

Chapter 1

There were not always dragons in the Valley. Nor should we lament their passing. For hundreds of years, we of Veratalis and the greater Valley stood hostage to the scaled tyrants. Their time as dictators by talon and guile has finally closed, and thus unfolds a new age. Indeed, the dragons showed us how to work the magic of the Anchors, and they gave us much, but I say to you that they hid even more.

In proposition? An expedition I say! Hark, the Age of Mysticism has come to an end, so why not begin the new one in virtue of inquiry and enlightenment. Consider the possibility that the realm of Aithos is not a realm of terra at random, set to move at the whims of the Divines, but a world onto itself. One bound in accordance to natural law and free from the constraints of Jaheelism. By my studies of the extraterrestrial bodies I put forth the hypothesis that Aithos is indeed a globe. As such I suggest a venture to disprove the lies of our deceased rulers.

- Sypherus Aber Gamello

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"Unfurl the storm jib," crowed the First Mate. Ezhno Gamello —son of the dubbed heretic, Sypherus Gamello— allowed Manshin the scraggly cabin boy to shakily tether the safety line about him, as the sky ship frenzied with activity. The captain could not afford it if Ezhno plummeted to his death because of ill precautions taken in a stratostorm, and despite the man's pestering Ezhno refused to hide below deck. He had spent far too many years in the shadows, and now that the dragons were gone he would never do so again. Let the storms and light come as they may. Bring the pain and the joy. Ezhno would not hide again, for

what sort of life was that? His heart was like a diamond weathered in the crucible of society's cruelty. Nothing could be done to hurt him that had not already been tried, so Manshin's apprehension was the least of his worries.

The cabin boy—a child by all accounts—tied off the knot and scooted away without looking Ezhno in the eyes. Sailing the skies for the last year had done little to prepare Manshin for the monster that Ezhno was, and it certainly showed in his hesitancy to touch him. *Ah, yes well, I cannot change what is*, Ezhno thought, hardly feeling the sting of Manshin's rebuke. He was well aware that even as his kind went he was not simply hideous, but also a monstrosity of sorts. Ezhno had a hulking body which contorted at odd angles, and left his right shoulder a hand higher than the other. The hunch of his back, which required specially tailored shirts, rose like the abdomen of a spider, and the disfigurement of his face. . . well that was a story unto itself.

Barely a man of his thirties, Ezhno's features were more wrinkled than a love letter stuffed in the pockets of an adolescent, and the whiskers of his beard did little to hide it. The right side of his face was some trick of the Divines, or at least that's what Digs, his childhood friend used to say—often with the utmost disgust and awe. The skin there was pulled taut, while the left side remained slacker than the muzzle of a newly born puppy. The eye and nostrils resembled dough,—after minutes of beating of course—and the other side was, well, average. It was one thing to be born ugly, but why couldn't his "normal" features at the very least be mildly charming? But of course, they were not. He had eyes the color of the red clay, hair like a windswept garden, and a smile that grated like the crescent sliver of an unwanted moon.

No, Ezhno did not fault the boy. How many of his kind had he seen? Maybe one or two in all the Valley, and likely only when Veratalis crossed paths with the other floating Islands and the nations they held. It was only in those times of celebration that the dragons had permitted his kind to join the others in the light of day. Once in his childhood, during such an occasion, Ezhno had heard from the coattails of a young puppeteer that in the other nations it was not so terrible to be disfigured. In fact some, according to his puppet, had even been allowed to take work. The man had even gone so far as to suggest that long ago, Uthreall once had a Queen born of few limbs. *What would life had been like if I was born in Marakai or Uthreall?* But it was likely just a story told in kindness, after all the dragons had subjugated the Valley in force, and it was unlikely the yoke of their rule was much different from one place to another. But since their deaths such thoughts were no longer apart of Ezhno's life, and thus were unworthy of further inquiry —but the nearing stratostorm was however.

"Awaken," Ezhno said tersely. On command his corpse breathed to life, previously vacant eyes sparking with a violet glow, and limbs jerking as if suddenly scorned by a hot iron. Ezhno hated the moment every corpse awakened, it was violent, and unnatural. Sherina Gamello's Property always rattled to life like sand through a metal sieve, it was the sound of a subjugated soul, forced to return to its anchor. Of what terrible things Sherina did to deserve such a fate Ezhno had no idea, but he was sure she would have been glad to know it was in the name of discovery.

Sherina's head swiveled in his direction, awaiting her commands. Paler than a birch in the fog, Sherina might have once been a beautiful creature, but now she was thinner than a rail. Fed a strict diet in accordance with Institute recommendations, the corpse bore a chestnut

jumpsuit that barely clung to her lithe frame. Her hair was a thin sable and shorn short for practicalities sake.

"Sherina, please record in images." Wordlessly Sherina pulled a small notebook from her chest pocket, along with a charcoal pen, and began to furiously draw. Ezhno nodded, it had been quite the undertaking to program that command into it. No, her. For some reason calling Sherina else wise felt wrong. It probably had something to do with the way he had been bullied as a child. Sherina might be a corpse but it did not mean she wasn't deserving of respect.

The skyship lurched as the stratostorm began pulling at its jib, and tossing her into a swaying sickness. Ezhno checked Sherina's tether once more and felt assured by the quality of Manshin's knots. Grunting, he turned his attention once more to what might be hidden amongst the clouds of orange. In the sphere of the Valley the winds were usually amiable, carrying warm tidings, and breathable air. But sometimes the dredges of a deeper storm would brew and reach up into this place of life. Usually these were more deadly in the lower stratospheres and became milder the further up they rose. In fact, to feel such storms in the shelter of the floating continents was uncommon, for the rocks and plants provided safe harbor from the worst of it. But they were not in a place of safety or respite, but instead they taunted fate by floating their skyship as low as possible within the boundaries of the Valley. All of this due to a small writ of sponsorship locked safely away in Ezhno's cabin, and with it the captains only hope for fame and fortune. Hour's prior they had embarked from Veratalis with the goal of catching the slipstreams of a stratostorm. In doing so they would break free of the life sustaining region known as the Valley, to pierce the squall lines, and enter into Aithos's unknown.

Threading the stratostorm was the captain's job, as the Stormmaster had already done much of hers, and soon it would be Ezhno's turn to prove himself. After all there were many aboard the *Greash* who considered him little more than a bad omen. That time would soon come, *so no reason to worry about it now*, Ezhno sighed. For now, the best part of being a scientist and explorator was at hand. Observation.

Angry clouds were belched upward by the furious storm below, quickly encapsulating the *Greash*, and obscuring the blue skies above. The palette of the lower mesosphere changed as all became a rustic orange, and a slick sleeting rain began to fall. First a drop here or there quickly turned into a raging torrent that left the deck dangerously slick. Still the crew managed to scurry about at the behest of their officers. The skyship began to reel this way and that, and soon it was all anyone could do to keep it right side up.

The air grew heavy with noxious vapors, and Ezhno realized they were losing altitude. Black-Eyed Vin, the Menagerie Master, released jellyfish by the dozens and watched as they were swiftly sucked ahead of the skyship —they were small things, bred no larger than a sand dollar. Puffing helplessly, they lollicked in the winds at the storm's mercy, trying fruitlessly as they might to break free and float to more gentle heights. Translucent with seed like cloves set atop their bells, they provided a luminescent road map of the cross winds, and perhaps a route by which they might navigate.

Edging closer to the railing, Ezhno tried to get a better look —his faithful corpse shambling just behind him.

"Oi! Stay away from the siding Master Exploratore," called a familiar voice. From his perch the captain —a scarred, but otherwise handsome scoundrel— scowled at Ezhno.

"I need to record this!" Ezhno called back. "No one has witnessed such a thing before."

The captain made a disagreeable face before shouting again over the howling winds. "Still, I would ask that you remain well wide of the sides. I trust my lads line work, but anything can happen. And keep that thing out of my crew's way!"

Nodding, Ezhno spoke loudly to Sherina, commanding her to stay close. Sherina scribbled mechanically but otherwise did as told. Not that a corpse ever disobeyed. "Look amongst the clouds Sherina," Ezhno said, "if they really do guard the Valley then one will appear at the peripheries. So long as fire is not present we will be fine," and indeed none was to be found. The captain, despite their differences was not a stupid man, and both were not willing to risk it all —even if just a foregone threat, one could never be too sure when it came to the words of those tyrants.

Finding a nook out of the way, Ezhno watched as many of the jellyfish were pulled into an invisible tidal wave and sucked below. The white dots were quickly consumed by the rustic clouds and just lit by the fiercest flashes of lightening. The steersman guided the ship from such dangerous eddies, and followed the jellyfish who had found a safe path onward. Both cnidaria and *Greash* rode perilously upon the break of the storm, sensing that a single mistake would bring all to a terrible end.

"Divines!" cried the Chaplain, "Bring us balance above all things in this peril. Would you temper the fear with courage. Would you temper this

vessel between that which is too high and that which is too deep. Bless our steersman to bring us to the precipice so that we might ride the currents of this storm..."

The chaplain —a wolf in white— continued his prayer, and the corpse added him to her records. Ezhno did not much care for the man, but truthfully he did not care for many people, and neither their Divines. Their lives would be bought by skill, sweat, and the power of man's hand —not some unverifiable pantheon of gods.

After what felt like ages the skyship's movements began to slowly smooth once more as the navigator seemed to find the sweet spot between life and death. Straining the *Greash* began to lift upwards, a process which required a few attempts to break free of the storm's grasp. Ezhno peered out, squinting his eyes but there was nothing to see. No shadows amongst the clouds. No wraithlike shapes, or streaming bodies.

Nothing to see this time. As I suspected it was all a sham to keep us in one place, like swine for the slaughter.

"Sherina cease. Pad," he grumbled. At his words the corpse halted drawing mid stroke —she was on her sixth page by now— and handed him the booklet. Taking the drawing pad Ezhno frowned, not because of the lack of quality, but rather because her latest page included a half-finished likeness of him. Disgusted he ripped the page out and threw it overboard. The crumpled wad was promptly caught by a sour wind and floated away. The rest of her recordings were fine however. "Return home, and sleep. Maybe next time we will see a dragon," he smiled sarcastically. Like a soldier on command the corpse about faced and began to march towards her "home" as programmed. She made it only a few meters however before being caught by the rope at her waist. She

promptly froze as if commanded to stand in place, sighing Ezhno limped over and started to untie her.

"New model?" asked the Captain, walking up behind him. "Very sophisticated that, to command a corpse with a thought I mean."

"Not my model," Ezhno said, freeing Sherina to return to his cabin. Rumor had it that some members of the Institute could now command corpses with a mere thought, but Ezhno had never seen such a thing before.

"Sherina is programmed to fall inert at any hint of self-harm, preservation is her first directive. I slightly overdid that one, but I would rather her stay safe, so it's not too bad I believe."

"I'll say," the Captain said, rubbing his chin. "Treat it well and you'll never have to pay for another one again."

"I suppose you are not here to make small talk are you, Captain?"

"Straight to the point," he sighed, "talk of any kind would be nice, but yes I came to inform you the crow's nest is ready for you."

Wordlessly Ezhno removed the last vestiges of his safety line, retrieved his cane, and began limping towards the stern —where a large canvas of fabric was being unfurled by the crewmen.

"Assuming we survive, this will be a long journey to remain angry Master Exploratore," the Captain called. "And considering this endeavor was commissioned by the crown we should probably have more of a working relationship. Don't you think?"

No answer.

"Well, you ought to consider it," the Captain shrugged.

Ezhno rolled his eyes. Another person trying to tell him things, trying to fill his head with things as if he were nothing more than a child. Such was human nature, in that it was not so strange to look down on those who are different, and act as their betters.

Ah, but you are doing the same thing. Yes, except I am right.

Ezhno indeed looked down on the captain, and it would be by his graces the history books even bothered with that man's name.

Fastening the buttons of his storm coat, a long jacket of many pockets, Ezhno waited for the men to finish their preparations. Catching the wind, the canvas became an enlarged balloon with a spacious basket dangling just below. Climbing within, Ezhno gave a curt nod, which looked more like a monster about sneeze, and thus the men released the nest —glad to be rid of him. Pulled by the air, the balloon began to ascend. Ezhno was thrust through clouds, past howling winds, and into the higher etches of Aithos, where the stratosphere practically met the stars. There the air grew thinner, and Ezhno was grateful when the tether of the crows nest jolted it to a halt —and so it was that he began to plod along.

Alone at last. To the west the sun was beginning to dip away under a plane of cotton candy skies, marking its tracings with a golden glow. To the east the moons had only just begun to appear, accompanied by a consort of heavenly stars. Stars that barely moved, stars which would help him spin a new era of man, stars whose guidance would set his father free. Rummaging in his pockets Ezhno pulled out many things.

Tools for navigation, maps, and his father's notebook. Taking the time to establish their bearings, Ezhno began to relay instructions by a simple, but effective bell system, to the steersman below.

"Not much longer father," he murmured. "I will prove you right." The world was not made of planes situated with one on top of the other, but indeed it was round, and capable of being explored at man's whim. There was a fluffing nearby, as a manta ray broke the surface of the pink clouds and glided curiously aside the nest. It had leathery wing flaps reaching ten meters in either direction, and an even longer tail. Beady eyed, it watched him awhile before floating to the south, briefly exposing its orange underbelly as it rejoined its squadron —an enchanting bellow rolling from the mouths of its pups.

"You and me both," Ezhno said, realizing that he had just accomplished what few humans in history had before. He was free of the Valley and in the greater world of Aithos. What mysteries were out there? What was it that the dragons had so fervently hidden away. Wiping tears from the corners of his eyes, Ezhno set his gaze on the horizon, for this was only the beginning.

You and me both my friend. . .