



**Chapter II**  
Clockwork

Jim's tour continued across the deck to a door under the forecastle. The captain opened the hatch and stepped through, gesturing for him to follow. Ducking in behind her, he was surprised to discover he'd stepped into what he could only assume were the captain's quarters.

On landships, the captain was usually tucked safely at the back of the ship, but it seemed the sky was home to a different set of rules. Her quarters were planted right in the bow of the impressive vessel. The room slanted inward, the glass windows pinching off against a wooden beam that ran downward in the same place that one would expect a waterborne ship's stem to be. Replacing the bow planks with windows offered a breathtaking view of the world beyond.


The transparent panes ran the length of the room, disappearing into the floor behind the captain's bed. He imagined that, with the curtains up, sleeping in the bed would feel more like floating unencumbered through the heavens.

His eyes were wide as he watched the world from an angle entirely alien to him. The ship was sailing upon the wisps like the water ships of the Great Green Lake. In the distance, the Eternal Mountains marked the northern border of Ruin and the farthest he had ever travelled. He wondered at all the exotic places the captain and her crew must have seen. With an airship, they could go so many places that he could not.

Ruin was surrounded with natural barriers. To the north lie mountains, and the dragons rumored to live there. To the west and east, tremendous unceasing storms would strip the flesh from anyone who dared to traverse the deep desert.

For the few fortunate enough to survive, they could look forward to a swift and gruesome death in the jaws of any number of gigantic desert predators including the famed Sheraa dune crawlers. To the south, assuming you could pass through The Holy Land without drawing the Prophetess' ire, the corrosive dead sea and its toxic fog would make quick work of man and metal alike. The yellowish clouds extended far into the sky, preventing air and land vessels from passage.





There was a loud squealing and a clang as the captain shut the door behind him. Pulling his eyes from the scene outside, Jim watched as she crossed the room to an antiquated wooden desk gathering dust in the corner. A dried inkwell and neglected quill sat to the right side of the work area.

Captain Rychist sat in a creaking chair that fit in with the rest of the aged decor. Purple velvet wrapped tightly onto ancient Manzawood, fraying in some places.

In the wastes of Ruin, the Manzatree, more bush than actual tree, was the primary source of wood. The refining process from live shrub to manufacturable wood pulp was both complicated and highly lucrative. Due to the highly flammable nature of an unprocessed manzatree, it was also a very dangerous profession. Whoever had decorated this place, Jim decided, was fond of risk and flush with currency.

As the captain leaned forward with fingers locked, her chair creaked loudly, drawing Jim's wandering gaze. "Please, grab a seat from the closet." She nodded to his left.

Jim turned the worn handle on a nearby closet, withdrew a wooden folding chair, and sat down. A fresh wave of dizziness washed over him followed by a strong desire to sleep. He suppressed a yawn.

Seeing the weariness in his eyes, the captain asked, smiling, "Care for a cup of coffee? Our last err... procurement found us in the possession of over three hundred pounds of it."

Coffee, the sweet nectar of life; Jim hadn't partaken in years. The only place wet enough to grow it was far north of the desert, deep in the territory of the Northern Tribes, a hearty but fiercely guarded people who lived north of the fortress city of Stronghold.

Coffee was rare enough to stay out of the hands of commoners, and the southern empires liked it that way. Nobles were willing to pay handsomely for the heavenly black elixir. #

He couldn't refuse. There was no telling when, or if, the opportunity would ever arise again.

Jim nodded briskly, trying to hide his excitement. His groaning stomach immediately betrayed him. The captain couldn't quite suppress a smirk at his embarrassment.

She turned a crank from somewhere behind her desk, and a brass voicepipe suddenly emerged from a small pocket in the wall. She cleared her voice and called down into the pipe, "Henry, please make your way up here with two coffees, black. Our guest is parched."

There was a faint metallic reply through the tube. Alia leaned in so she could hear. Seemingly satisfied, she nodded, turned the crank back and let loose another disarming smile. "Before we continue, I'm assuming you'd like a little history on who we are and how you got here."

All was quiet for a moment. Jim cleared his throat, realizing that she was waiting on him, and replied, "Yes, please."

"You are a man of few words," Alia remarked, "but, don't worry, I talk enough for ten, Henry for twenty."

"Sorry," Jim answered. "Me and people... well, not too many good ones in the wastes."

A frown flashed across the captain's face. "Believe me, I understand." There was more awkward silence. Jim's stomach groaned again.

"Where is that damn coffee?" Captain Rychist wondered aloud. "Anyhow, first things first. You're on an airship. I hope that much is obvious now," she said as she gestured to the cloud blanket that drifted outside the windows. The side of her mouth crept up again. As it did, she brushed a few strands of hair across the scar on her face. Jim nodded for her to continue, trying his best not to study the old wound.

"As I mentioned, he's a Dagger Class Attack Ship with a few clever upgrades that, I'm quite proud to say, I helped install personally. This ship is coming up on its three hundred year anniversary."

Jim blinked. "Three hundred?"

"Correct. I'm this ship's fourteenth captain, matter of fact. He was launched from the city of Solitude back during the second crusade. I'm told he participated in dozens of engagements against the Prophetess' forces and was one of the few ships to come out of the war still operational."

Alia sighed and stared into no place in particular, saddened. "After the Alliance surrendered and turned its attention back to trench warfare against the Federation, he served the next two hundred and fifty years in boring peacetime roles. Poor baby," she said, patting the bulkhead behind her, "You were meant for greater things. At least you weren't refitted into a cruise ship like most of the big ones."

Turning back to Jim, she continued, "Anyhow, forty-three...four? years ago, it was...uh...taken out of mothballs where we came into possession of it. Technically, I'm his second captain, if you start counting from there. We named him The Liberator. Not a very creative name I know, but after all these years it's stuck."

Jim interrupted, "So... it... I uhh mean he, flew for the Alliance, fought for them, your crew wears Alliance uniforms, and you...aren't Alliance? Who do you report to then?"

Captain Rychist shrugged, "We don't."

"You don't? Don't what?"

"Report to a military."

Jim furrowed his eyebrows in confusion.

"Well, Jim, some call us pirates. Others call us rebels. I prefer to call us liberators. Hence, the name of the ship. You see, we liberate the undeserving of their possessions and put them to much more appreciated use. Our Alliance uniforms and cold weather gear for instance. Oh, and from time to time, we may liberate a monastery of brainwashed acolytes and offer them better lives."

Monasteries were mockingly called "brainwash schools," only in private conversation, of course. The splendid structures could be found in nearly every southern town and city, serving as a dark reminder of the Prophetess' victory over the Alliance and Federation hundreds of years before. When an Awakened was discovered, they would be whisked away by her priests, locked away for years and re-educated to serve her will.

"Awakened?" Jim asked, surprised. "You've actually stolen-"

"Liberated," she corrected him.

"Right, liberated Awakened from the Prophetess? How many of your crew are st— err, liberated Awakened?"

"All of them, naturally. Well, all but one, Henry, who is taking his time with that coffee, much to my annoyance." She crossed her arms and leaned back in the creaking chair.

Jim shook his head, "Sorry but... all Awakened?"

"Except Henry," the captain corrected him.

"Right," Jim replied. "But, all Awakened are taken by the Prophetess' followers. I've heard of some escaping to the desert, where they died. How could-"

The captain wagged a finger at him, "For someone who could barely utter a few words just an hour ago, you sure have a lot of questions."

"I'm a uh... curious person," Jim replied.

She nodded, "Smart people ask questions. Dumb people simply accept answers. Oh, and to answer your question, yes, at one point or another, most of the people on this ship were slaves of the Holy Order or on the run. I did mention we call our ship The Liberator, didn't I?"

Jim nodded and replied, “Yeah, a few times. But how were you able to break the Prophetess’ brainwashing of—”

His question was interrupted by a sharp knock at the door.

“Come in, Henry.”

A human figure, with a large brass ball where his legs should have been, rolled into the room. The machine was made entirely of metal. His outer structure was a mix of sheet steel and brass. Inside his human-shaped body was a controlled chaos of moving gears and cogs. Each one turned at a different speed as if it had a mind of its own. Behind the tangle of moving machinery, somewhere deep within the human form, dim blue light backdropped its inner workings.

The ball upon which it balanced was inlaid with thousands of tiny symbols. He wasn’t even sure they represented letters. Though he couldn’t decipher them, Jim felt he had seen them before.

His wandering gaze stopped at the thing’s eyes. White light shone through mechanical irises which narrowed as the machine stared back at him. Despite their artifice, he felt as if he could see a person... a soul behind them. A chill crawled up his spine.

The machine man rolled toward them with a full spread upon a polished platter including sugar and cream. The captain introduced him, “Jim, meet Henry, our ship’s quartermaster among other things. He handles the flow of materials — food, weapons, comforts. Oh! And he makes a terrific cup of coffee.”

Jim couldn’t pull his gaze away, “Is it a he? Or rather, is he an uhh...?”

“HE is a man,” the captain replied. “A clockwork man to be precise. Judging by your expression, I’d venture a guess that he’s the first you’ve seen.”

“I saw one once in Trest but... living clockwork tech is outlawed for everyone except the Proph—”

“Excuse me,” the clockwork man’s accented baritone interrupted, “I don’t appreciate being referred to in the third person when I’m right in the room.”

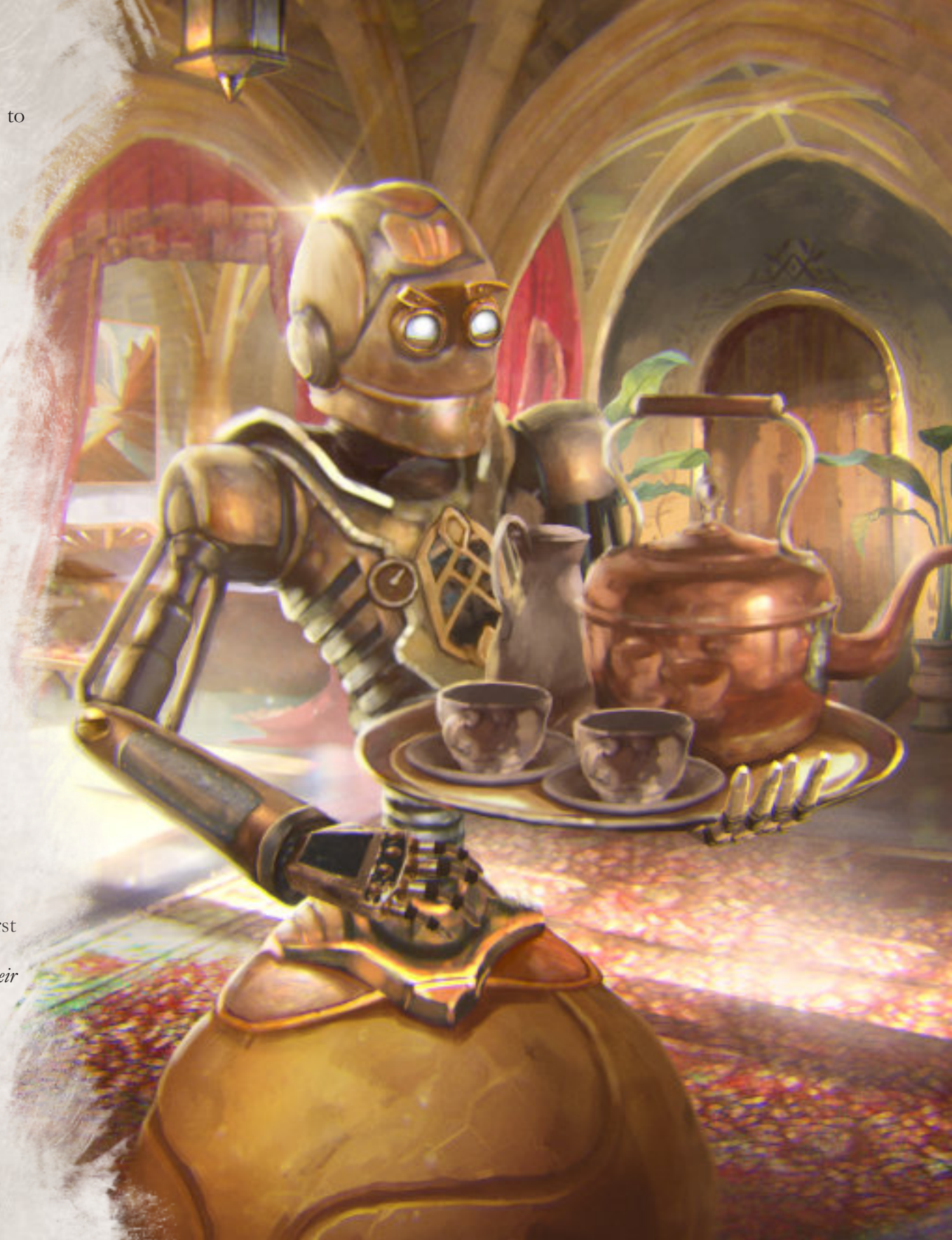
Jim leapt from his seat and exclaimed, “It spoke!”

“HE spoke,” Henry corrected him.

Captain Rychist laughed and turned to Henry. “Seeing people react to you never gets old. It’s like a child seeing some new wonder for the first time.”

Jim frowned and thought, *most children don’t see something like this in their lifetime.*

“Not too many marvels out in the wastes, huh?” the captain asked.





Before Jim could respond, Henry interrupted again, “As the captain said, my name is Henry. Yes, living clockwork tech is highly illegal. Of course, that doesn’t stop Her Royal ‘Tyranical’ness from owning it.” The contempt in his tin voice was sharp. “However, I am the property of no one, man or woman.”

Jim couldn’t quite place the accent. And the symbols on the mobility ball... there was definitely a familiarity to it. He looked into Henry’s glowing blue eyes and said, “I didn’t mean to offend you but, uh, how old are you?”

“Oh boy,” The captain rolled her eyes.

Henry’s eyes brightened, “Oh! I’m so glad you asked!” The tray was set down quickly with a clunk on the antique desk. The lid of the coffee pot fell onto the tray. He rapped a metal hand against his chest and replied, “This chassis is only ninety seven, but I believe my ether cube, my heart if you will, to be over ten thousand years old!”

The captain raised a hand and shook her head. “Please Henry. This poor man can only take so much in his first day among the clouds. Let’s not fill his head full of your stories of speculation. At least, not today.”

“They’re hardly stories, captain,” he replied defensively. “The ether cubes contain the essence of our progenitors. Essentially, I’m one of those ancients, or at least, I was created by them, and will prove it, someday.”

The captain shook her head. “Listen, there’s still much for Jim to learn. Perhaps we can reserve your... history lesson for another time.”

A loud bell ringing somewhere outside cut her words short.

The captain was already on her feet when Harol burst through their door. His brass goggles were pushed onto his thick cotton flight cap. In his hand, he still held the welding torch. “Sorry for interruptin’. Captain, raiders are approachin’ from the northwest. Lookout reports at least three dozen of ‘em. All in Firebugs. We got about five minutes before things get interestin’.”

The captain’s jovial expression disappeared. She pulled an antiquated matchlock pistol from her desk and tucked it into her belt behind her back. With fire in her eyes, she shouted the command.

“BATTLESTATIONS!”