



Prologue: The Rude Awakening

The cool morning breeze blew through a narrow canyon ruffling light green weeds protruding from the cliff side. That same pleasant wind abetted birds from small crevices throughout the steep wall of rock, the sun just peaking over the horizon to illuminate its glorious red stone. The air filled itself of bird song and rustling foliage... and the steady pulse of something mechanical.

A bulky airship rested anchored close to the canyon's side, its slightly rusted, dull iron exterior a sharp contrast to the naturally formed rock to which it was tethered. The airship's bulbous nose and stubby fins caused it to look like a mechanical fish that had left its ocean for the skies above. Smoke billowed from an exhaust in the back and the engines could be heard idling their determined ballad. The ship's propellers lazily spun keeping itself airborne, the name *The Ephrait* painted on the side in faded, cracked lettering.

A gust of air slipped through a hole in *The Ephrait's* exterior, most likely from cannon fire. The airship was lined with scorch marks and dirt that had settled on the main walkway. Machinery of all different shapes and sizes lay strewn across the metal floor, oil leaking from bent tin pans. Bolts, cogs and nuts of varying sizes and shapes were scattered in unorganized piles. Pipes dripping with oil and condensation ran along the corridors with periodic strips of cloth tied around them, barring steam from pouring out uninvited.

In the Wheelhouse, caged birds sang a racket that echoed throughout the interior. One bird with strikingly white plumage and a long tail chirped a high-pitched note that reverberated down the corridor, disturbing the ship's inactivity. The song carried over popping gears and turning pistons, piercing the clangs and hums of *The Ephrait's* engines. It reached a worn hammock made of frayed tan burlap in need of repair strung from the bulkheads.

The hammock rustled.

The song came again upping its pitch.

“I don’t want...” mumbled the hammock’s occupant.

Light brown hair poked from the folds of the hammock. The man, Alister, slowly began to snore. His arm, still holding a wrench, hung over the side.

A small device attached to the engine below began to whistle softly. A minute jet of steam plumed from an opening at the top.

The bird song assaulted him once more, higher and shriller than ever. Soon the other birds joined in and an orchestra of frantic chirping filled the small space.

“Rusted pigeons...” Alister mumbled, this time a little more lucid, “stop that! I should have thrown you all out months ago.” He dropped the wrench and rolled over.

The audible battering continued.

Alister lifted his head irritably. His hair lying flat against his skull on one side, the other stuck straight out in all different directions giving him the look as if he had been a victim of a violent storm. Perched crooked on his forehead were a pair of large lensed goggles. They gleamed with polished metal and thick glass. Alister yawned and rubbed his tired eyes.

The chirping became more frantic, anxious. If Alister hadn’t been tired, he would have noticed the extreme change in pitch. Something was wrong.

“Eternal hell,” Alister croaked angrily. “You bunch of useless...” *Boom!*

An explosion shook *The Ephrait* throwing Alister from the hammock. He hit the ground with purpose, his lean muscular body naturally springing into action. He rolled across his shoulders, muscles suddenly awake and alive, throwing himself to his feet. His steps slammed against the floor as he sprinted down the passageway wearing nothing but blue and white striped breeches smeared in grease.

Hopping over a rusted piece of floor just in front of the entrance to the Wheelhouse, Alister made for the pilot’s chair. Another violent concussion crashed against *The Ephrait* throwing Alister to the side. To his right pipes burst, releasing jets of steam. The Wheelhouse became foggy as the evaporated water covered the room. Rock, blown from the canyon wall above, crashed against the observation deck causing the overhead compartments to boom like thunder.

Alister threw a stool off of his oil smeared legs and sprinted to his pilot’s chair ignoring the chaotic bursts of cannon fire and frenzied bird song around him.

Adjusting his goggles, Alister threw a lever retracting the grappler anchor keeping *The Ephrait* attached to the canyon wall. The spear-like anchor head broke free of the stone and retracted into the starboard side.

Alister pulled another lever and the engines rumbled to life, no longer producing a dull thrum but a swift pump of pistons. The sudden surge of the engines brought life to the airship, causing dim lights to brighten. *The Ephrait's* pipes took on pressure until an intersection made an ominous clunk.

The engines ground to a stop and the airship began to lose altitude.

A dial lit up, beeping a caution. Alister leapt to his feet. "Will you be quiet!" he bellowed as he passed the panicked birds. He took up a bulky hammer from the airship's nav desk and scrambled to the pipes.

Taking it in his right hand Alister smashed the hammer's fist sized head against the pipes, filling the Wheelhouse with even more ringing.

The birds stopped making noise as Alister ran to the other side of the cabin and turned a palm sized handle stabilizing the pressure.

The engines groaned back to life.

"Come on, don't fail me now." Alister said to the ship's ceiling.

Another explosion shook *The Ephrait*, this one closer than the last. Loose tools and parts burst from their assorted places above.

Alister dodged the chaotic mess, cursing as a wrench smashed against his foot. "Dammit" Alister growled as he stumbled into the pilot's chair. He yanked the throttle and the engines gave a heave. *The Ephrait* burst from between the canyon walls like a north pike fleeing from predators. The airship passed the lush green plateau and raced into the sky.

Alister sat forward, looking out the bulbous windshield, searching for his pursuers. The glass around the edges had turned foggy with hard water stains obstructing his view as he squinted to see into the distance.

Finally, he spotted his attackers. Three ships, two small, most likely fighters, and one large, all three sported the insignia and flag of Jubal's Abaric Pirate Alliance.

Alister cursed and adjusted his goggles.

Smoke burst from one of the ships followed by the whistle of a shell.

The shot fell short...thankfully.

Deciding to shake his pursuers off in the cloud cover, Alister flipped a switch, turned a knob then punched the throttle. As visibility faded, replaced with condensation from the clouds, Alister sat back in his chair and exhaled in frustration. Blinking dials and frantic gauges greeted him. Alister ran his hands down his face. The morning had not gone according to plan.