

HEROES OF TIME LEGENDS

A NOVEL OF THE HEROES OF TIME SERIES

MURDOCH'S CHOICE

BY WAYNE D. KRAMER

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Revised First Edition

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PROLOGUE

CENTERPIECE

6/33/3201 P.A.

Fiddles and flutes trilled like the skipping of children, punctuated by lively drumbeat. Men guffawed in raucous laughter and clapped the shoulders of comrades, and enough mulled drinks had been consumed to poison the ocean. Here, upon the rooftop terrace of The Wayward Sailor's Inn, it was just another celebration of old salts and jolly tars from the seafaring mercantile guild.

Starlina Murdoch was neither a salt nor a tar. She wasn't old or particularly jolly. She was simply here, hoping to prevent disaster.

She flipped long, brown hair with streaks of light blue away from her lean, well-tanned face, a wineglass steadied in her other hand. With a piercing glare, she looked throughout the gala, scanning the cluster of motley riffraff and quietly snorting her distaste.

This was an inn of Warvonnia within the province of Rocknee,

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an old town situated along the kingdom of Tuscawny's eastern coast. Not much had changed here for centuries, and many of its inner workings happened out of the light of day, but at least one of its constants was the simple, subtle charm of a seaside town, with its rich, salty air and its maze of curvy, sloping streets that seemed impossible to navigate save to those who knew them.

Tonight's celebration revolved around the return of one of the guild's most renowned captains: her father, Captain Zale "the Gale" Murdoch of the *Queenie*. The ship had become one of the most famous merchant vessels in the kingdom, if not the entire continent, under her father's command.

It didn't take long for her to spot her father. He stood across the terrace, a stout, boisterous man surrounded by fawning sailors rapt by his every word. Even from this distance she heard his gruff yet gentlemanly voice overpower everything else.

"It was a fish monster alright, with arms like a giant squid and legs like a frog. As soon as one appeared on deck, I speared it with a pike like a pickled herring and launched it from the ballista!" Those around him stared agog, as though in the presence of greatness incarnate. He lifted his hands to calm their apparent adulation. "Not saying I'm a hero. Just saved my entire crew *and* our bounty, like any captain worth his salt should do. We slayed the rest of those gilled demons right there on stern in glorious victory." He raised his arms high. "And I said, 'Men, tonight we dine on *fish!* Ah ha ha ha!"

Shaking her head, Starlina downed the rest of her honey-mulled wine, relishing its smooth yet spicy bite.

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She wasn't really here for her father, nor was she here for the hearty libation.

She was here to see the best friend that her father was already stealing from her.

Jensen Karrack, a young man of sixteen, and Starlina had known each other since childhood. Their relationship was a coy evolution beyond friendship—an innocent hand-hold here, a little shoulder-rub there, arms touching in the tavern when seated among other friends. They finished too many of each other's sentences, laughed just a little too much at each other's jokes. Starlina loved every bit of it.

Attending this *soirée* had been a last-minute decision. She hadn't told Jensen she was coming, and already she wondered if it was a mistake. So far she hadn't even spotted him among the scallywags ambling about the terrace, some steadier than others.

Jensen had talked often about sailing. It wasn't until recently, as he approached university age, that Starlina realized how serious he was about pursuing it for his actual career. That didn't make it inevitable, nor was it easily accomplished. Long-haul sailing positions in Warvonia's guild were in high demand, especially with the most successful crews. Most likely he would have to accept something less elite, perhaps at the harbor, or something administrative.

Then came the opportunity of Jensen's lifetime. It jostled Starlina to the soul.

He'd won a contest, besting dozens of other seafaring student hopefuls. This granted him an opportunity that didn't usually

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come until well along in the university program—the opportunity for firsthand experience aboard an actual ship of the guild.

By some horrid knife-twist of fate, Jensen was able to choose her father's ship.

Supposedly they'd sailed just beyond the edge of the Great Crescent. Supposedly they'd battled gyllians—giant mythical fish monsters, slaying every one. Supposedly they'd plucked ambrosial grapes straight from the Ethereal Realm, parted the waves with their valor, and snuffed the fires of Gheol with naught but their unfathomable bravery. With sailors, who really ever knew what to believe?

Starlina took another glass of wine from a passing servant's tray and leaned against the stone plinth of a statue as she sipped. At this vantage point, she was a few steps higher than the main terrace, giving her a broad view of the attendees. She sighed and glared at the statue's face. It was of a sea captain, pointing his cutlass in the direction of the ocean.

She frowned at the scene before her. She had been certain Jensen would be here.

Swirling her glass absently, it occurred to her that she was likely the youngest one here. With her fifteenth birthday less than six months away, she was nearly of the “young adult” age class. She already felt mature beyond her years. She lived alone, bused tables to support herself, rarely saw her parents, and knew her limits with wine better than most of the tipplers roaming this place.

She downed that glass and grabbed another.

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Her mother had left months ago, supposedly for Sharm in the south. Good riddance, as far as Starlina was concerned. They'd had little more than fight after fight over her mother's destructive life choices with countless men. It was a relief when her mother finally left Warvonian. Starlina still wished the best for her, that she might find a better way for herself in a different place, although she doubted it.

The four hundred twenty-five days of each of Starlina's fourteen years already felt like a long slog toward adulthood. There were exceptions, of course. There was the time she spent with Jensen, when twenty-eight hours never seemed long enough for just one day.

Her reverie was broken by her father's roaring voice as it carried across the terrace.

"Blubberpots, sots, and jigglequeens, every one of 'em! *Ah ha ha! Pop-Pop!*" He did some goofy little jig that earned endless claps and chuckles from everyone around.

Starlina rolled her eyes and looked away, beyond the inn, where below stretched a calm and deserted plaza, one of many that was relatively unchanged since feudal times. Soon enough that plaza would be filled with the boisterous din of drunken sailors stumbling away from this place.

She'd been here long enough. Maybe it was time to give up on her hopes of talking some sense into Jensen. She took another sip of wine.

"*Another* glass, milady?" spoke a luscious voice from behind her. "Shall I arrange a carriage for your safe return home?"

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She gave a lopsided smirk and spun to face the source. There stood Jensen, staring at her with those beautiful hazelnut eyes that had hypnotized her since their childhood. His brownish hair had hints of muted yellow throughout, and his lean, square face had a handsome, angular jawline.

He still smelled like the sea, like a sailor—salty, rugged, with hints of heedless adventure. Not a bad scent, necessarily, but it stoked a sense of urgency within Starlina. She was already losing him.

“A carriage for two, Mister Karrack, so that you may whisk me away from this place at once.”

Maybe that was a little direct, but she wanted his attention. She wanted him alone with her, away from all of *this*.

He raised an eyebrow. “*Mister Karrack?*” He shook his head, looking dejected. “And I thought we had at least achieved a first-name basis, Miss Murdoch.”

She fixed him with a glare, about to respond when a portly, glossy-skinned man pushed between them with a guttural belch. Her mouth fell open in disgust as she watched the man hobble away.

“Jensen,” she said sharply, “let’s find someplace less obnoxious. A stroll on the beach, perhaps, or the market square, or even the harbor.”

He laughed. “So soon? The fun is just beginning!”

She sat her half-emptied glass upon the statue’s stone plinth. “I’ve had quite enough of sailors for one night, thank you. All I can smell in the air here are sweat and alcohol.”

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“It’s not so bad once you get used to it.”

Starlina and Jensen turned at the sound of her father’s coarse laughter bellowing into the air.

“The guy just looked at me and said, ‘I never met a bridge I didn’t burn!’ *Ah ha ha ha!*” Cackles erupted all around him like a pack of hyenas.

“Well,” she said, turning back to an amused Jensen, “I suppose I don’t *want* to get used to it.”

There was a flicker of conflict in his face, but it vanished with a stroke of his goatee. “You should’ve seen us out there, Starlina.” Now he was outright giddy. “Fog everywhere, utter stillness, just us out there in a quiet cove right at the mouth of the Border Crescent, where the prize rested in an underwater cave. The *Border Crescent*, Starlina, on my very first voyage!

“And then they came—the gyllians. They’re *real*, as real as badger anthropods. They actually *climbed* up the ship, some of them even to the deck. Your father’s crew . . .” He paused, overtaken with awe, drawing a breath. “. . . they’re true fighters. Those monsters were vicious, like nothing I’ve ever seen. I actually took down one with a hatchet.”

She gaped at him. “That sounds absolutely horrific!”

“If only you could’ve seen your father! He spiked one like a kabob and bolted it from the aft ballista!”

Starlina hardened her stare. “So I’ve heard.”

This was worse than she’d thought. Now he’d triumphed in the face of true danger. What ambitious sea-bitten young man could resist *that*?

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Of course, the excitement was fresh. Her father and Jensen had been away for nearly a month, returning just two days ago. She'd already grown up wishing her father could simply disavow the seafaring trade. Was she now destined to wish the same of Jensen?

It's this town, she seethed inwardly. Boys enamored with the ocean since childhood, like some vast rite of passage, as if everything else were meant for lesser folk.

Jensen looked out toward the lower terrace, where they could still hear her father's laughter. "Even here, your father is quite the centerpiece."

"So that's it, then?" asked Starlina. "You'll be joining my father's crew, sailing off into the great beyond?"

"That's far from official, and anything could happen over my time at university. I can't deny being excited, though, for I think my chances are much greater having joined in that voyage."

Starlina flashed him a glare. "Why must every man in this town take to the sea? Is there not enough to be done here upon the land?"

Jensen chuckled dismissively. "Let the land be for those who like their vision hampered. Give *me* a clear horizon—the promise of adventure and discovery!"

"Overrated tosh, if you ask me." If not for the dark, he might've seen the heat rising in her face. "I don't think I could ever be with a man in the seafaring guild." She ignored the sudden concern in Jensen's eyes. "They're far too absent."

"Some voyages are long," he said, "and some are short. But

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they come with great reward, and is it not true that time apart makes the heart grow fonder?”

“Time apart leaves the heart to ponder, more like.”

“Well,” said Jensen, “*I* think you should keep an open mind. If I one day get to join with your father’s crew . . . Well, there’s none closer to reaching the guild’s mastery bar. Imagine he *does* reach it. I could be one of the few sailors in history to be part of a crew under grandmaster status. We can take fewer jobs . . . and the best jobs.”

It was Starlina’s turn to laugh. The mastery bar was basically a guild-wide goal, more like a challenge, set by the officials. Reaching it was like trying to reach a rock from out of Eliorin’s planetary rings. “They raise that bar every year! You might just grow old chasing after it. All they do is make it so no one could ever hope to achieve it.”

“Your father will,” Jensen replied with an air of finality.

There would be no arguing with Jensen. Ever since he was old enough to know what sailing was, it seemed, he had idolized her father. Maybe Jensen was a lost cause after all.

“There are plenty of sea-related occupations that don’t require sailing, you know.”

He tittered uncomfortably. “A little late for me to change course now.”

She arched an eyebrow. “It’s only the thirty-third of Jervens. Plenty of time to make a change.” His seventeenth birthday was fast approaching, on the fifth of Jovidor, only a few short weeks until those hoping to be students would declare their desired

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disciplines before a panel of university professors.

Jensen looked dreamily toward the planet's rings in the sky. In the hazy air, they illuminated the terrace in an almost ghostly nightglow. "After that last voyage, I'm all but certain to earn admission."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

He ran a hand gently through her hair. She inhaled at the touch. "Ah, Starlina, I so long for the day when you can join me upon a ship. Then you might see how truly majestic it is."

She shoved his hand aside. "I've been on a boat before, Jensen."

"Not with *me* on it," he said with a wink.

She stabbed him with a sharp glare. "I'll stay on solid ground, thank you, where humans are meant to be."

"Then you've decided upon your own university declaration?"

She hadn't, but she still had time for that. "I suspect it shall be whatever keeps my feet firmly upon the land, sir. Something here in Warvonía. I'll make this town so striking that the eyes of every citizen can't help but aim within, instead of toward the ocean." Starlina loved all forms of design—fashion, architectural, interior—and so she imagined her career aspirations leaning in that direction.

"Anything might develop for me while you're away for weeks and months on end," she added before he could comment. "It might be time for me to leave this old place. Miskunn might suit me better . . . or Ruca, with a view of the palace."

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“You could go anywhere, Starlina, and it will always be my mission to find you there, if even to view your beauty from afar.”

Curse him to the fires of Gheol, she thought. He’s completely unflappable.

Her icy countenance melted into a thin smile. “You would, too . . . and I’d be all for it, waiting for you like a fool.”

Lute and cello chords sang out, whilst kettledrums pounded a beat. Brightly dressed minstrels in an upraised gallery took over to liven up the occasion.

Jensen held out a hand. “I hope your feet aren’t planted *too* firmly. Care to dance?”

She took his hand, he took her waist, and together they floated about the terrace like youthful swans on a lake. As children they had danced together countless times to music much like this. Yet, as Jensen’s strong hands clasped her sides and twirled her with such control, suddenly the dance felt anything but childish.

For countless songs they spun and glided about, until nearly an hour had passed like a few minutes. Everything around her disappeared, all of it a trifling blur. She saw only Jensen.

Finally, the music stopped, leaving Starlina breathless in Jensen’s arms. Shouts and laughs and conversation of the gala again reigned around them. Her attention was only on him. He held more than her sides. He held her heart. In truth, he always had. If only she could make him see the joys of life—life with *her*—without so itinerant a job as sailing . . . then all could be perfect.

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Jensen released her. "You've only gotten better at that," he said.

She drew in a breath. "As have you, good sir."

"I have something for you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a polished gemstone like pinkish-purple glass. "This is lilac kuntupite. It's said to align the hearts and souls of people who care for each other over great distances. Might be a load of rubbish, but who knows? I got a pair of them from a friend in the guild. So, now I have one . . . and so do you."

She took the stone and looked it over, not quite knowing how to react. It was a genuine gesture, but with it came again that promise of "great distances," a constant she'd already had to endure growing up with Zale Murdoch as her father.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Thank you."

Their moment was interrupted by her father's voice, which had a remarkable ability to carry a broad distance.

"Let's hang 'em first and *then* have the trial!" The men around him were in stitches, their faces red, likely as much from the drinking as the laughing.

"*That* silly man will be the one to break the mastery bar?" she asked. "And I thought *I* was the one who's had too much wine."

"He will, alright. You just wait and see. Your father's unstoppable. Captain Zale 'the Gale' Murdoch—the man, the scourge, the legend." The nut-brown eyes of his dashing face looked into hers. He moved closer, very close, his face inching toward hers.

She jolted back, despite the playful smirk tugging at her

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mouth. “You haven’t asked my blessing to approach like that.”

He stopped, only a breath between them. “Sailors don’t ask questions. They take action.”

He kissed her cheek and walked away, Starlina’s heart racing and her mouth grinning from ear to ear.

CHAPTER 1
THE GALE

7/19/3203 P.A.

There comes a time for any ruthless seafarer at the top of his game, once well along in years, to set aside the rough-and-tumble manner of his occupation and gird himself with the kinder, gentler mien of the Pop-Pop.

Captain Zale “the Gale” Murdoch was no small amount of man. Just shy of fifty-five years old, he had grown and shaped himself a magnificent ale-gut, a solid round and impenetrable protrusion. A thin carpet of cropped, silvery brown and auburn hair covered his head and flowed into the whitening hairs all about his face. His legs were thin and his wrists were small, but he had all the muscle he needed. His greatest muscle, after all, was his brain.

Lola, his darling wife, stood just behind him. She was well-built and broad-shouldered, the sort who could stack two mounds of firewood in the dead of winter while tending a pot of stew and scouring the tub all at the same time. She had dark,

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discreetly graying hair and an endearing round face.

They approached the home in which Lola's daughter lived with her husband and children. It was a modest abode of sand-colored bricks, situated in Warvonia's southwestern residential district.

Zale was just in from yet another profit-rich voyage sure to be the envy of every other merchant in the guild. A self-satisfied smirk stretched his broad, whiskery face. He would have his reward.

But that was no matter now. What mattered now was beyond the humble, wooden door before him. He pushed it open with a flourish, ready to demand the tribute he'd so rightfully earned.

"Give ol' Pop-Pop a smooch!" He belted out a belly laugh, shaking his girth. Squeals of delighted children welcomed him.

Four children to be exact, and not just any children. His granddaughters. Fawn was age nine, Sage was age six, and little Nova was turning four on this very day. Hazel, reaching out and babbling from within her mother's arms, was not yet two.

"Oooh, I hear someone's having a birthday!" Zale teased.

"Me! Me!" piped Nova. She had bouncing pigtails of white and golden hair.

Zale stooped low to accept the incoming barrage of hugs and kisses. Ecstatic little arms yanked him beyond the threshold.

Lola followed him in and eagerly accepted her own bounty of cuddles.

"Grammie Gangy!" greeted Fawn.

"Well hello . . . and happy birthday, Nova!" Lola replied.

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Zale took care not to stumble as the kids pulled him farther in.

The lower half of his left leg was composed entirely of graphenite, a dark-gray metal-gemstone alloy considered to be one of the strongest and lightest available. Rarely was it spared for the needs of an ordinary civilian, but Zale was anything but ordinary. He'd proven his service to the crown time and time again, starting with over two decades in Tuscawny's naval Sea Force, years spent with obsequious buffoons who specialized more in bootlicking than navigating vessels. He bested his nitwit shipmates at every turn, whether rigging a ship for prompt departure or locking blades with marauders.

Things got interesting when the seafaring mercantile guild sought him out.

The pay would be better, the work more exciting, and he'd be among true professionals. Unlike the mercantile guilds of other provinces, crews from Rocknee, and more specifically its prominent port city of Warvonnia, were often entrusted with the most specialized and rare of cargo runs.

It became almost an afterthought to Zale that this was one of the kingdom's iffier mercantile guilds. Most assumed it was a guild of criminals—bootleggers, privateers, and smugglers sanctioned by the crown to sail their private vessels, without the colors of their land, and retrieve the kingdom's less-than-virtuous bounties. Zale saw it as a guild of the competent.

He received a quick lesson in the magnitude of his new charge during one of his earliest assignments, a secretive mission

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of military import. As his ship approached the jagged sea stacks of Aviania, just outside the Great Crescent, their ship was attacked by terons, bipedal winged creatures that could best be described as humanoid dragons. Few in the kingdom had ever actually seen these creatures. With talons like giant fishhooks and teeth like spearheads, they were like things of legend.

Zale fared the worst in the encounter, his leg ripped beyond saving. He never even knew what they had come for.

The guild showed remarkable diligence in arranging to have his limb rebuilt. Medical breakthroughs, it turned out, were quite possible for those whom the officials deemed worthy of the resources. With his new leg, Zale felt stronger than ever before, like something more than a mere man.

He returned to action in full pomp and circumstance, sailing from port in his new ship, the *Queenie*, one of the sleekest, fastest, and well-outfitted square-riggers to scale the seas, named after what Zale proclaimed to be the greatest cat that ever lived. He chose a gilded, roaring teron as its figurehead, touting his survival of that voyage past.

The great tale of Pop-Pop's metallic leg was a favorite of the grandchildren's.

Technically these were grandchildren only by marriage, the daughters of Lola's only child, Haly, and her husband, Dane. That made them no less family to Zale. They were every bit as much so as even his own daughter, Starlina, borne by a woman of his wilder past. For a while he wasn't sure which one. He had no children with Lola, but she had every assurance of being the only

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woman for him till death. With this gal, he was convinced that he actually meant it.

He relished the bliss of Nova's birthday party, enjoying great food and conversation. He lowered himself into an armchair, the kids clambering all around.

"So, a birthday!" Zale spoke grandly, taking Nova into his lap. "How old are you—two? Three?"

"Four!" Nova insisted, holding up three fingers. Fawn corrected her hand by lifting one more of her fingers. "Four! Four! Four!"

"Oh, it can't be! *Four* years?" He turned to Lola. "Can it be, sweet Dwoey?"

"It can," sweet Dwoey confirmed.

"Let's see. Born in 3199, on this nineteenth of Jovidor . . . with this year being 3203 . . . By the stars! You *are* four!"

Sage, a round-faced jewel with wavy locks and sheer joy in her gait, thrust a wooden sauropod toy in his face. "Sing the song, Pop-Pop! Sing the song!"

Zale chuckled as another of his many gifts garnered the appreciation of present company. He took the toy in one hand and conducted the tune with his other, as his pleasantly coarse voice sang out:

Diplodor the Dinosaur,
he went down to the knickknack store.
Got some snacks and a whole lot moooooore!
Diplodor the Dinosaur.

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Once, of course, was never enough, so he repeated the song three times more before finally giving ol' Diplodor the sendoff. He joined his family in mirthful laughter, thanking the divinity of Eloh for the gift of this joyful respite before seeking his next adventure.



Warvonía was oft considered the gem of Tuscawny's eastern coast. Largely unchanged for hundreds of years, many of the town's outermost structures and walls were composed of old stone blocks quarried from the Monarch Mountains in the south. Red-roofed turrets prodded at the sky from its ancient wall towers and gatehouses. Farther inside the town, colorful, half-timbered houses lined narrow, cobblestone streets. At the locale's nucleus was an expansive town square famous for its aisles of market booths, which throughout the year were themed to seasons and holidays.

It was here that nineteen-year-old Jensen Karrack chanced a chance meeting with Zale Murdoch that was, in fact, not really chance at all.

Jensen sought Captain Murdoch's blessing to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage.

He had played this moment in his mind countless times. Even so, his palms were sweaty and his heart raced. He couldn't quite pinpoint why he was so nervous. Starlina and he plainly

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loved each other. They had for years. It had never been abundantly clear how the captain felt about this relationship. He had, at least, never spoken out against it.

Of course, he had never spoken out in favor of it, either.

Perhaps Jensen's nerves came simply from the fear of rejection. Perhaps he feared rejection in the form of being hung from the *Queenie's* rigging or drowned in a barrel of brine.

Then there was his career to consider. Securing his position in Captain Murdoch's crew between his final two terms at the university had taken no small amount of persistence. The captain and other shipmates had seen his proficiency with weapons. High marks in helmsmanship from his instructors had empowered him to seek the role of boatswain's mate, while his skills in carpentry had helped to seal the deal.

Now he just hoped he wasn't about to put all of that in jeopardy.

But it had to be done—it was simply the proper way—and so here he was.

He already knew, thanks to a tip from one of his shipmates, that the legendary captain would be here today. Nervously he stood at the end of one of many streets spilling into the town square, running a hand through his brown-and-buttercream hair and stroking the goatee on his chin.

Finally, he saw his target. Captain Murdoch, dressed in a dark-red tunic and off-white trousers, strolled alone toward the market booths. Inhaling a deep breath, Jensen stepped lively into the bustling town center.

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"Captain!" he called out, his voice cracking a little. "What a coincidence seeing you here!"

Murdoch turned with a scowl. His eyes softened with recognition, although the look wasn't exactly a cordial greeting. "Afternoon, Jensen."

"Gathering some essentials, sir?" Jensen cursed inwardly at this weak attempt at small talk.

"That's what the market is good for, so I hear," Murdoch replied.

"Uh . . . yes, sir. That it is."

Jensen followed Murdoch toward an aisle of produce stands, all freshly spread with the season's latest bounties. Summer, sub-season of harvest, had ended with the start of Jovidor, and the fall sub-season had begun. Indeed, crops had produced aplenty, with baskets of colorful berries, piles of melons, and carts overflowing with peppers, cultivar beans, and all manner of vegetables.

The captain paused to pick through a cart of apples. "What're *you* after?" he finally asked, not taking his eyes off the fruit.

"Hmm, yes, an apple will do nicely," Jensen stammered.

He grabbed the first apple within reach and absently handed the merchant a five-lat coin.

Murdoch turned and walked off.

"Actually, sir . . . I'd like a word, if you please."

The captain's stony expression remained unchanged. "Well, we *are* both here, after all."

Jensen's mouth felt very dry. "Sir . . . it's about your daughter,

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Starlina. As you know, we've known each other since childhood, and we have grown into fine young women—uh, woman—rather, *she* has grown into a fine young woman . . . sir." Murdoch's agog expression bore into him. "I find that I'm . . . well, I'm in love with her, sir. I've a mind to propose marriage. I'd hoped I might have your blessing."

Murdoch looked him up and down. Jensen wondered if this might be a good time to turn around and run. He watched for the captain's reaction, hoping he hadn't signed his own death warrant.

Murdoch's mouth fell open. "*Bah hahahahaha!*"

A few passersby flinched at the sound, widening the space between them.

"You're a fanciful one, Jensen. Never forget—the sea is an unyielding place. See that your earnest whims and callow impulses don't get the better of you."

His mouth frozen agape, Jensen watched Zale Murdoch disappear into the market crowd.



Nova's birthday two days prior still replayed merrily in Zale's mind as he made his way toward The Wench's Tavern. He took in a sliver of nighttime sky as he walked the streets, Eliorin's planetary rings painting a bright band across the starry tapestry. Despite being nestled along one of the town's lesser-traveled

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alleys, the tavern tended to host some of the land's most travel-seasoned patrons. It was the preferred hunting ground for new mercantile work, and it was one of very few places where those seeking Zale knew they might eventually find him.

Their next job would be especially important.

Zale's crew was but one solid catch away from breaking the guild's mastery bar, a goal set every year by the guilders. It was a number based on the value of a crew's lifetime catch. Every year, of course, it only increased, always pushing more hopefuls out of the running. Zale and his crew were already well beyond goals of the past. To reach this goal granted the crew's captain "grandmaster" status. Reaching the goal was practically unheard of, with the exception of certain legendary crew masters of the past. With it came the promise of greater authority within the guild, quota flexibility, and riches aplenty.

The rules of the bar were clear: only one crew would ever be awarded grandmaster status within a given year, and they had until the end of August to do it. After that, the bar would be moved again.

This year Zale's crew was especially close. One more run of reasonably high value would do it. With this being the twenty-first of Jovidor, they still had just shy of nine weeks before the current goal expired.

Zale threw open the tavern door like a gust of wind, blowing the room into a curious silence. His eyes surveyed the environs as he took measured, clomping steps toward the bar counter in the back.

The Gale

“*The Gale.*”

“*Zale the Gale.*”

“*Murdoch, Captain ‘the Gale’ himself.*”

His name traveled throughout the room in a chorus of whispers—music to his ears. He pulled a chair at the bar and sat with a groan, the room behind him returning to its usual din of chatter and thumping mugs.

When the barkeep arrived, Zale greeted him with a polite smile. “Dark stout ale for me, good sir. Thank you.”

His drink arrived in tandem with a lanky man in a long, dark coat. He had a lean, almond-shaped face and short, dusty-blond hair.

Zale kept his eyes forward as he lifted the glass for a drink. “Evening, Dippy.”

“Good evening, sir.”

Dippy was first mate of the *Queenie*, essentially an extension of Zale when it came to finding new jobs and, if needed, additional crewmembers. Dippy wasn’t his real name, of course. His real name was Daubernoun. He looked like a Dippy to Zale, and so Dippy he became.

“What’s the report?” Zale asked.

“A few private jobs,” Dippy replied. “Some collectors seeking rare minerals like gold-veined lapis and green moonstone.”

Zale raised an unimpressed brow. “Lapis? Do they take us for land-rats? Tell him to go up the coast into Korangar, and turn left at Boring Town. Luxorite I’d have found interesting, for a zesty chance at bilking foreign royalty.”

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There was a loud *thump* across the room, accompanied by a frenzy of shuffled chairs. A man fell to the floor, completely still. In this place, it was just as likely to be from drunkenness as poison. A bald man wearing a frock coat leapt to his side.

Zale was about to turn back to his drink. In spite of himself, he kept watching.

The bald man seemed to be tending to the man on the floor. He leaned in close, placing his hands delicately on the man's head and chest.

"Bizarre," Zale muttered.

The bald man looked up and made eye contact with Zale. Seconds later, the fallen man gasped, scrambled to his feet, and stumbled out the exit.

Dippy pointed toward the spectacle. "Did that guy just heal that other guy?"

The bald man stood slowly and went back to his table as though nothing had happened.

Zale took a swig of ale. Strange sights were not uncommon here in the tavern.

"What other jobs, Dippy?" he asked.

"There's another seeking quandalite."

Zale scratched at the thick stubbles of his chin. "Don't hear that one every day. Does he have the lyra to show for it?"

Dippy faltered a bit. "Says he's willing to pay more than market . . . but only with a ten percent deposit."

"Bah ha!" bellowed Zale with a slap of the counter. "Hire the Gale on such nominal dosh? And my papa's Grimy the Grimkin."

The Gale

“Well, I thought you’d say that.” Dippy ran a hand through his hair. “There is one more, Captain. Fella claims to represent nobility, here on business for the Palace.”

Zale frowned. “Curious case. Are you sure about this? *The Palace—Metsada Palace?*”

Metsada Palace was the kingdom’s prime seat of governance, home to King Berosus Sar-Utultar and the legendary Throne of Light. The palace itself rested upon a star-shaped plateau said to have been formed by the divine using bolts of lightning. Zale, along with many others, assumed this to be just part of a larger narrative which insisted upon the King’s divine right to the Throne.

“Does he claim to come *from* the Palace?” Zale asked.

“Says he’s from Brumm, actually.”

“Brumm?” This was a different story. The Palace was located in the province of Sharm, just south of Brumm, and between them coursed the rugged Ba’ar Mountains. It wasn’t extremely far from Metsada Palace as the starling flies, but getting there was no quick jaunt.

On top of that, citizens of Brumm, compared to Sharm and Rocknee, were generally stereotyped as less refined. Their nobility, on the other hand, was a class all to its own—ruthless, always on the lookout for the most proper and sincere ways to stab each other in the throat, all for the sake of position and power. Brumm nobles looked down on those from the other provinces, rarely deigning to meet in-person. Instead, hired goons were sent to do their bidding.

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Zale went back to his mug with a throaty chuckle. "Ask him why he married his sister."

Dippy's eyeballs darted back and forth. "Captain . . . I think this one might be serious."

"Go on, man! Ask him!"

Zale watched as Dippy took timid steps away from the counter and stopped at a table by the farthest wall. Zale had already dismissed this prospect as codswallop. Seated there was a very plain man in very plain civilian clothes. He looked frail amongst this tavern of burly louts. His face was pallid, his black and white hair slicked back, his garb a simple brown suit.

Dippy asked the question. Zale took another gulp from his mug. *Insolent hound*, he thought. *Serves you right for wasting the Gale's time.*

The man's dark scowl caused such a transformation in his face that even Zale flinched. His words to Dippy seemed sharp and pithy. Dippy looked as though the man had just pointed a knife at his chest.

A minute later Dippy scampered his way back toward Zale. This time he motioned to the barkeep for an ale of his own.

"Well, that looked eventful," said Zale.

"He doesn't have a sister." When the ale appeared, he took a long drink. "What he did say is that he knows you have a wife, a daughter, a stepdaughter, and four grandchildren in the vicinity of Warvonía."

Fury filled Zale so fast that his vision blurred. "*What?!*"

Men at the nearest tables shifted their chairs uncomfortably.

The Gale

Dippy leaned in. “Captain, please listen. This guy seems well-connected. He might be for real. He seems dangerous.”

Zale considered that. It often held that the dangerous men were the more serious ones. “What’s the job?” Zale rumbled.

“Says he’ll talk only with you. But he did tell me it’s enough to pass the bar . . . and he’s already talked to ol’ Seadread.”

Hearing mention of his long-time rival only galled Zale all the more. Captain Garrick “Seadread” Rummy—or Captain Puffypants, as Murdoch often called him—was also within striking range of the mastery bar this year. *Cheating ratbag*, Zale seethed at the thought. He was certain Garrick had somehow bribed the guilders into boosting his tally.

Zale downed the remainder of his ale and pushed back from the bar counter with a guttural moan.

“Look alive, Dippy. Let’s see what we’re dealing with.”

They went straight to the man’s table, Zale leading with a glare fit to kill.

“Captain Murdoch,” the man greeted with a tilt of his head, his voice like slick oil. “I’m pleased to see I finally garnered your attention.”

Zale eyed a black amulet around the man’s neck as he sat down, skipping the formality of a handshake. “To Gheol with your pleasure. Why are you speaking of my family?”

“Relax,” the man replied coolly. “We all need our edge, Captain . . . and mine is knowledge.” He motioned for a server. “Let’s have drinks. Wine, perhaps?”

“Ale for me,” Zale replied. “Helps me think.”

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“Make that two,” said Dippy.

A young male server arrived, and the man ordered. “Two of your . . . standard-fare ales . . . and a glass of Eidyn oak-leaf for me, chilled.” The server left them. “It is good you came to speak with me. I am here to make the choice of your next job much easier.”

Zale raised an eyebrow. “Life is full of choices. I always say, choose the one with the best payoff.”

The man cocked his head to the side. “Indeed.”

“My associate tells me you’re affiliated with nobility,” Zale said. “I can’t help but feel a bit . . . skeptical.”

“Guild Chief Dugard Pratt can affirm my station, should you feel the need. By the time we’re through here, I rather doubt you will.”

Zale stared at the man. Not only was he supposedly from across the kingdom, but now it seemed he had some familiarity with Warvonía’s leadership.

“Who are you?” Zale demanded.

“I am Vidimir Tefu.”

Zale paused, waiting for more. Finally, he said, “Should that name mean something to us?”

Vidimir looked amused, his smarmy grin reminiscent of a triangle. “The name of Tefu is among the Great Lineage delineated in the accords of our province. But I’m sure a fully dedicated seaman such as yourself has little time for the inner workings of nobility.”

Zale grunted. “Why would a man from Brumm in league

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with nobility venture all the way out to our quaint seaside village?”

The server returned with their drinks. Vidimir waited for him to leave before continuing. “I come to your town, because in the entire Grandtrilia continent, there is no stronger band of seafaring . . . *merchants* . . . to be found.”

“Flattered,” Zale replied. “So, what are we after here, fine silks? High-value minerals? A nice trinket for your baron’s sitting room?”

Vidimir swirled his wine and took a delicate sip. “This is of far greater importance than our baron, Captain. More than the capital baron . . . more than the grand vizier . . . more, even, than the king himself. This concerns the heart of our realm, the divine blessing bestowed upon the Patriarch when the days of the Shadow Age were chased away.”

“Now you speak of fable,” Dippy chimed in. “Shadow Age doomsayer, Cap’n. Mayhaps we *should* let Seadread take this one.”

Zale nodded. “I’m inclined to agree. Believe what you will about the Shadow Age. If that’s what this is about, we don’t have the luxury of chasing mythical trifles.”

“This concerns the Light of the Land itself,” Vidimir said.

The Light of the Land was an energy source, said to be within a holy hall of the Palace. It was established long before even the kingdom’s existence, as a sort of blessing upon the land from the Ethereal Realm during cataclysmic days of the past. It’s what many believed gave the entire Grandtrilia continent, of

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which Tuscawny was a part, its right to exist.

Vidimir continued. "Divine benediction might have been vital in the days of Birqu Umis and our conquering kings of the past. But, it would seem, the divine is moving on, and the blessing that once ensured our stability now wavers. The once-stalwart brightness of Zophiel's Light, these days, is more like a flicker. It's a matter of time before it gutters out completely."

Zale fixed the man with a hard look. "This sounds more like a matter for the divine than a seafarer. Have you tried praying lately?"

Vidimir sipped his wine, his eyes amused. "Fate is a dogged mistress, Captain. My first whim was to find you here . . . and here we are."

"We tend to prefer bounties a little more on the *tangible* side," Zale said. "*Real*, as it were."

"If money is your concern . . ." Vidimir reached under the table and lifted a canvas bag. He set it down with an unmistakable jingle of coins. ". . . I assure you the reward will be more than enough to shatter your guild's mastery bar. A bar, by the way, which has already been raised."

"Complete blarney!" Dippy yelled, nearly jumping from his seat.

Zale chuckled. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, sir. The bar is never raised till after Agust. Anything else is against the long-standing code of our guild."

Vidimir shrugged. "You'll soon see for yourselves. But I fear you'll find it quite an insurmountable goal in such a short time.

The Gale

That is, unless you accept the offer at hand.”

Zale had to admit, Vidimir’s account was intriguing. He might indeed serve the nobility class and thus possess more knowledge than most about lore surrounding the Light and the kingdom’s foundation, but this claim about the mastery bar was especially hard to believe. For one, why would this man from Brumm know about it before even Zale? It was a matter Zale intended to verify the first chance he got.

“For the sake of humor, what is it you want?” Zale asked.

“The ancient shard of *Ni’shan-qa Til’la-ni’tha* . . . perhaps better known as the Grimstone. It is a fragment of the Great Celestial Entry which ushered in the Shadow Age. In the right hands, the power within this fragment can be harnessed to keep our land stable, even as the Light fades. You are to deliver the Grimstone to me at the port of Miskunn, from which you will sail with undoubtedly the single greatest payout of your career.”

“Dark to replace Light. There’s a twist,” Dippy spoke wistfully.

Indeed, there it was again: the Shadow Age. If someone wanted to cast doubt on the legitimacy of a job, there was almost no better way than to center it around the Shadow Age. Even kingdom historians couldn’t agree that such a time had even existed.

Zale stared into Vidimir’s expressionless face and tapped absently on the table. “Look, we pull in shipments of pyritite for making household fuses. If it’s luminous flocalcite ore you’re after, we’re your crew. We can pillage foreign crops, clear out

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mines, make off with livestock, or find you a nice gulobeast for a pet. You speak in fairy tales, and we're not very good at catching fairies."

Vidimir slid his glass to the side. He lifted his fingers before him, as if he were about to start knitting. Something disturbed the air around his hands, like heat distortion on a sultry day. His index fingers came together with a dark spark, and right before them he drew a tiny, purple rectangle in midair.

With a thrust of his palm through the rectangle, a flare of violet flame ignited upon the table, spreading slowly. Dippy jumped back with his chair. Zale remained still, keeping his hands clear. He expected to feel the normal heat of a fire. This fire radiated an unsettling chill.

Vidimir slammed his hand down upon the flame, extinguishing it. A cold gale of wind rushed through the tavern, momentarily snuffing lights and blowing over his wineglass.

Silence fell in the tavern. Every head turned toward their table.

Zale looked around at the faces staring in their direction. Then he burst out into a great laugh. "*Ah hahahaha!* That's some parlor trick, men!"

The general riffraff returned to their business. Zale spun back around to Vidimir. "Okay, so, is that some odd variety of flamethyst, or ...?"

Vidimir eyed him darkly. "*That* is but a faint glimmer of the energy reminiscent of the Grimstone. In the right hands, the potential of this object is the envy of all lands."

The Gale

“And supposedly where is this object located?” Zale asked.

“This is where I must face embarrassment.” Vidimir stared at the table. “We were hot on the trail, certain we had found the Grimstone’s location.” He looked back up at Zale. “Our crews became lost in a tangle of uncharted islets near their destination. One ship returned in retreat. The other was ambushed by one of the black ships of Gukhan. It was my mistake. The crews I sent were not the best.”

Dippy shuddered. “Gukhan?”

Gukhan was the one nation within the Great Crescent that most sailors went out of their way to avoid. Many crews that sailed too close never returned, and the reclusive Gukhanians were known as being especially hostile to outsiders.

Zale grunted. “Are you trying to help the kingdom or plunge it into a war with hellhounds? We don’t poke at the secretive soldiers of Gukhan. Unwritten rule of survival.”

“A rule or not, the need is real. An opportunity is before you, Mister *‘the Gale.’* Someone will retrieve the Grimstone for me and become a chapter in this land’s redemption.” He pushed back from the table and stood. “Whether or not you are that person is the choice you have to make.” Without so much as a backward glance, Vidimir left the tavern.