

## Up above, down below

We ride the skies. We are the sky folk, only feeling alive while the never sleeping winds grab into our hair on deck of our steam powered airships, our supremacy contested by none, except the giant eagles from the crying peak. We stare with pride on the horizon, knowing there cannot be anything we're unable to conquer behind its line.

But our courage is not only rooted in the magnificent achievements of our scientists, even though most of their machines work by magic through the eyes of our air cadets. It is also our easy way of life, bold kings and queens of the vast cloud oceans... that makes us forget.

Forget how we shivered as childs, listening to the old nanny's legends from below the clouds. Forget how we shake our heads in disbelief whenever we hear tales from a captivated pirate, claiming he'd seen... things... down there. Ripping yarn. Forget how the whole crew always freezes in terror, if a malfunction forces our airships to sink partially into the clouds. There is a saying between air jacks: "All hope is drown, if you sink your crow's nest down." Some say the souls of crashed air buccaneers are caught in the clouds, weaving their songs of agony and sorrow into the winds that tear at our floating islands. There is tales of creatures with leathery wings, never seen, never studied, delving into the clouds.

But what lies even further below, down there in the deep? Since generations we pass a book on in our family, hundreds of years old, from a time when our ancestors still prayed to the wind god Quaalish for a safe passage, blind for the fact that the quality of our machines decided their fate, not obscure rituals. The book tells a story of the gods, creating our kind from magical clay, dug up from a vast island below the clouds, sharing their life with ours on this mysterious, endless island. This peaceful relationship ended as our scientists evolved to such heights that they challenged the gods creations, mimicking their wonders, stirring doubts into people's hearts about the rules of life our gods forced upon us. War was inevitable. But even though the limitless powers of our gods could wash our kind away, this would've been like drowning us in their own tears. Despite our riot, the love for their creation was so great that they crushed their own homeland into pieces, letting us float above the clouds on parts of it, ending the war by separation.

A well known legend describes a barren, wasted land down in the deep, where fat humans roam, weighted with heavy steel shackles, damned to never experience the life-granting feeling of flying between the islands, doomed, grounded forever, longing eternally for the clouds... in vain. Old men say it is us, as there was a time when we let balloons sink below the cloud ocean, crewed with murderers, to free the sky folk from the stone-hearted.

I heard the world down there is filled with horrendous creatures – in fact we have more stories of different monsters floating around than I know stars – waiting for the foolish to descent into their gray home of eternal rain. Their only means to reach onto our islands is by ascending from a dream about the world below. Yes, we are scientists. Nevertheless many of us never use a white blanket, as it resembles clouds and puts them below the white oceans while asleep.

There is a tale of evil children that died young but wouldn't let go existence, haunting the edges of our islands at night, pushing the unwary over the edge to gain company in a world without laughter, sunshine and movement.

Another war legend places our ancestors and other tribes on vast landscapes below the clouds, breaking into a war spanning the centuries – the infamous Forever War. Tired of destruction and ash

rain, we broke lose from the shattered land and escaped to the stars. Within our contemporary army a rumor is kept alive: if you die, you are cast down into the Forever War, only to be reborn as sky folk should you prove yourself as a glorious hero. And certainly the warring factions in the deep will know about us, as too many a ship crashed, got lost in the clouds, or brave adventurers descended... never to return.

Whichever story is true, I believe all things under the cloud ocean must be evil. Because whenever we talk of paradise, it lies somewhere hidden behind the horizon.

[optional end: I am not afraid about the mysteries that lie below. But as we are sure there is something, lurking beneath the clouds, how can we believe that up above us is nothing... but stars?]

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from the steam frigate Beyond Horizon

Thank you for reading!

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