but he wouldn't leave any that remained. What would they find themselves doing in a month, a year?

I shook my head and dropped my musings, they weren't helping my attitude. I just needed to wait for Gnar to pull back and we would be done.

Done – they'd be free. And my crew who remained were there because they chose to be. That was ... something remarkable.

It wasn't completely finished, I still needed to speak with Rhistel. I hoped, however, that our more recent activities would have rebuilt enough trust that he would stay with me.

I signaled the Consort and she began to turn back out to sea from where she'd been sitting and waiting with ballistae loaded for any interlopers. I directed my constructs to raise anchor and heave to, beginning the labor of maneuvering the hulk back out to sea as well.

Now I really was running shorthanded; my mana almost couldn't keep up with summoning the number of constructs needed to manage this hulk. Ideally I'd consolidate my little fleet, but that was a problem for tomorrow.

I followed the Consort out to sea as the sun began illuminating the sky behind us. As the day dawned and we left the land in our wake, the awkwardness of a prolonged goodbye faded behind the mounting satisfaction of a task completed.

I'd upheld my oath! I'd finally given all those under me a true choice, and at the end of it I had both experts and friends stick by me. It was a joy I had no conscious way to express.

As I contemplated how I ought to express my swelling elation, I felt something in my Domain. It was a foreign influence – not a overpowering, competitive Domain that shunted my own back like I'd experienced facing goliath monsters in the depths – but it was different from my own.

Different, yet somehow familiar.

We tried signaling the Death's Consort ahead, but before we could complete our message my blood turned to ice as a familiar ship breached the edges of my Domain: the Perdition. Davy Jones had re-entered the scene.

I wondered what my former master wanted with me, and I worried that in a direct battle of wills that some root of his former power would still hold sway. Drese and I had worked to understand the exact degree that Jones could still influence me, but it was impossible to know for sure. The fact that I could level up in spite of his orders meant that I'd come far in breaking free from him, but could my progress hold up in the face of the person who'd claimed me in the first place?

I hoped that this could be a productive, civil discussion between equals. Failing that, I hoped that it would be a non-violent encounter since I couldn't hope to match him.

Both those hopes were shattered as the Perdition violently breached the surface alongside the Death's Consort and opened fire on her with a full broadside.

Author's Note:

Sorry-not-sorry for the cliff!