

Chapter One

Every winter, for about two or three months, the island of Destan—a small island located south of the much larger Northern Isles, home to a few hundred people, mostly human, with a tiny minority of amphibious aquarians who lived just off the island's shore—was beset by the wrath of Kano. The waves of the Crystal Sea would rise to a height of at least 200 feet (in some cases even larger) and the incessant rain would be enough to drown even an aquarian.

During this time, travel by sea was nigh impossible. Fishermen from the Northern Isles didn't come down to fish and even pirates refused to come down this way during 'murder season,' as it was called, mostly because it seemed like the ocean was trying to murder everyone who dared sail upon its waves.

Most Destanians knew what to do during this time of year. They lashed their boats to their docks or brought them further inland so they wouldn't be swept off into the depths of the ocean, never to be seen again; brought in or tied down any other physical possessions they usually kept outside, and stayed inside their homes almost all day every day. Worship services at the Temple of Kano were often put on hold during this time, which Kinker Dolan, an old fisherman who had spent his entire life on Destan, found rather amusing.

No sane person would ever go out onto the Crystal Sea at this point, especially in a tiny little fishing boat that could be capsized easily. Even large ships rarely strayed into the area at this point. Once, five or six years ago, Kinker remembered seeing an entire fleet of massive battleships from the island of Nikos sink, their entire crews drowning in the terrible ocean. It was a chilling sight, especially the next day, when some of their corpses washed up on shore half-naked and covered in seaweed.

It was an image that stood out in his mind as he rowed his tiny fishing boat, creaking and groaning, out into the darkness of the night. His old bones ached and moaned every time he was splashed with the cold water of the ocean, which was to say they ached and moaned all the time.

Kinker ignored his bones. This was the only chance he had of getting off Destan without the Priestly Guard noticing. It was not ideal weather, to be sure (his beard was soaked through and the rowboat's bottom was already filling with water, which he couldn't scoop out right now), but that was exactly why he had chosen this night to make his great escape. Not even the Priestly Guard, with their magic, would dare set sail on these deadly waters at this time of night, not even to capture someone who knew all their darkest secrets.

The only problem was that Kinker had no idea where he was going. He had forgotten his compass back home and the endless rain, the gigantic waves, and the blackness of the night made it impossible to tell where he was or where he was going. He could not even be certain how far he was from Destan, because the sound of the ocean waves crashing against the island's shores was obscured by the rain and lightning that shook the sky.

In addition, Kinker's stomach kept doing back flips every time the ocean waves raised his tiny boat and tossed it. His boat was tossed around so much that Kinker felt like he was a tiny ball being thrown around by a bunch of young, easily-distracted children who were not careful with their toys. He had faith he would survive, however; because before he left Destan he had made a sacrifice to

Kano, the Goddess of the Sea, asking her to protect him and get him to where he needed to go.

Not that he had much time to think or remember what he'd done before he left. He was thrown about once more, this time so violently that both of the oars on his rowboat snapped off and disappeared into the rain and waves. That meant Kinker was totally at the mercy of the sea now.

He gripped the bulwarks of his boat as it rocked back and forth, somehow managing to stay upright despite the weather. His fingers grasped the sides of the boat with a steel grip, but he was all too aware that his capsizing was a when, not an if, and that it would not be long before he found himself sleeping on the bottom of the ocean.

A flash of light disturbed these thoughts, causing Kinker to look up in surprise. He at first thought that his old eyes—which were getting worse every day—were playing tricks on him, but through the wind, rain, and darkness, he spotted what looked like a line of lights not too far from where he was. His first thought was that the lights belonged to the spirits of those who had died at sea, said to travel the Crystal Sea's surface, only appearing to sailors, fishermen, and others when death was at hand.

Then a flash of lightning briefly illuminated the entire area, revealing that the row of lights were not spirits at all but rather lights shining from the side of a large ship.

That wasn't the only thing the lightning revealed, however. It also revealed a gigantic wave—much larger than any that Kinker had ever seen in his entire life—on his port.

Kinker had only a few seconds to register that fact before the wave crashed down on him with the force of thousands of pounds of water, smashing his rowboat into splinters and knocking him out instantly.

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Dying at sea was not as painful a death as one might think. Kinker had spent his whole life on or near the Crystal Sea. He had become a fisherman, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather before him, and had always been aware that the sea was not your friend. Even though he had devoutly worshiped Kano his whole life, Kinker knew better than to let his guard down around the sea. It was an entity, unforgiving and impartial, that would kill you as soon as it would help you.

But now that he thought about it, he wondered if he was really dead at all. Every bone in his body felt like it had been smashed into pieces and he was shivering and cold, which was strange because he had always been taught that death would be feeling-less. As a child, he remembered asking his mother what death would be like and she told him that when he died, he would simply stop feeling because the dead could feel nothing.

In the midst of the pain and coldness, Kinker concluded that he was not yet dead. Somehow, he had survived, but how, he had no idea.

That was when he felt a sharp jolt of pain near his midriff. His eyes flew open as he gasped for air. While he coughed out what felt like the entire Crystal Sea, a chair nearby skittered across the wood floor. Someone with a thick Northern accent said, "He's awake. Quick, get the captain."

Through his waterlogged ears, Kinker heard the sound of another set of feet running, then a door opening and slamming shut. He felt someone put a wet rag on his forehead (that smelled of mold for some reason) and heard the earlier voice say, "How are you, my man? You all right? Feel okay? Can you breathe?"

Kinker blinked several times before his vision became clear enough for him to tell what he was

seeing. A man was standing above him, his eyes twinkling. The man had something hanging off his neck, a necklace, which had a set of multicolored beads on it. The man was probably from the North, because his skin was a darker shade of brown than Kinker's.

“Did you hear me?” said the man. “I asked, can you breathe?”

Kinker nodded slowly. His neck felt like it had been ripped off his shoulders and reattached by someone who didn't know what they were doing. He realized he was lying on a bed; furthermore, he was utterly nude, with only a coarse blanket to cover him.

“Good,” said the man. “When Vashnas pulled you up from the sea, we were certain you were dead. But thank the gods, you're alive.”

Then the man frowned. “Or perhaps not. Our resources are already stretched thin, and I can't imagine the Captain would be very happy if he found out you are still alive.”

Kinker moved his lips, trying to speak, but he only managed a few words because his throat felt like someone had cut it with a long, sharp knife. “Why ... call him ...”

“Hmm?” said the man, leaning down closer. “What'd you say, my friend?”

Kinker didn't think of himself as this man's 'friend,' but he did say, “The Captain ... why call him ... if he doesn't ...”

“Oh, I understand,” said the man, nodding as he stood back up. “Well, the Captain gave us orders to summon him if you woke up. Don't worry, though. I doubt he'll toss you overboard, unless you happen to be a murderer or something.”

Kinker gulped, which was like swallowing a prickly thorn bush. “Who ... are you?”

“Name's Telka Agos,” said the man. “I'm the doctor of this ship. Been keeping you alive, which admittedly has been rather difficult because the medical supplies on this ship are, how should I put it, very bare bones.”

“Clothes,” said Kinker with a cough, “where ... are ... my clothes?”

“Your clothes?” said Telka with a chuckle. “The sea ripped them off your body. You were brought on board the ship completely naked, my friend. Once you're better, though, I have an extra set of clothes you can borrow.”

Despite the pain, Kinker felt extremely embarrassed by the thought that some people had seen him naked. He changed the subject. “Big ship?”

Before Telka could answer, the door slammed open, causing Kinker to look up from the bed he was lying upon.

Another man entered the room, a tall, strapping young man with dirty hair that looked like it was normally well-kept. His skin was as dark as Telka's. Besides that, the two looked radically different. The man who entered wore a long boat cloak that covered his whole body, except for his head, which made it impossible to tell what else he was wearing underneath.

The man strode into the room with an air of authority and command. At his side was an aquarian, perhaps female based on her figure (although Kinker had never been good at guessing aquarian genders). She had to be an aquarian. Her skin looked like fish skin and her head resembled that of a black fish, narrow and with a row of spines running lengthwise. She had webbed hands and wore a jacket that was completely buttoned up. She looked tired, like she had run a mile.

“Captain Malock,” said Telka, saluting the younger man when he saw him, “I see Vashnas told you about the old man awaking.”

“Indeed she did, Telka,” said Captain Malock, stopping at the foot of Kinker's bed as he adjusted his boat cloak. “I was in the middle of lunch, but I wasted no time in getting here when I heard the news.”

“He's breathing,” Telka said. “And even starting to talk a little, but it's pretty obvious that he's still in pain. He may not be able to say much.”

Malock looked at Kinker and said, “Old man, how does your throat feel?”

Kinker put one hand against his throat and said, “Like it was ripped off and nailed back on.”

“But can you still speak?” Malock said.

Kinker swallowed and winced. “A little.”

“A little will do,” said Malock as he walked over to the left side of Kinker's bed.

The Captain pulled up a nearby chair and sat on it. As Malock did so, Telka took a step back, perhaps to give Malock room. The young female aquarian stood by Malock's side, still not saying anything. Kinker wondered if that was because she was silent or simply couldn't speak Northern Common. Either way, he found himself staring at her a bit too long, mostly because he'd never seen an aquarian up close like this before.

Then Malock snapped his fingers. Kinker looked at the Captain. He leaned forward in his chair, his intense eyes borrowing into Kinker's, like he was trying to read Kinker's mind.

“All right, old man,” said Malock. “Let's start with your name. What is it?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because if you don't, I won't hesitate to throw you off this ship and into the ocean,” Malock said. “I'm a humane captain, but I also do whatever is necessary to keep this ship afloat. And if you don't tell me anything about yourself, then I'm afraid we won't have any room for you here.”

Based on the looks that Telka and the female aquarian were giving him, Kinker knew that Malock wasn't joking. Despite his youth, it was clear that the Captain already held the kind of authority over his crew that only the most experienced of captains did. Why, Kinker didn't know, but because he was in no mood for a swim, he decided to talk.

“My name is Kinker Dolan,” said Kinker. He spoke slowly because he realized it hurt his throat less to do that. “I am from the island of Destan.”

Malock quirked an eyebrow and looked at the female aquarian. “Ever head of it?”

The female aquarian nodded. “Yes. It's a small island, the southernmost of the Northern Isles. Its seas are home to a variety of rare fish, but otherwise is an insignificant spit of land in the middle of nowhere.”

Kinker didn't like hearing his home insulted like that, but he noticed how protective Malock seemed to be of the female aquarian, so he decided not to argue.

Instead, he said, “I've told you my name. Now tell me yours.”

Malock brushed some of his dark hair out of his eyes and said, “Fair enough. But I'm surprised you don't already recognize me. My handsome features are renown throughout the Northern Isles, and I am admired by many fine women, even though I have room in my heart for one alone.”

“Well, I am not a fine woman,” Kinker said, “so forgive me if I fail to recognize you on sight.”

Malock sat up straight, puffed out his chest, and said, “My name is Prince Tojas Malock, son of Queen Markinia and King Halock, Crown Prince of the House of Carnag, Captain of the *Iron Wind*, and the Chosen One of Kano.”

He recited all of those titles with the kind of enthusiasm Kinker commonly associated with Priestess Deber, back home, informing the masses of a new message she had received from Kano. Yet none of those titles meant a thing to the old fisherman. Only the last one interested him, but even then, he wasn't sure he wanted to ask because he didn't want to hear Malock drone on about it.

“Well?” said Malock. “Don't you have anything to say?”

Kinker shook his head. “Not really. Most of those titles don't mean a whole lot to me.”

Malock looked so shocked that he almost fell off his chair, but he immediately righted himself and said, “Well, if Destan is as obscure an island as Vashnas says it is, then I suppose it makes sense you wouldn't know about me or Carnag. But you've heard of Carnagian boots, haven't you?”

Kinker thought about that for a moment. “My grandfather owned a pair, but he lost them at sea when he was fishing one time. They're supposed to be high quality, aren't they?”

“Indeed they are,” said Malock. “My people produce the best boots in all of the Northern Isles. I am wearing a pair right now, in fact. Behold.”

Malock raised his right foot high enough for Kinker to see. A large boot made of fine leather covered it, but the boot didn't look nearly as fancy as Kinker expected it to. It looked like it had been exposed to the weather, with water damage obvious at the toe. It was even ripped on one side and had obviously been hastily repaired by someone with no knowledge, training, or skill in boot repair.

Malock rested the boot back on the floor and said, “We produce enough boots to supply the entire Northern Isles. We have buyers from Kiskasa to Nikos and everywhere in between.”

“Okay,” said Kinker, though he wasn't sure what was so impressive about being the prince of a giant boot factory. “Say, you mentioned something about being the Chosen One of Kano earlier; what does that mean?”

“That is not important at the moment,” said Malock in a tone that told Kinker it was actually very important. “What is important is finding out why you were on the sea at that time of night.”

Kinker blinked. “That time of night? Don't you mean this time of night?”

“Oh, that's right,” said Malock. “You don't know. Well, you were out for, what, three days?”

“Three and a half, actually,” said Telka, nodding. “That's why we weren't sure you were alive, Kinker. You were out for so long, why, it's a miracle you woke up at all. Younger men than you have died from the same injuries.”

“Three days ...” Kinker repeated, looking at the blanket covering his legs. He couldn't imagine being out cold for three days, yet he had no reason to believe that any of them were lying to him about this.

“So if you were hoping we'd take you back to your home, you are sadly mistaken,” said Malock. “We are already well beyond the Northern Isles. There's no going back, no matter how much you beg and plead.”

Good, Kinker thought. I don't want to go back, not after what happened there. Not after what I did.

“Again, I must ask,” said Malock, “what were you doing on the sea in that weather? Our ship was nearly capsized and it's much larger than yours. You must either be very stupid or have a very good reason for risking your life. Were you trying to save someone else?”

Kinker hesitated for a moment. He couldn't tell them the truth. They might kick him off the ship

if he told them. He had to come up with a lie quickly.

So he said, “Yes, I was. My granddaughter was out making sure the boats had not been swept away by the sea, but then the ocean waves dragged her out. I suppose she's dead now.”

Kinker actually didn't have a granddaughter. He'd never married, never had any children ever. This was mostly because he had been devoted to his work, but also because he had never been interested in women very much. He much preferred men, but even then, marriage had never been a concern of his.

But Malock, Vashnas, and Telka didn't know that. They looked sad at hearing the 'news,' which meant they bought the lie—hook, line, and sinker.

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Malock, sounding like he meant it. “Losing a family member is always difficult. I lost my own grandfather to the sea a few years ago, actually. One minute he was there and the next ...”

Malock looked down, breathed in and out rapidly, and then looked back up at Kinker. His face had regained its authoritative, detached look, but Kinker didn't think he'd ever look at it again without seeing the pain in Malock's eyes that was now far too obvious for him to ignore.

“But that has nothing to do with this,” said Malock. “The point is, I appreciate you telling us who you are and what you were doing out in the sea on that night. Love makes us do crazy things, whether it's familial, platonic, or romantic, so I won't fault you for doing something so stupid and dangerous.”

Vashnas smiled at that, like Malock had just made an in-joke that only she and the Captain understood. A glance at Telka told Kinker that it was indeed an in-joke because the ship doctor didn't react. He simply stood there looking concerned, as if he thought Kinker was going to drop dead if he kept talking like this.

“Now that I've told you my story, it's your turn,” said Kinker, pointing at Malock. “What is the Crown Prince of Carnag doing so far from his palace?”

Malock sat up straight and rubbed his hands together, like he couldn't wait to tell Kinker. “Oh, that's a long tale. I'm not sure I can relay the entire thing to you here, right now, but—”

“I have nothing better to do,” Kinker said, gesturing at the blanket covering his legs. “Shoot.”

“All right, then,” said Malock. “You see, Kinker, about two months ago, I was asleep in my royal bedchambers, after a hard day of practicing my fencing techniques and negotiating boot prices with the Shikan military. I was quite exhausted, so when my servants finished dressing me—”

“Your servants dressed you?” Kinker said. “Can't you dress yourself?”

Malock huffed and folded his arms across his chest. “As Crown Prince of Carnag, I don't have the time to dress myself. It is beneath me; hence why I have servants especially devoted to the task.”

Kinker had a hard time imagining that. What was so difficult about slapping on a shirt, a jacket, and pants that you had to hire people to do it for you? It seemed like something that any grown adult could do in less than a minute if necessary. Even a young child could accomplish the task in a short amount of time. When Kinker had been a very young kid, he'd compete with his brother to see who could get dressed for work in the shortest amount of time.

Perhaps royal clothes are more difficult to put on or something, Kinker thought. *Or maybe Malock is just a spoiled brat.*

That last thought seemed likely to Kinker, though of course he did not say it aloud.

“Now as I was saying,” Malock said, his tone more than a little miffed now. “When my servants finished dressing me, I fell asleep the minute my head hit the pillow. But I did not get a restful, dreamless sleep. Instead, I was visited in my vision by a beautiful woman, a woman whose beauty exceeds that of nearly every mortal woman I've ever seen in my life.”

Vashnas made a face at that, like she was annoyed. At least, Kinker thought she was annoyed. He was not good at deciphering aquarian facial expressions, primarily because he had spent most of his life around humans. The few aquarians that had lived on Destan rarely mingled with the humans, so Kinker had never gotten to know them very well.

Malock didn't seem to notice because he was still talking. “The woman wore robes the color of the sea on a bright summer day, shining beautifully. Looking into her eyes was like staring into the deepest sea; mysterious, dark, yet inviting. And she carried with her a fishing net made entirely of water.”

Kinker sat up a little straighter at the description, which had sparked a memory in his head. “Fishing net ... did she have long hair that resembled the ocean waves?”

Malock looked stunned at Kinker's question. “Yes, yes she did. You sound like you've seen her before.”

“I think I have,” said Kinker. “But go on. I'm still listening.”

Malock scratched his chin and said, “Well, as you can probably guess, I was taken aback by her appearance. I was certain she was just a figment of my imagination, but she was far too ... real for that to be a possibility, if you understand what I mean.”

Malock looked at Kinker like the old fisherman should, but for the life of him Kinker could not understand. Glancing at Vashnas and Telka didn't help because Vashnas still looked annoyed and Telka looked embarrassed.

“Anyway,” Malock continued, “whether you get it or not is unimportant. She then spoke to me.”

Kinker tilted his head to the side. “What did she say?”

“I do not remember it all,” Malock admitted. “She spoke in an unfamiliar language. Nonetheless, I understood the gist of it: She was summoning me to the edge of the world, to the very last island in creation, an island known as World's End.”

“World's End?” said Kinker. “Isn't that just a legend?”

“It's real,” Malock said. “I saw it—saw it in my dreams. The woman showed me the most beautiful city imaginable, built on the edge of the world. The Throne of the Gods, as it is also known in the old stories. It was a brief glimpse, true, but somehow I know it was real.”

“How can you trust what the woman said, though?” said Kinker. “Maybe it was just a dream.”

Malock shook his head rapidly. “No, no, no. I know it was more than just a dream because of the woman's identity.”

“And who was the woman, exactly?”

Malock placed his hands on his lap and said, “Kano. Goddess of the Sea, Sand, and Art.”

Another memory sparked in Kinker's mind, of when he was a child, seeing the face of a beautiful woman in the ocean surf before it dissipated in the waves. “Kano? I didn't think anyone else worshiped her outside of Destan.”

“I do not actually worship her,” Malock said. “The Carnagian Royal Family is devoted almost

entirely to Grinf, God of Justice, Metal, and Fire, due to the blessings he has bestowed upon us over the years. As a matter of fact, the last member of the Royal Family who tried to worship another god ... well, let's just say that it didn't work out and leave it at that.”

The tone in which he spoke made it clear that, if Kinker even asked about it, the old man would find himself back in the Crystal Sea again.

“Anyway,” said Malock, his tone brightening, “I didn't even know about Kano until she showed up in my dreams. I actually had to have some of my servants research her in the royal library. We have tons of books on the various gods. Turns out Kano has quite a following among the aquarians but for some reason has never been particularly popular among humans. Wonder why that is.”

“Not much of a mystery, if you ask me,” Vashnas said. “She controls the whole sea and we live in it. Would be kind of dumb if we didn't honor her.”

“Ah,” said Malock, “I see. So when I learned that she was an actual goddess, my next choice was not at all difficult to make. I decided I was going to round up a fleet of ships, find the best crew money can buy, and head on down to World's End, which, according to the dream, is at the very end of the southern seas. Simple, yes?”

Kinker scratched the back of his ears. “You mean your parents didn't try to stop you?”

“Oh, at first my parents were against it,” said Malock with a snort. “They were convinced I was acting on nothing more than a delusional fantasy. In particular, my mother seemed to treat the suggestion of me going on a voyage to the end of the world as though I had just suggested that I wanted to jump off the tip of Carnag Hall. My father simply thought it was irresponsible, argued that I had to stay here in order to learn more about my future kingly duties and that I couldn't be sure Kano had summoned me at all. Frankly, my parents can be a tad overprotective at times, if I do say so myself.”

To Kinker, they didn't sound overprotective at all. They sounded reasonable. But he did not share this opinion, as he was still listening.

“But despite all their faults, my parents are highly respectful of the gods and their wishes,” Malock said. “I summoned a dream reader, who confirmed that my dream had indeed been from Kano. When the dream reader confirmed it, my parents dropped all their protests and immediately began helping me put together a fleet and crew that would get me to World's End in one piece. That took about a month total.”

“Wow,” said Kinker. “So you have an entire fleet of sailing ships, each manned with a complete crew? Just to escort you to World's End?”

Kinker immediately knew that he had said something wrong because Telka shuffled his feet and looked away, Vashnas became interested in her jacket's right sleeve, and Malock's arms dropped to his sides and he suddenly looked as old as Kinker.

“Ah,” said Malock, a slight tremble in his voice, “wrong tense, Kinker. We *had* an entire fleet of sailing ships, all manned with a complete crew. Five ships, in fact. Now ... well we only have one. This one, actually.”

Kinker could hardly believe his ears. “How did you lose almost an entire fleet of ships?”

“A string of bizarre coincidences and disasters that I doubt even Tinkar, the God of Fate, could have seen coming,” Malock said, shaking his head. “I'll tell you about them later. All you need to know is that the current situation is very grim for everyone involved, including you.”

Those words seemed to resonate with Kinker in a way he couldn't at first explain. Then it hit him.

He looked around the quarters he was lying in and realized what it was about the place that had bothered him. The room smelled of fish and blood, the walls and floor were stained with bodily fluids he didn't care to identify, and there was a hole in the ceiling that looked to have been created by someone stabbing the ceiling with a sword.

When he looked more closely at Malock, Vashnas, and Telka, he noticed more signs of weariness and damage. Telka's hair was matted and encrusted with dirt, Vashnas stood with all of her weight on her right leg, like her left leg couldn't support her, and Malock himself had several small scratches across his face that messed up his otherwise handsome complexion. All of them shared the same weary, tired look that Kinker had always associated with retired soldiers. He had seen a lot of retired soldiers back on Destan during fishing season, when retirees from the various Northern armies came down south to fish.

Whatever had happened on this voyage, Kinker understood that it was far more serious than he had first thought. And to be honest, he wasn't really eager to find out exactly what had sunk four large sailing ships and killed their entire crews.

Malock shook his head and said, "But enough of that. We have enough sorrow on this ship as is. Let's try to think happy thoughts."

"Happy thoughts?" Kinker said, looking at the Captain in disbelief. "Why haven't you headed back home to Carnag? I mean, you lost four ships and from what you've said this one isn't doing too well, either. Seems irresponsible to risk the lives of everyone on this ship like this."

"I cannot ignore the summons of a goddess," said Malock, as if the very suggestion was insane. "As a Kanonite yourself, surely you have heard stories of what Kano has done to people who ignore or disobey her direct summons?"

Kinker nodded. "Yes, but I'm sure she would understand if you had to go back to get another fleet. She is not an unreasonable goddess."

"I can't risk that," said Malock. "Angering gods is never a wise move, Kinker. Besides, you don't understand. I can't just go back. My very soul is drawn to World's End, like a magnet. I couldn't go back even if I wanted to."

Kinker had to admit that Malock seemed to be genuinely driven. He didn't look away from Kinker as he said that, nor did he tremble or stumble over his words. The Captain of the *Iron Wind* seemed to believe in what he had just said and he wasn't going to apologize for it no matter what. Maybe he was less spoiled than Kinker had thought.

"Fine," said Kinker. "I guess it is too later now to turn this ship around; although I find it strange that Kano didn't protect your fleet from destruction."

"You should direct that inquiry to the other gods," said Malock. "Most of the crews of my fleet were not Kanonites. Perhaps Kano didn't see any reason to protect them or perhaps they just weren't especially pious; either way, that is no reason for me to give up and go home."

"I didn't say you should," said Kinker. "In fact, I said the opposite. By the way, where are we now?"

Malock looked at Vashnas, who said, "We just entered the southern seas a day ago."

Kinker shivered. "The southern seas? Please tell me you're joking."

“Hardly,” said Malock. “In order to reach World's End, we have to go through the southern seas.”

“But the southern seas are full of danger,” Kinker said. “All the old legends say so. Gigantic sea monsters, unpredictable weather, and all kinds of other things are said to exist there. There's a reason Destan is the farthest known southern island, you know.”

“So what?” said Malock. “Those are just stories and legends, Kinker. We have so little precious fact to rely upon that I find it silly to be afraid. I mean, so far, the southern seas have been very kind to us, with favorable winds and bright sunshine. You're just worrying for no reason.”

“No,” Kinker said, shaking his head. “A friend of mine once told me about the giant sea snakes that live in these seas. They have mouths big enough to swallow entire islands whole.”

Vashnas laughed. “Giant sea snakes with mouths big enough to swallow whole islands? That's so ridiculous that I can't believe you even thought that was true.”

Being laughed at—by an aquarian, of all beings—made Kinker angry, but before he could answer, Malock said, “Fear not, elder. We have the best guide to the southern seas that anyone could ask for. We'll be prepared for whatever these seas have to throw at us, and then some.”

“And who is that guide?” said Kinker, looking at Malock.

“Me,” said Vashnas, pointing at herself.

Now Kinker shifted his attention to her. “What do you know about the southern seas, young lady? No one who has ever tried to explore them has ever returned alive.”

“Except for Vash here,” said Malock, reaching over and patting her right arm. “She's been to the southern seas, traveled all the way to World's End, in fact, and can tell us everything there is to know about it.”

“Really?” said Kinker. “How do you know that for sure? I would like some proof.”

This seemed like a reasonable request to Kinker, so he was shocked when Malock stood up, knocking over his chair, and grabbed Kinker by his beard. The Captain didn't raise his other hand or anything, but he was staring at Kinker with such intense loathing that Kinker felt like he was being held above a fire.

“Don't ... you ... dare ...” Malock said, every word emphasized for impact, “... imply ... that Vashnas is a liar ... or I'll ...”

“Captain, please,” said Telka, reaching out and grabbing Malock's arm. “Let go of Kinker right this instant. He's still weak, and any undue shock might harm his still-recovering system.”

Malock just shot Telka an even angrier look, but the doctor didn't let go or shift his gaze. That made Kinker respect Telka immensely because his chin was starting to hurt from Malock pulling on his beard.

“Didn't you hear what he said?” Malock said through gritted teeth. “He implied Vashnas is a liar. You think I'm going to stand here and let him get away with it?”

“I understand your anger, Captain, but it's the wrong response,” said Telka, his tone even and firm. “He didn't have any malicious intentions. He's understandably skeptical because he obviously believes no one has ever gone to the southern seas and come back alive. Now let go of him or I will be treating your injuries in a moment.”

For a moment, Malock didn't let go. If anything, his grip seemed to tighten because his knuckles turned whiter and his normally handsome face became contorted with anger.

Then, to Kinker's relief, Malock let go and stood back. Kinker let out his breath, which he hadn't even realized he'd been holding in, and moved as far away from Malock as he could on his bed. Vashnas put an arm around Malock's shoulders and began speaking to him in low, soothing tones, but that didn't seem to do much to make Malock calm down.

"I'm sorry for implying that Vashnas is a liar," said Kinker. "I wasn't meaning to. You heard Telka. He got it right."

Malock didn't respond. He just kept glaring at Kinker like he was hoping to kill him with his nasty looks alone.

Vashnas looked at Kinker and said, "It's okay. Most people are skeptical when I tell them I've been to the southern seas and survived. Honestly, I don't believe it myself at times, but it's true."

"Could you tell me how?" said Kinker. "Just for curiosity's sake. That's all."

"I received a dream from Kano proving it," said Malock. He seemed calmer now, but Kinker keep up his guard up just the same. "The night before I met Vashnas, Kano sent me a dream in which I saw Vashnas swimming through the southern seas. She explicitly told me that I needed Vashnas if I was going to make it to World's End alive. And the very next day, as I was inspecting the crew of my fleet, I saw Vashnas and immediately summoned her to my court, where I told her about my dream."

"Is that true?" said Kinker, looking at Vashnas.

Vashnas nodded, looking a little embarrassed. "When I first entered his court, Malock showed me a picture he'd drawn of me, a picture he'd drawn when he woke up. And I know for a fact that he has never seen me before, so there was no way he could have drawn it from memory. There is no other explanation for it. Kano must want me here."

"I see," said Kinker. "I guess that makes sense. The gods surely do work in mysterious ways, do they not?"

"Indeed they do," said Malock, perhaps more harshly than was necessary. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must return to my stateroom. Vashnas and I have to discuss what awaits us in the seas ahead. For now, Telka will take care of you until he deems you fit enough to work on the ship."

Kinker raised a hand. "Hold on. When did I volunteer to join your crew?"

"I suppose you'd like to swim back to Destan naked?" said Malock. "I won't stop you if that's what you want to do, of course, but I doubt you'd make it very far, even if you're a good swimmer."

Kinker cursed under his breath. "You're right. I guess I don't have much of a choice but to work on this ship, do I?"

"No, you do not," said Malock. "When you're better, I'll give you a tour of the ship, introduce you to the crew, and assign you a job. Do you have any useful or productive skills?"

He asked that last question almost too fast for Kinker to catch, but the old man said, "Yes. I'm a fisherman by trade. Been fishing off the coast of Destan for fifty years now."

Malock's scowl disappeared like a cloud on a summer's day, replaced with a giddy smile that took Kinker by surprise. "That's excellent. I hope you recover soon because I already know exactly where I want to put you. Telka, make sure to tell me the minute you think he's ready to start working. I wish to put him to work right away."

"Yes, sir, Captain," said Telka, saluting. "I'll make sure you know as soon as possible."

"I'll pray to Atikos for you, Kinker," said Malock as he and Vashnas left the room, "so that your

healing may come quickly.”

As soon as Malock and Vashnas left, Telka thrust a bowl of some kind of greenish soup under Kinker's nose and said, “Eat up. You look hungry.”

It hadn't even occurred to Kinker to eat, but when he thought about it, his stomach rumbled. He immediately took the bowl and slurped down the greenish soup, even though Telka was about to hand him a spoon. The soup was hot and burned his throat, but he was so hungry that he didn't care.

When the last of the soup entered his mouth, he lowered the bowl and handed it back to Telka. “Thanks, doctor. What was in that soup, anyway?”

Telka took the bowl back, but didn't look at the bowl. He was staring at Kinker in amazement, like he'd never seen him before.

“That was lime fish soup,” said Telka. “It's nasty stuff. Fit for human consumption, of course, but still nasty.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?” said Kinker. “It was good.”

“You're not supposed to slurp it all down like that,” said Telka. “It's hard on the stomach, so you have to eat it in small helpings to avoid throwing it all up.”

Kinker put his hand on his stomach and said, “My stomach doesn't feel that bad. Are you sure that's what it's supposed to do?”

“Normally,” said Telka. “But I guess you're different. What do you Destanians normally eat?”

“Fried fish, zapper stew, and other stuff like that,” said Kinker. “Why?”

Telka put the bowl down on a nearby desk and said, “I just find it intriguing that you ate it all so quickly and without any adverse medical—”

The only warning Kinker received was a slight rumble in his stomach. He heaved and managed to avoid hurling all over his bed. Unfortunately for Telka, however, his barf landed on the doctor's trousers and boots, dousing them in lime-green stuff that Kinker didn't try to identify.

Kinker lay back in his bed, shivering and coughing, while Telka looked down at his pants and boots in dismay.

“Well,” said Telka, “I guess you Destanians *don't* have stomachs of steel after all. Let me clean this up. I'll get you some water and after that you should take a nap. You need it.”