




**Chapter I**  
Changing Scenery



*Thump thump thump.*

A life spent between cities, floating above the sands had familiarized Jim with the sounds of nature. Wind, sand, scurrying creatures, and the slow creak of his landship as it lumbered across the Dune Sea. These were things he knew.

*Thump thump thump.*

The sounds of large machinery, by contrast, were an unwelcome intrusion upon a well established audible palette of familiarity. Jim's mind slowly sifted out the chaotic elements of his dreams from reality. Finally, blinking away a stubborn haze, he tried to make sense of the room taking form around him.

Walls covered with a patina of rust framed the small room. At the far end, an aged oblong door was fixed to the wall. The shining wheel handle was oddly matched to its dilapidated frame—like a bleached stone on brown sand.

*Am I dead?* Jim wondered as he studied his surroundings. A straight line was not to be seen. The ceiling, walls, floor, all of it was warped in some way, as if the structure of the room had been subjected to extreme force. That, or centuries of use.

Next to him, a flimsy steel rolling table covered with assorted medical instruments sat unattended. The scent of wood alcohol stung his nose before it was whisked away by a cool draft.

Among the medical tools on the dented surface, he spotted what appeared to be a large metal canteen. The sensation of thirst hit his stomach like a lead weight. Quickly, Jim grabbed the container and unscrewed the lid. It smelled stale and slightly metallic, but not pungent. Satisfied, he threw his head back for a long gulp.

Water slid down his gullet and was accompanied by a sudden wave of nausea. Jim felt as if his stomach had been empty for weeks. He coughed and cleared his throat before taking another swig.

As his focus and strength returned to him, he sat up from his bed., Which was cushioned and covered in faded tan linens. Taking a breath, he pivoted himself and swung his legs over the bedside. He set the canteen down and scanned the worn room.

All the questions of this unusual circumstance swam in his mind. *Where am I? How did I get here? Am I a captive? What did they do to me?*

A loud squeal and a metallic clang disturbed the quiet mechanical thrumming. Darting his head around quickly, Jim spotted a scalpel on the nearby tray. With sleight of hand, he retrieved the blade and slipped it underneath his pillow. Scrambling back into the bed, he sat against the metal grated headrail and focused a stoic gaze on the far wall.

The rusty door swung open. He caught a quick glimpse of a hallway lined with rusted metal and worn purple carpet runners.

Four armed men made their way through, lined up against the far wall, and turned to face him. Each stood at attention, or rather a poor mocked version of it. Jim stared at his captors. They all wore a brown uniform with red cloth bands on the right arm. He'd seen them plenty of times before. The armbands were typical Alliance Air Navy design.

The Warlord Alliance was the most belligerent empire in Ruin. The loose confederation of twelve desert warlords was held together by a burning hatred toward the Free Citizens Federation to their south, a people who had broken off from the Alliance over two hundred years prior and had been warring with them sporadically ever since.

When trading with Alliance cities, Jim did his best to stick to smaller settlements, the kind with few or no garrisons. Warlord soldiers were known for their cruelty and mistreatment of the lower class, and Jim was nearly as low as it got.

Anyone unfortunate enough to be caught alone in the desert by one of their patrols who was too poor to bribe them could anticipate a life of cruel slavery in the black-crystal mines, or, if they were lucky, a draft into the frontline death brigades manning the trenches. Neither was a very promising future.

This being said, something struck Jim as unusual about the soldiers standing across from him. All of them wore their uniforms poorly, and none were clean shaven, or clean at all for that matter. One was slightly overweight and the others seemed a hand too short. Even their breech rifles looked worn. One man was holding a muzzle-loading musket.

Once the soldiers had planted themselves against the far wall, an older man entered. His silver hair was matted with sweat and grease. He had a hawkish nose and small spectacles that seemed one small misstep from falling off his face completely. His hands rested steadily at his side and the smell of rubbing alcohol followed him in.



The woman who followed after him was something else entirely.

She walked in the room with authority and purpose. Coal black hair fell slightly over her left eye, nearly hiding a thin scar. It ran the course from above her left eyebrow down to her jawline. The rest of her hair was done up in a tight ponytail. Knee high mechanic's boots made of leather and desert cotton met a pair of grey sport pants covered in grease. Her button up shirt appeared to be a few sizes too large for her and was so filthy that Jim was unsure of its original color. *Almost white. Almost, not quite*, he thought.

But the most uncanny feature was that she was present at all. Women were hardly ever present in an Alliance military unit, even as engineers. Warlords, and by extension, their soldiers did not view women as peers—to the orthodoxy of their society, women from Alliance nations were thought of by men as only the means to the ends of homemaking while they, the soldiers, marched off in the winter to make war.

As Jim watched her, he was suddenly drawn to her eyes. They were the deepest green he had ever seen. Her gaze pierced through him, and there was a powerful spark of intelligence behind those pools of green. He found his practiced apathy falling away under rising curiosity.

“Let's start with the easy stuff,” the woman began. “What's your name, and what's the last thing you remember?”

There was a moment of tense silence. Finally, a small grin crept up the side of her mouth. She stole a glance at the elderly man.

He didn't share her amusement and sighed loudly, “This isn't an interrogation, son, and you may notice a lack of bonds. You're not a prisoner here.” The man's voice was still crisp and powerful despite his age, “Ahh yes, you also may have noticed, you are all patched up. You're welcome, by the way.”

Against the far wall, the Alliance soldiers stared straight ahead, but the tension was visible. If Jim tried something, despite their appearance, he had no doubt he'd be on the losing side of an engagement. He sat quietly for another moment, considering.

Finally, he opened his mouth to speak. The words came slowly at first. It had been months since his last conversation with another human being. Aside from the occasional swear word while maintaining his ship, he was very out of practice.

His voice was a rough whisper. “My name is Jim, and... the last thing I remember is... an explosion.” It wasn't exactly a lie.



The doctor raised his eyebrow, “Jim? You look like an ‘Izalatan; the forgotten class. I’ll say, you’re the first one I’ve met with a name like that. Don’t you lot take pride in your traditional names?”

Literally translated, ‘Izalatan means ‘removed’ in the old tongue. It was a name given to most lower class people within the Alliance as well as some traders, many of whom were descended from a culture conquered thousands of years before the first empire.

The ‘Eternal Kingdom’, as the first empire had called themselves, ruled the deserts of Ruin for nearly four hundred years and brought about many of the technological innovations that were still in common use.

“Doctor,” the woman interrupted. “As you say, this is not an interrogation. Jim is a fine name. Welcome aboard, Jim.”

Jim’s eyes narrowed slightly as he tried to hide a look of confusion. The woman smirked and continued, “After we retrieved you, it didn’t look very promising. You were charred, your head was a bloody mess, you had a good number of broken ribs and, well, at first glance, we assumed you were dead.”

Jim’s hands probed the bandages around his midsection and head. There was plenty of dried blood, but as he pressed on the various darker patches, nothing hurt or felt out of place.

He’d avoided the majority of the explosion, including the raging inferno. That much he remembered vividly. “Charred?” he asked.

He hiccupped as he finished the word, his voice rising to a squeak. He pressed his lips tight and quick, his eyes growing wide.

She smiled at his embarrassment, brushing her hair slightly further from her scar as she answered, “Both of your arms were completely blackened as well as a good portion of your torso. Over the last two days, you’ve been in that bed tossing and turning—”

“And healing at a phenomenal rate,” the doctor interjected.

*But healing like that... only happens when...* a light went off in Jim’s head. He’d heard of this sort of experience before. *I’m an Awakened?* he thought. The moments which had preceded his unconsciousness replayed in his mind.

Less than one tenth of one percent of the population was said to be a potential Awakened. “Natural” awakenings always followed a near death experience. The Awakened would often die from the release of massive energy as its previously hidden power erupted and often overwhelmed them. Very few like himself were known to exist outside of The Holy Land.

Those who did survive were hunted endlessly by agents of the Prophetess, the ruler of the Holy Land, said to be beautiful and deadly, and in possession of extraordinary awakened abilities. Those captured were taken away to be re-educated in the Golden Spire, the seat of government for her reclusive empire. There, they would serve out their lives as the Prophetess’ devoted priests and priestesses.

The role of a priest was anything but peaceful and benign. Powerful as the Alliance and Free Citizens Federation were, they never refused a request for extradition of captured Awakened. Failure to do so would result in an army of priests “politely” asking a second time, usually making an example of those who refused them.

If these were Alliance military, it was only a matter of time before they brought him to the nearest monastery for a considerable reward. The Prophetess and her Holy Order paid handsomely for people like him. Awakened potentials were rare. Natural Awakened were almost unheard of and returned high bounties to their captors.

The doctor leaned in as the woman whispered something into his ear. He dismissed the soldiers with a nod, and the bumbling detail shuffled out of the room through the oval door. The doctor then made his way to the medical table and began collecting the instruments.

As the doctor organized his medical implements, the woman stepped forward and offered her hand. “I am Captain Alia Rychist,” she said. “If you ever call me Alia though, I’m likely to send you back to this place with more than burns and dehydration. Captain or ma’am will do.” She stared at him for a silent moment to accentuate her point.

Jim finally took her hand and shook it. He nodded for her to continue.

“I’m going to get right to the point, Jim.” she said. “I know what you are and I know what they will do if they find out. Truth be told, I could make a small fortune for turning you in. And believe me, we could use the money.”

There was another moment of unsure silence as she stared into him with her deep green eyes.

“However, that isn’t our way,” she said with a wry smile. “In fact, you should count yourself lucky to be here. We have a need for someone with your... unique gifts.”

“I’m not interested,” Jim replied.

“Fair enough,” the captain replied with a shrug. “As I said before, you are no prisoner. Unfortunately, we aren’t making port for some time, so I’ll have to drop you off at the nearest dune. It should only be a few week’s walk to Freeport.”

Jim squinted and stared at the floor. Crossing the Great Dune Sea on anything other than a landship or heavily armed caravan was suicide. He gritted his teeth in frustration.

Finally, he sighed, “What’s the job?”

The doctor broke in. “Before we continue, would you be so kind as to place my scalpel back on the tray? It seems to be missing.”

Jim tilted his head sideways as if confused.

The old man smiled and added, “Son, if we wanted to harm you, believe me, we had ample opportunity to do so over the past two days.” He and the captain shared an amused glance.

Jim turned the pillow over and removed the scalpel that he had carefully hidden away. He placed it hesitantly back on the tray, letting it drop with a loud *clang*.

“Thanks for that, son. I can appreciate a person who’s always prepared for the worst. I assume your survival instincts, or an overabundance of luck, is what has gotten you this far in the first place. On this ship though, I wouldn’t recommend running around and cutting up our crewmen. The captain can have awful bouts of meanness and, well frankly, downright temper t-”

“That’s enough out of you, old man.” Alia interrupted. “Jim and I have things to discuss, and he hasn’t seen the ship.”

“Ship?” Jim asked.

“He’s a chatty one, Alia,” the old man said. With a curt nod, he gingerly grabbed his cart and rolled it out of the room. The metal tray bounced and banged as he navigated the bowing wood floor out of the room.

“I thought you preferred ‘captain,’” Jim said.

“Benjamin’s a special case. He’s earned the right,” she replied with a shrug. “Well, do you feel strong enough to take a walk?”

“Yes,” Jim replied. His head was throbbing, but he stood, doing his best to ignore it. He swayed for a moment. The captain reached out to steady him, but he pushed her hand away. “I can walk,” he insisted. Jim lumbered toward the exit, happy to escape his coffin. Through the door, the sound of the *thump thump thump* grew louder.

Most landships were purely propelled by sail. Steam engines were expensive to build and complicated to maintain, not to mention how sand and machinery are notoriously poor bedfellows. Only the largest and most formidable landships, usually within empire militaries, had the need and budget for such technology.

He couldn’t seem to steady himself. Spotting his struggle, the captain said, “Don’t feel bad. It takes most people a few days to get used to the rocking. I just hope you don’t have a fear of heights.”

“Heights?” he asked, confused. How big is this ship? he wondered.

Alia smiled mischievously and asked, “Do you know where we are right now, Jim?”

He recalled the details of his journey north. “I was about one hundred and seventy kilometers northwest of Vigilance Oasis.” The words still came slow as he said more than he had in months. “If you’ve turned with the wind, that would put us umm...” His head was still aching.

Seeing his struggle, the captain added, “Somewhere a few days east of Freeport.”

“Yeah,” he replied as he braced himself against the wall, fighting off another spell of dizziness.

“Pretty good speed for a landship, especially one as big as ours,” she said. They reached another hatch door. A tiny porthole spilled light into the darkened hallway. It was daytime. After being stuck indoors for days, though most of it had been spent unconscious, the sun felt warm and inviting on his skin.

“Thing is, Jim, we’re not on a landship,” Alia continued. The door swung outward, and a gust of ice cold air rushed past him. For a moment, he nearly lost his footing again as bright light blinded him and a gust pushed him back on his heels.

“And I meant what I said about that fear of heights thing,” she gleamed.

Jim shielded his eyes and followed the captain carefully through the door on unsure feet. What he saw next would be etched into his memory forever.





Beneath him, he felt the familiar motion of wooden deck planks. However, these were thicker and sturdier than the ones in the infirmary. Still, they creaked with every step.

Grabbing hold of the railing, his eyes adjusted while he took in his surroundings. His hands gripped tighter as he drank in the scene.

Their ship was sailing through a sea of white clouds, their tops passing lazily by, nearly spilling upon the deck. From the northeast, the high Eternal Mountains shot up through the endless white blanket. Some still sparkled with the last of last winter's meager snow.

South, through a break in the clouds, The Great Dune Sea stretched far beyond his sight. The blacks and browns of each hill connected together in an endless tapestry of ripples and snaking ridge lines.

Jim leaned over the railing and spotted white sails and a glint of metal on what looked like a Brigantine class landship far below them. This far north, it probably belonged to the Unaligned League Ground Navy, patrolling out of Freeport. At this distance though, it was hard to tell. It moved along gracefully as its lengthening shadow stretched eastward in the warm afternoon light.

Pulling himself away from the breathtaking scene below, Jim began to realize just how big the ship — the airship — was. Above him, an enormous balloon of oiled, patchwork canvas stretched to the fore and aft of the ship. Countless small steel cables held it in place like a giant creature caught in a trap, locked in a hopeless upwards struggle for freedom.

Rope ladders wrapped the giant balloon every couple dozen paces and followed the canvas up and around the balloon, beyond his view. They creaked with each gentle push of wind, tensing and then relaxing as the ship moved gracefully through the sky.

The deck was crawling with men and women of every size and color. All were wearing thick flight jackets with the collars pulled up around their necks and faces. Just like the underdressed Alliance soldiers he had seen earlier, their uniforms were in poor condition. Among them, a few even donned thick leather aviator caps common to most empire military pilots.

A man, as wide as he was short, bent over a steel cable anchor with a welding torch. As he manipulated the tool, his exposed forearms twitched and tensed. A rubber gas tube fed the blowtorch. It coiled and snaked around the many obstacles scattered around the topdeck before disappearing somewhere below. Pieces of frayed black tape, hastily wrapped around leaks in the line seemed to be everywhere.



The man turned to glance at Jim and the captain. Captain Alia motioned for him to come over.

As he made his way to them he shot a calloused, soot-covered hand toward Jim, who needed a moment to pull his gaze from the bustle of ship activities. The man's vice-like grip certainly did the trick though. Jim barely contained a grunt as he shook the human equivalent of a pneumatic press.

The short man was all business as he spoke, "Name's Harol, lead deckhand. Pleasure. See ya around, then."

Harol pulled a pair of fogged brass-rim goggles over his eyes. He adjusted something on the sides and suddenly two dark lenses dropped into place.

Harol quickly returned to his welding. He paused only momentarily to bark orders at a duo of young twins loitering nearby. The boys, teenagers Jim suspected, scurried off to carry out the man's wishes.

"Forgive Harol. He's a man of few words and many talents," the captain said. "Much like yourself, I imagine." She motioned for them to continue their tour.

Though Jim could not seem to figure out his balance, he did his best to concentrate and quickly shuffled forward to catch up to her.

From somewhere underneath them, the smell of burning coal crept up through slats in the wood and mixed with the sulphuric smell of black powder. The deck continued ahead for at least eighty meters.

There were two dozen eighteen pound cannons to starboard and what looked like a few thirty-six pounder downward-facing siege cannons above the forward quarter. All showed signs of recent use, their muzzles blackened under a layer of spent gunpowder. Crew members darted about, performing maintenance tasks on the carriages and structures holding the cannons in place.

Over the side of their ship, a pair of particularly brave carpenters sat on wooden planks suspended over the side by a few frayed ropes. They banged away with their steel hammers, patching what appeared to be a section of missing wooden hull. The hole was splayed inward as if something had struck and penetrated. They joked quietly and laughed, unphased by the thousands of meters of open air beneath them. Like Harol, each wore a pair of brass goggles, though these didn't appear to hold the same tinted drop lenses.



A breeze gently pushed against the side of the ship and sent Jim into the rail. He struggled to stop his vision from swimming. A strong hand from the captain quickly grabbed his arm as she said, "Easy there. You aren't going to puke, are you? We just repainted the hull at our last port of call, and I don't think Asad and Allie would be very happy." She nodded toward the carpenters as they waved up toward her.

Jim closed his eyes and collected himself for a moment.

"I'm fine," he lied. "It's just a headache." He ran his hand along the smooth railing, "What is this ship? This has to be at least a... Sunder Class Airship? What military do you report to? FCF? Protectorate? Alliance?"

The captain chuckled, "I'm glad you're feeling a bit more talkative. And no, we aren't Alliance, or FCF, or any empire military for that matter. As for the class, he's called a Dagger Class Attack Ship. It falls somewhere between a cruiser and a small battleship. Bit bigger than a Sunder."

"He?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes, "The male fascination with classifying ships in the feminine is so typical. You know, if most of my crewman thought they could get away with it, they would mutiny on that one little detail alone."

Another grin crossed her face. Jim found himself smiling back in amusement, though he wasn't "in" on the joke. Realizing how foolish he must look, he cleared his throat and returned to gazing about the ship.

Another gust of wind hit the ship, causing it to sway and groan. The captain seemed unphased as she stood and pointed at Jim. "You can have your lady ships, but this ship... oh no, he's no lady. He's a brute and would never be found in polite company. Though he is a survivor... and deadly when threatened."

Looking back to him, she smiled again. He noticed that the unscarred side of her lips seemed to rise slightly higher than the other. "I'm sure you can appreciate that."

She carried a confidence that he'd never seen in anyone, man or woman. Everything she said and did seemed to be completely prepared for and purposeful. It left him feeling somewhat foolish and out of place.

She had either not noticed him staring or had chosen to ignore it. Stepping over a coil of rope without looking down, she said, "As to the nature of our procurement of this lovely gem, that is a conversation for another day. Now, let's have a little talk about this newfound gift of yours and how it can benefit us both. You like money, right?"

