

# I

**T**he airship *Persephone* departed from the city of Mercury early that morning, commencing the twelve-hour flight to *Serenity*. Air travel was the quickest means of transport across the globe, but also a privilege reserved for the wealthy. Dignitaries, captains of industry, and high-ranking military officers were usually the only ones who could afford to travel in such luxury and extravagance.

Jameson Pierce was one such dignitary, a man fortunate enough to be born into a family of exceptional wealth. The young, blond man stood on the ship's deck with a drink in hand. The ice clinked in his glass as he leaned over the railing, watching as land and sea rapidly passed beneath the ship in a blur of green and blue. While one hand cradled the drink, the fingers of the other wrapped about the globe-like handle of his cane.

"There you are!" The voice belonged to Katherine, a

woman of nineteen, and like Jameson, born into privilege. She was also shallow as a puddle and continually tried his patience. “My dear Jameson, one might think you were trying to avoid me.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth, my dear,” said Jameson. “I just thought a bit of fresh air would be nice.”

Katherine came close to him and turned, pushing her back against his chest. She took hold of the arm which held the cane and wrapped it around her waist. “Why would you want fresh air when there is such a magnificent party occurring inside?” She pouted. “You’re becoming a dreadful bore in your old age, Lord Pierce.”

“Perhaps you’d be better suited with a younger man.”

“I’d prefer one who can keep up with me,” said Katherine. The tips of her fingers lightly danced up the frilled collar of his shirt. “Do you think you could?”

“I think...”

Jameson found the words die in his throat. He gently pushed Katherine away and went to the rail. His eyes spotted something in the distance, something closing in rapidly. Katherine, however, failed to notice.

Katherine was not pleased to find that her paramour’s attentions were no longer on her. “Jameson Pierce, how dare you—!”

“Quiet!” His jaw slackened as the object in the distance grew closer. Not to mention larger. “It’s a ship.”

The solar sails curved in the wind as the small ship came closer and closer to the deck of the Persephone. As it drew nearer, Jameson saw two figures standing on its deck: one man wearing a dark green cloak, and the other a woman in a tight shirt, loose pants, and a small-rimmed hat atop her head. The man rested his foot on the rail of his ship and when it came within a close enough range, he pushed off on that bent leg.

The cloaked man flipped in the air and landed soundlessly on the deck of the Persephone. He rose from a crouch and as he did, drew the sword sheathed at his side, pointing the tip of it in the direction of Jameson and Katherine. Katherine opened up her lips to scream, and that was when the woman from the other ship landed behind her and clasped a hand over her mouth.

“Ah-ah, don’t want to announce our presence too soon,” said the woman.

“Let her go,” said Jameson.

The woman smiled at him. Her hand went to her belt holster and drew out a boomerang. “It looks like we’ve got a strapping hero, Zarim.”

“Zarim,” said Jameson, taking in the young man. “Famed

sky-pirate. You're quite a legend."

"Thanks," said Zarim, still holding his sword up.

"Although to be honest, I thought you'd be taller."

"He gets that a lot," said the woman.

"Ekala, do you mind?" asked Zarim.

Ekala shrugged. "It's true."

Zarim turned his gaze back to Jameson. "And who exactly are you?"

Katherine jerked her head to one side. "He's Jameson Pierce, and if you know what's good for you, you'll stand down now!"

Ekala clamped her hand over Katharine's mouth again with a sigh. "Can we throw her over?"

"She can't give us her money if she's at the bottom of the ocean," said Zarim.

"That's why we take the money first," said Ekala.

"If you harm the girl, you'll have me to contend with," said Jameson.

"Really?" asked Zarim.

Jameson flinched. Something in the pirate's eyes. A green flash. But it couldn't have been real. Just a trick of the light, had to be. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Everything you've got," said Zarim. "And since you're 'Jameson Pierce'," he mocked Katherine's tone as he said the

name, "I imagine you've got quite a lot on you."

"I don't have much," said Jameson as he reached inside his coat. He drew out his pocketbook and dropped it on the deck. "Just that."

Zarim bent down, never breaking eye contact with Jameson as he picked up the wallet. He slipped it beneath the folds of his cloak and it seemed to vanish in there. "Good, then how about we go below deck? See what the other passengers have on them?"

"You'll find it difficult, there's a party going on in the ballroom."

Ekala smiled. "We do love a good party." She pushed Katherine against Jameson. "Lead the way, rich boy."

"As you wish," said Jameson. He and Katherine went into the stairwell first, descending the circular stairs. Once they reached the platform, he led them into the main ballroom. A small band was present and the passengers were dancing and drinking to their heart's content. Zarim kept his sword ready and, with his free hand, drew the pistol holstered at his side. Ekala held a boomerang in each of her hands. She leaned towards Zarim.

"You sure this is a good idea?" she asked in a low voice.

"You wanted some action, this is action," said Zarim. He raised his gun and fired a shot. The music came to a stop and

the guests were startled, turning to face the source of the loud noise. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! I apologize for interrupting your festivities, but I’m afraid I have to ask you for a donation to my favorite charity. Namely...me.

“My name is Zarim. I’m sure some of you have heard my name before. And this is my lovely associate, Ekala. The two of us are here to relieve you of the great burden which you call wealth. If you cooperate and give us what we want, we’ll be out of your hair very shortly. But if you cause us any problems...well...let’s just say our reputations speak for themselves.”

Jameson watched with rapt attention as Zarim and Ekala collected the wallets of the passengers. Something especially caught his eye—a symbol on Zarim’s belt buckle. It bore a rose with a drop of blood at the end. A strange thing for a pirate to wear and he committed the image to his memory.

“We won’t put up with this nonsense from a bloody pirate, “ came a voice from among the crowd of revelers in the ballroom.

Zarim’s ears perked up at the challenger. Jameson himself was curious, craning his neck to spot the fool. He saw an older man, dressed in a tuxedo and with a golden sash indicating his lordship. His right eye was magnified by a monocle and he stood straight, chin up in defiance. The crowd parted for

Zarim, who calmly strode over and pressed the tip of his blade against the old man's wrinkled neck.

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that, old timer. Did you just say you wanted to be made an example of?"

"Ruffians, that's all you are," spat the lord. "Deserve nothing less than the gallows."

"Maybe you'd like to try the gallows firsthand, see how much you like them after?" asked Zarim.

"Zee, we don't have time for this." A buzzing came from a device hanging from Ekala's side. She plucked it from her belt and raised it to her ear, listening through it.

Zarim slid his blade beneath the man's sash and sliced it neatly, letting it fall to the ground. He stuck it with his sword and lifted it up, holding it up to its owner's gaze. "I'll enjoy using this as a grease rag."

"Kill me if you must. At least I'll have died with dignity."

"That's what you think, gramps. There's no dignity in being thrown from an airship."

"Zee! Just got radioed, looks like we've got company," said Ekala, holding the transmitter to her ear.

Zarim looked out the bay window and saw another ship in the distance, closing in fast. It was smaller than the Persephone, but far more dangerous—at least in terms of who was aboard. Zarim cursed under his breath.

“That’s a Dreadnought scout ship. You have no hope of escape,” exclaimed the lord.

“Babe, you got the loot?” asked Zarim.

Ekala shook the sack she held in her hands. “Looks like a pretty decent score.”

“Good, then it’s time we take our leave.”

Ekala was first up the steps with Zarim following close behind. But before he ascended, he offered one last look and a grin to his former captives. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your generosity. Now I hope you’ll be sure to mention this little encounter to your friends and loved ones.” He bowed and then sprang up the steps.

Jameson ran up the steps as well, moving out to the upper deck. Zarim looked at him and smiled before jumping from the railing and flying through the air. At first glance, it seemed like he wouldn’t make it to his own ship, but then Jameson noticed the rope hanging from it. Zarim grabbed it effortlessly. He turned towards Jameson, one hand gripping the rope, and offered a smug salute.

The entire act couldn’t help but make Jameson grin. The pirates definitely had style, there was no denying that. He went below deck once more and already heard people discussing the events. Jameson rolled his eyes as he walked through the crowd.

“I’ve heard stories, but I never thought I would be a victim!”

“This is absolutely uncalled for! I’ll have words with my representative about this!”

“I thought the Dreadnoughts were cracking down on those awful pirates!”

“Did you hear what he called himself? That was the Zarim, captain of the Excalibur! Legend has it he’s some sort of a demon!”

Preposterous, thought Jameson. A demon, he had never heard something so ridiculous. Zarim and his companion were thieves, nothing more. Extremely skilled, brazen thieves, yes, but thieves no less. As he moved towards the bar, he heard sobs and he found Katherine huddled behind. When she caught sight of Jameson, she practically tackled him, wrapping her arms around his body.

“Oh Jameson, it was horrible! I’ve never feared for my life like that before!”

“They weren’t going to hurt you, Katherine. They just wanted the money,” said Jameson.

“Yes, but you’ve heard stories of this Zarim, haven’t you? How he sails to the forbidden lands! And he even employs hobgoblins and cavorts with the unholy ones!”

“You place too much stock in legends and folklore, my

dear.”

“What the hell are y’ thinkin’, kid?” asked Swul as Zarim and Ekala entered the bridge of the Excalibur.

The stout faerie barely stood above three feet. He wore a dark green cap with a short brim, casting a shadow over his unnaturally blue eyes, which seemed to sparkle. A cigar sat clamped between his teeth, and his entire appearance seemed somewhat at odds with the gossamer wings that protruded from the slits in his gray shirt and embroidered vest, the color of which matched his cap and his pants.

Zarim cast the faerie a dazzling smile as he passed a raised platform which housed an ornate chair with a red cushion. A few feet in front of that, on a slightly lower level, was a large steering wheel and an instrument console.

“We need to make some waves.” Zarim took the wheel, turning the Excalibur a hundred and eighty degrees. He reached for the large throttle, a rod extending from a point near his feet and accelerated.

“Think we can outrun ‘em?” asked Ekala.

Zarim smiled as he patted the wheel with affection. “Not a ship on the planet that can outrun my baby.”

His eyes widened as the proximity alarm flashed on the console. “Don’t tell me that...”

“What?” asked Swul.

“That Dreadnought ship is closing in on us—and fast!” Zarim turned to Swul and Ekala. “You two, go man the cannons! Reduce that damn ship to scrap!”

“You an’ me are gonna have words later, Zarim,” said Swul.

“Not now, little man!” Ekala grabbed Swul by the back collar of his shirt and yanked him behind her. Swul nearly dropped his cigar, but caught it and broke from her grasp, his wings flapping and raising him above the ground. He flew after her, quickly overtaking her as they descended the steps past the middle deck and down to the lower one. At the ship’s aft were cannons and an intercom system. As the pair moved into the seats mounted to the two rear cannons, the Excalibur was struck by a shell from the Dreadnought ship, causing the two of them to rock as the ship quaked.

The intercom crackled to life with Zarim’s voice scratching through. “You two better hurry up before pieces start falling off my ship!”

“Don’t get yer panties in a bunch,” said Swul. The cannon was too high for his diminutive frame, so he had to stand on the seat to see over the edge. “You know I hate these damn things!”

The cannons had wide barrels with a rack attached to it that fed shells into the weapon. Swul maneuvered the

cannon, lining up the sight with the Dreadnought attack ship, and fired. There was a momentary lapse as the cannon reloaded and he heard Ekala fire her cannon as well. Both their shells struck the Dreadnought, but failed to deter it and it increased its speed, firing two shells of its own.

The Excalibur slewed to the left and the sudden shift in momentum caused Swul to lose his balance. He hung onto the cannon's handles as it swung to the side, but used his wings to redirect him back.

"The hell'd you learn how to fly?" shouted the stout faerie.

Zarim's responding voice crackled through the intercom. "Would you rather fly with a hole in the hull?"

"Rassum frassum..." muttered Swul. He climbed back into his seat and repositioned his cannon, and directed a sidelong glance to the beautiful piratess manning the gun to his left. "How you doin', sweetheart?"

"I'd say better than you, but that's because I can actually use the restraint harness on this thing," said Ekala. She brought her cannon to the ready as a fresh shell slid into the barrel. She focused the sight, catching it dead on the Dreadnought. A pull of the trigger and the shell tore through the air. It cut the distance between them and the enemy and blew right into the bridge.

"Jackpot," she said with a grin.

For a moment, the Dreadnought kept on them, but then thought better of it and veered off. Swul watched with a smile on his face. “Can’t believe it, you scared off a Dreadnought ship, babe!”

“I’m good that way,” said Ekala as she unfastened the harness. She walked back towards the bridge with Swul flittering behind her. Once they reached the bridge, Zarim offered a broad smile of his own and embraced Ekala.

“That was nothing short of amazing!” he said.

“Go on,” said Ekala.

“Let’s save the celebrations, kid.” Swul struck a match off Zarim’s armrest and lit a fresh cigar. “What the hell were you thinkin’ attracting Dreadnought attention like that?”

“Calm down,” said Zarim.

“Nah, I won’t calm down!” said Swul. “What’s the point? The bounty from a job like that ain’t worth the risk! All you did was lift some socialites’ wallets. Big freakin’ deal! We don’t need Dreadnoughts on our tail!”

“The point, my faerie friend, is that it sends a message. It spreads the word and our legend grows,” said Zarim.

Swul enunciated his points with his cigar clasped between two fingers. “First off, I’m no damn faerie. They cast me out, remember? Second, I was almost killed by one of those Dreadnought squads. I ain’t looking to go up against ‘em

again.”

“You don’t have to remind me, pal. Who’s the one who saved your ass?” asked Zarim.

“Savin’ me from the fryin’ pan don’t give you no right to toss me in the goddamn fire!”

“Listen up, short round,” said Zarim. “Last time I checked, I was the captain of this ship, not you! So if you got a problem with the way I do things, why don’t you flitter off somewhere else?”

“Why you self-righteous, rat-bastard—”

“You forgot ‘roguishly handsome’.”

“—roguishly han—hey!”

Ekala moved towards the helm as Zarim and Swul continued the argument. She leaned against the wall, shaking her head with an amused disapproval. “You’re like damn kids when they get this way.” She knew the faerie had a point, though. Their take? Probably not worth risking Dreadnought attention. But on the other hand, their reputation made things run a bit more smoothly. And she *did* love going after the rich.

She finally decided they’d been arguing long enough. “So what’s our travel plan look like?”

Zarim looked away from Swul, and at console which had a map of the world showing their current position. “I’ve got a

course plotted for Delfor. We can refuel and resupply there.”

Ekala huffed.

Zarim glanced over at her. “I know Delfor’s not your favorite place, but—”

“I just don’t trust Gax,” she said. “He’s a first-class creep.”

“Yeah, but if not for him, we wouldn’t have the Excalibur. And he gives us quite a bit of work,” said Zarim.

“I suppose,” said Ekala. “Still, he makes my skin crawl.”

The city of Xanadar sat nestled in the mountainous regions of the Shanla continent. It had been virtually untouched by the expansion of the Imperials based in Serenity, the location providing natural defenses from invading hordes.

Here was a place of spiritual enlightenment. A long and rough path led to Xanadar, but those who made the trek considered it a test of their fortitude. Many longed to learn from the guru known as Master Quand.

Quand was in the midst of a meditation seminar with several of his latest students, teaching them proper breathing techniques, when his eyelids snapped open. His head began to throb as an incredible force surged through his body.

Quand collapsed, his body going into a seizure as the concerned students milled around him. None of them had been here very long and they had no idea if this were part of

the class or if Quand was truly in some form of danger.

A monk standing near the door pushed through the crowd, falling to his knees alongside of Quand. He tried to hold the man down until the seizure subsided. When it finally had, Quand looked up at the students surrounding him, studying their quizzical expressions.

“Master Quand?” asked the monk. “Are you okay?”

“No, Fei,” said Quand.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s the Soulstones,” said Quand. “One of them has awoken.”