

The Captain's cabin was supposed to hold a kind of authority on its own, sort of like how an audience chamber would for a king. By virtue of the Captain's authority, the place where he slept and conducted business would take on an atmosphere that rubbed off from its occupant.

I stepped into Burdette's cabin and immediately changed my plans to have the next phase of redemption held here. The room was odious to me. It wasn't just my own nightmares of this place, it had absorbed the essence of my treacherous first mate. I didn't consider it my cabin in my own head – it was Burdette's room – how much worse would it be for all those who'd spent the last months seeing Burdette's claim on it?

Instead of conducting business here, I grabbed the chair and carried it to the quarterdeck above, asking an orc to free the bolted-down desk and bring it up as well. The design of the carrack included a quarterdeck with more elevation above the main deck than typical, so I could grant each audience a measure of privacy and gravitas that the process deserved.

The quarterdeck held an assortment of improvised shelters. I pushed these out of the way to make space but didn't demand it be cleaned before conducting this business. Let the debris serve as a contrast and a reminder!

When my desk was brought up I positioned it so I was seated facing the ladders, with space between me and the wheel for the crewman to stand.

"Please have the elf Rhistel come up first," I instructed the orcs before having them all vacate the deck. I needed no guards for this.

Rhistel was dignified but leery as he climbed up to the quarterdeck. He and Drese were actually rather similar in their demeanor, but the madu carried himself with confidence whereas the elf carried with him a wariness like a fish that had been hooked several times.

I wondered if at the end of all this Rhistel would stay.

Seeing no place to sit, Rhistel stood in front of me, first crossing his arms before folding his hands in a much humbler appearance.

"First off, I want to thank you for the good that you did these last months," I said. "Things could have been much, much worse if not for your intervention."

After a moment of silence, he thanked me.

"I explained the basics of what was to happen to the whole crew prior to my dealing with Burdette," I went on. "I am going to elaborate on that with each member. I start with you because you are in a unique position."

"I trusted you more than anyone except Sadeo. I wanted to help you, and rejoiced with you when you redeemed your profession and befriended Cherry. Since then, I've also had the opportunity to go over this," I pulled a copy of Voice of the Crew from my adventurer's bag. "Your words are particularly poignant and accurate."

He stared at the book for a moment before I realized everyone on board was as cut off from the world's news as an extended whaling expedition would be. I paged through the book while I explained what it was, flipping back to his own words before handing them to him. "It would seem that the human world has been taken with the story and book binders are making cheap copies with different assortments of letters. Your words are in nearly every one."

"Ironic," Rhistel murmured. It truly was; if the humans had known he was an elf his letters wouldn't have enjoyed the acclaim critics hastened to give him. "Many of the crew wrote these with the illusion you would never see them, my Captain."

"They wrote them for the entire world, Rhistel." I said. "They can content themselves with the fact I was the last person on the seas to see them. I have no intentions of using anything in these pages to punish anyone, even the more ... outspoken."

There were many rather vociferous condemnations of me amongst the collection.

"I suppose now you'll tell me just how we'll be punished?"

"After you, I am going to invite the crew up one at a time. If they have any desire to stay on with me, they will have to explain why to my satisfaction. If they wish to be free, I will remove their curse immediately."

"Immediately?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you concerned about ... safety concerns? There are many who blame you for everything. If you take away your control over them through the curse ..."

"Your concern has already been raised and addressed by my orc lieutenant, Gnaraugh. It comes down to having several dozen professional warriors acting as security. I will leave even those who hate me safely on shore – most are entitled to their bitterness, I won't punish them for it."

"I see," he said, setting the book down on my desk. "You said you would be doing this with all of the crew after me. Is that a deliberate choice of phrasing?"

"Yes, Rhistel, it is. You represented the non-humans on board, and your decision to join in mutiny carried them with you. Once I was gone, you fought with Burdette for control. You have assumed responsibility for this crew, and so your punishment will be to see it carried through."

“I will offer to free you, Rhistel, but not until every crewman has either decided to stay with me or been deposited on land. You will be the last. Once every person who you took responsibility for has been accounted for, then you will have the freedom to choose your own fate again!”

Rhistel spent a minute absorbing what I said, watching my eyes for sincerity and glancing out to sea in Cherry’s direction. He bowed to me. “I accept this as both justice and mercy. I swear to uphold your command while I remain in your service.”

I accepted his oath and dismissed him, asking to have Bosun Willy sent up next.

I chose Willy for a specific reason: I knew that he would chose to have the curse lifted, and he was a straightforward man. If I first spoke with all the people I wished to keep on, then those waiting would see a string of people returning from their talk with me still cursed. If I sent down Willy curse-free, he would tell it straight to all those eager to discover what I was doing. I wanted these individual conversations private, but had no reason to keep them secret.

My conversation with Willy went as expected. He was the Bosun, supposedly the most knowledgeable deckhand on board. Only I was more proficient than he was, so he’d never felt his authority and I’d been too green as a Captain to see that he needed it. I spent a few minutes removing his curse, after which he sagged to his knees and began to cry.

I got up from my desk and clapped my hand on his shoulder. “Take it from someone who actually deserves the blame on them: try to forgive yourself. You can strive for a life of redemption, shut yourself away for your life or even hop aboard another ship like it’s business as usual. I won’t pretend to have any magical insight for guilt. But Willy,” I squeezed his shoulder hard. “You’re not an evil man. Recognize that.”

He nodded – I suspect it was a reflexive acknowledgement and not because I’d stumbled upon any magic words.

“Please send Abner up next, and have him bring another chair.”

My carpenter’s mind had been cracked. He was living life so stressed that he’d been reduced to reacting to everything rather than thinking for himself. It took me several minutes of trying to convince him I wouldn’t punish him for anything he did before I simply removed his curse and sent him back down. I’d make sure he went ashore with friends who might help him regain his senses once he was away from all this.

I went through several former deckhands before I received my first surprise when I asked Varinya the lioness up. She’d been supportive of me before, back when I’d been the hero who pulled Burdette down, but I expected she’d seek freedom from me now. Instead, she turned and looked over the crew below.

“I think I’ll wait and see what they decide.”

I pulled my eyebrows down from my forehead and restrained my reflexive answer about how I was running things. I knew Varinya, and I knew her character. A bit lopsided with strength and dexterity over intelligence and wisdom, but all the former prostitute had ever wanted was to protect her adopted family – whoever they were that day.

“I’ll let you wait and decide after I’ve spoken with the others, but I don’t want you sharing your decision with others. I don’t want you to inspire a lot of ‘wait and see’ choices.”

She snorted, which sounded both more fearsome and derisive coming from a leonid than any other race. “Okay.”

After her, I adjusted my plans slightly. I called Sadeo up next.

“Before you ask,” he said. “I’m with you this time – to the end of the line! I heard what you were telling the others and I’m staying. Besides, you’ll need me to run any artillery if you hope to have any chance of hitting a warren at 50 paces!”

“It warms my heart to hear that, Sadeo. I actually thought that’d be your answer, though. Why I really wanted to talk with you next is because I wanted your insight, and now is as good a time as any to set the standard of getting it.”

His face, all set to fiercely argue, softened in a smile. “We’re turning over fresh ground here, aren’t we?”

“We certainly are. So tell me, amongst the crew who is definitively leaving and staying, and who remains undecided?”

I showed Sadeo my list and he pulled the spare chair up beside me and stood on it, helping me categorize where people stood. I was actually surprised at the people he said would consider staying on. I had assumed I would lose about 90% of my old crew, but with Sadeo’s insight it looked more like 60-70% definitely wanted out. I wasn’t happy about retaining the hands so much as I was about the specific people who’d consider staying – people who I valued and whose trust again would mean a lot.

After he’d helped me out and we spent several minutes talking about what the future held, I sent him back down very chipper kitsune.

Myota was next – it seemed the only reason he wasn’t poisoning people against me was that no one wanted to listen to him. I’d once considered him an ally, back when the ship was an average slave-ship. However, even then he’d sold his idealist theories of how things ought to be in a very annoying manner. We’d disagreed on how to free the slaves and hadn’t agreed on much since. He’d performed admirably as a surgeon on board, but hadn’t ever attempted to hide his opinions. He made sure I heard them now, and even trimming the wayward courses and regularly pulling him down from his soapbox I still spent more time with him than any other crewmember.

He of course demanded his freedom, and told me the only right thing to do was free everyone. He didn't accept my option of giving them a choice as a valid one. As the curse dropped away, I told him he was free to share with whoever would listen, but that he should have a care with the types who'd be interested in extracting information from him.

It was a warning I planned to give everyone. The fact that it finally made him quiet was just candy.

Dogen's role as quartermaster had been greatly simplified when I'd relied on the supplied hardtack and water, but to my surprise he was willing to stay on. His reason that he had nothing better waiting for him and maybe a lot of trouble was a depressing one, but I accepted him. Gerald would appreciate having someone else manage inventories so he could focus on cooking and experimenting.

Joash was a decent seaman and wasn't too proud to say he hadn't committed a few crimes in his old life, but he couldn't ever feel comfortable as part of my crew. I released him.

Willard Thorpe should have joined on with an adventurer's guild: he was a crazy fool who had joined up with me willingly for the adventure and now that I was returning 'new and improved' wanted to stick it out.

"My only request is that once I have a lead on finding Meg, you let me go then. Sound fair?"

I spent a moment racking my brain for who Meg was. "Wait, Meg the adventurer girl? The one who showed up and tried to turn us against Davy Jones right before ..."

He sighed wistfully. "Wasn't she something?"

"You're mad," I muttered, but made a note in my register and accepted his terms.

Phillip had been in charge of my motley fighters when I'd first started out. He wasn't a professional warrior, but had spent time in Andros' army which had been where he'd been hit with charges he disputed and was demoted to slave. He'd retained a strong sense of duty and morality – so service under my previous command had broken him.

Yet when I'd boarded I found him standing up for Varinya. His first words had been to beg me not to have him kill again, that he'd rediscovered his calling in protecting people.

"I hear that you're giving people a choice ..."

I sighed and threw my pencil down on my desk. "Let's be candid with each other, Phillip. I owe you at least that much."

He nodded but didn't take my meaning. "I analyzed those orcs you brought with you. The fighters here really can't hold a candle to them, but I bet I could learn a trick or two!"

“Phillip,” I said. “I spoke with Sadeo and he told me you’d stay on if I played my cards right. He even told me about how the two of you tried to be a moral compass for the lads caught up with Burdette. I won’t lie: I wanted you. I wanted you because I broke you before, and I thought that if you stayed on it was a sign I was a good person.

“You shouldn’t stay with me, Phillip.”

He swallowed thickly, his eyes on the desk rather than meeting my own. “Why? Because I lost it? Or because of what you plan to do?”

“Because there is a better purpose for you. I have ideas, directions that I can take the crew to be a positive force on the seas. You could be a minor piece of that. Or,” I emphasized the alternative. “You could go with those young lads you were trying to steer. Sadeo is staying. They’ll be free, but there’s dangers throughout the world and they’re liable to make foolish choices without a guide. You could be that for them.”

“You want me to ... to leave, so that I can take care of the others leaving?”

“Ask yourself where you’d do the most good,” I answered.

He wrestled with thoughts, having somehow come to the perspective that he could be a fighter for me again only to have me push him away.

“You don’t have to decide now,” I said. “Go talk with Sadeo. Talk with the ones leaving. I’ll send for you in a few hours, you can tell me your decision then.” Phillip nodded absently and stood, making his way back.

I watched him go with melancholy. It would have meant a lot if Phillip had joined. It meant a lot that he even wanted to. The truth of it was that I couldn’t always be going into an engagement and wondering if it was too much for Phillip. He would also be a subordinate in the boarding team rather than a leader, so I wouldn’t even be discussing options or necessity with him. He would be a grunt, and I couldn’t in good conscious put him under Gnar. It was better if he found a different purpose.

I hesitated when I got to Arnnaith’s name. The half-elf boy was smart but not wise. When I’d returned he’d immediately begged to be taken back as my cabin boy.

I was offering people the freedom of choice, but that required a certain level of maturity to evaluate the choices. I’d already seen examples of grown men lacking that capacity, did I trust Arnnaith would?

Time to see.

I expected him to sulk up and plonk down on the chair opposite me before giving me a sullen glare like the self-important brat he used to be. Instead, he stood in front of the desk with his hands folded, meek as could be.

Devious manipulator or frightened youth?

“Tell me about how you and Rhistel get along,” I asked.

“Well Captain, we’ve gotten along better since our rocky start, but we don’t exactly spend time together, see?”

It would seem he picked up on others’ methods of speech. “You used to talk about nothing but going to your homeland of Elessar. Has that changed?”

“Yes, Captain. It has.”

“Why?”

“The point has been brought home very clearly that half-bloods won’t be wanted.”

“You don’t even want to see? What if they start losing the war and need more fighters? You know I’m giving blanket freedom to everyone, why come to me with your cap in hand? Just say you want to go to Elessar and it’ll be done!”

Arnaith glanced at his empty hands. “I don’t have a cap, sir.”

I was sure that he was being deliberately dense, rather than confused over the idiom. “If any of my crew want to stay, they have to explain why to my satisfaction. This is your chance to explain.”

“I have the tactician skill, Captain Domenic! I even leveled it up while you were gone.”

“Lieutenant Gnar has the skill as well, along with a great deal of battle experience.”

“It doesn’t hurt to have a second?” Arnaith said, even his tone acknowledging it was a weak argument.

“Domenic, the truth is I have nowhere else to go. You treated me fairly, even if it took me some time to see it. Why is it such a bad thing to want that back?”

“If you were any of the other crew, I might let it go at that. The trouble is I have a hard time trusting you, Arn. You have a habit of subterfuge and sneaking around, and I frankly can’t keep up. When I had you shadowing me, you shared everything I did, didn’t you?”

“No!”

“Not to Burdette, I’m sure. You hated him then almost as much as I did today. But to Rhistel?” He didn’t admit it, but I could see the lie in his eyes. “You also remind me of myself, and that seed of bitterness inside you makes me wonder: now that you’ve dropped your hope of your maternal ancestry, are you hoping that you’ll get revenge against your father on the seas?”

“Umm,” Arnaith looked awkward. “My father wasn’t a navy man. His demesne was landlocked.”

Maybe I was projecting too much on him. The killing of my own father still bothered me a lot. “Arn, cut to the heart of the matter and swear to me it’s the truth.”

He bowed his head in shame. “My father played manipulation games against me. Almost everyone else in the whole nation despised me. Being your shadow ... being your shadow was the safest I’ve ever felt. I can’t be the hero of my own story, but I won’t mind anymore tagging along for yours.” He met my eyes. “And I swear on my skills that’s the truth!”

I got a prompt regarding his serious oath, and I actually believed him. Most people looked at him and saw a child, whereas I saw a cunning mind and forgot that he was also still just a boy.

“I’m going to be running my ships differently. I will take you on, but you’ll be spending part of your time as a hard-working cabin boy and part as an apprentice to Gnar, understood?”

“Got it, Dom!”

“It’s Captain – don’t think I didn’t see how you slid from using my title to using a nickname. You will perform your duties diligently while you work to restore my trust. Do not abuse it; there are hundreds of others I’ve made sail their own courses and if I can’t trust you I’ll make you do the same. Now do you understand that?”

“Yes, Captain. I do.”

I nodded to the ladder. “Go wait with the others.”

After him, I had only to call back Varinya and Phillip. Varinya decided to stay on after all, while Phillip sought his freedom. He was much more assured of his decision after speaking with Sadeo, and I nodded to the kitsune in gratitude.

“Those who have elected to leave the crew, gather where you can hear me!” I had to use my Domain to see whether they obeyed since I couldn’t feel their presence anymore. “You all are now considered passengers aboard my ship. You will be provided for until we reach our destinations. If you wish to practice or learn work skills, that is acceptable. You will be returning to a different world than you left. War has changed things. You might find support amongst a government in exchange for what you know. If you wish this I won’t hold it against you. Beware, as that same government may decide that they can take answers from you how they wish, without your consent! You are freed men, and your future will be up to you. Start your new lives better than I did.”

I dismissed them and yelled for my crew to muster, which they did on the decks of both the Death’s Consort and the Final Internment. “Now for all you who are staying, listen well! You are my crew, and I am your Captain! I expect your loyalty, and I promise it will be deserved! I



expect your hard-working service, and promise it will be rewarded! I am your Captain, and I will rule over you. I will do so justly, and to that end I am appointing officers and advisors.

“Gnaraugh! You will continue to be my war-leader. You will be in command of the warriors and fighters under me.” Gnar bellowed in acknowledgement and acceptance of the role.

“Sadeo, you will continue to be my chief artilleryist, and are promoted to lieutenant.” The kitsune pressed his fist to his chest and nodded.

“Drese will be my medical officer.” It was a formal title to go with his current job, but formalities mattered. Structure was more important as the crew grew, and I had two ships to manage.

“Rhistel will serve as the commander of the Death’s Consort whenever I am not on board. To assist him with naval matters, I am appointing Travis as his second in command.”

It was a big promotion for Travis, but I was needed aboard the Final Internment if she was to have any hope of keeping a straight heading. Travis was an outsider and loyal to me, which should help whenever I wasn’t on board. He was also a very handy seaman, which were in short supply among my crew currently. My crew composition was ironic, I used to have a crew full of sailors and a dearth of fighters but now the opposite was true. Thankfully I could mitigate that by summoning crew.

“These command structures will have subordinate positions that I will discuss with my lieutenants. In addition to these command positions, I also appoint Gerald and Hali as advisors.

“There are many more positions to be filled. Some of you will be chosen and expected to step up. I will see to it that if you fill a position you lack experience in that you are groomed into it. I am not an unreasonable taskmaster. If you have a quarrel with my decisions or with anyone else, you are to bring the matter to your superior. If you do not feel your superior has addressed it you may bring the matter to me, though do not do so lightly!”

I gazed over my assembled crew as the sun disappeared, and we stood under the light of the two moons.

“This is a new beginning, gentlemen, in a world where the battle lines are being drawn wider and wider. Let’s make a difference!”