

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jonathan put his hands to the oversized wheels of the control panel and heaved. Despite all appearances, it was not a musical instrument nor even particularly complicated. As the wheels moved, the lower section of the pipes shifted, metal squealing and groaning. A sudden howling of air issued forth from the device as gaps appeared between the pipes running from below and those vanishing into the darkness above. Despite people covering their ears with cloth or hands even over their earplugs, they winced at the tearing, shrieking noise — though it was just sound, and nothing more terrible.

The first wheel locked, and he moved on to the next one. There were only a few arrangements that actually resulted in proper connections, though the manipulations didn't touch on the true mysteries of the place and merely opened the way. The Arch would take its due when they crossed it.

It took several minutes of laborious operation and some minor experimentation when his notes proved insufficient. At length, however, the lower half of the pipes had been shifted into their new arrangement, and the vicious, howling screech abruptly stopped. A series of thumps and groans echoed from above, and a heretofore stationary shaft running up into the darkness beyond the burning-light began to turn. A rising growl of engaged machinery came from all about them, and things half-seen in the dull red light, beyond the bounds of the bright pool of zint, lurched into motion.

Then it all stopped.

Somewhere above them there came a keening wail, rising up beyond the frequencies of human hearing. A shudder ran through the control platform, and Jonathan looked upward with a scowl. Eleanor was the first to unplug her ears, looking around with deep skepticism.

"Is it supposed to do that?" She asked, more bite than question.

"It is not," Jonathan said, rising from the control panel. "Perhaps we damaged it last time we were here."

"Then are we done here? All that and it's just broken?" Eleanor crossed her arms with a scowl.

"Of course not," Jonathan said witheringly, as the rest of the group followed Eleanor's example and unstopped their ears. "I will investigate. There must be something that can be done." He hooked his cane onto the crook of his arm and simply leapt up atop the console, wrapping his hands around the pipes and pulling himself upward.

There were exclamations from below, but Jonathan ignored them as he ascended toward the noise. His fingers gripped rugged metal as he paralleled the still-turning shaft, the lantern at his belt competing with the burning-light just above. The glass-enclosed flame was set just off to one side, casting numerous and numinous shadows on the expanse of metal behind the turning shaft.

The Arch of Khokorron had deep and strange knowledge built into every cog and flange, the burning-lights and their shadows revealing depths and details to the trained eye that no zint light would display. Details Jonathan could no longer ignore, as he ascended high enough to reach

the point of failure, eyes trembling and teeth clenched as he found where the control shaft connected to some larger, more elaborate apparatus.

It was clear where the rotation stopped, but there was no apparent physical cause. It was only in the more subtle dimensions, in the complexity revealed by the burning-light and his own sunlight-pure vision, that the failure became obvious. Jonathan had only passing knowledge of machinery, but in this case it was a flaw in reality itself.

Jonathan's expedition to the Arch was far from the first, and each group had been of their own race, with their own rules and their own esoteric knowledge. Each visitation had altered the distances and dimensions, each operation had engaged the machinery with different and conflicting rules. The drag and the weight of the secrets that the three of them bore – Jonathan, Antomine, and Eleanor – had finally been too much.

The mechanism stood conceptually askew between what was and what should be, unable to complete its purpose as that purpose had been eroded. Anyone without long experience delving through inhuman architectures would likely be entirely stymied, and even Jonathan had few options. There were no devices he had prepared to address such an issue, nor could he leave. He would not abide anything that impeded his path to sunlight.

He clung to the pipes, watching the metal rotate, and focused all his esoteric understandings on what he saw. Despite his eyes wishing to drift off in different directions, and his hands having difficulty gripping the pipes now that their true geometry was revealed, he considered the aspects and elements he saw. The problem was, in the end, very simple: a gap needed to be bridged. An anchor driven between what was intended and what the machine had become.

As always, brute force could be surprisingly effective. It took someone with the proper understanding to know where to apply it, but that was something Jonathan had spent his entire life acquiring. He clung to the pipe with one hand, drawing his cane with the other and discarding the sheath, letting it slip into the darkness below. Then he drew it back, hesitating only a moment. The cane was special to him, but he could not let partiality influence his actions. With one smooth and steady motion, he thrust it forward.

Metal squealed as the blade punched through the rotating cylinder in an instant, plunging into the collar beyond, at angles that made his sinews creak in protest. For a moment it hung in an impossible superposition of directions, then the machinery began to turn. The blade followed the disjoint, seeming to shear in half as it was drawn into the untempered mysteries of the Arch's workings. For a moment Jonathan watched the cane sweep around, the blade distorted and disjointed in the way that water in a glass distorted a spoon. It seemed to grow more and less whole as the angles changed, entrained in the endless meshing of gear on gear.

Then he slid down, escaping the clangor and clamor as the Arch began moving in earnest, an echoing clash that spread through the far depths of the immense machine. All eyes were on him as he landed back on the platform, but Jonathan ignored the stares as he scooped up the flower-pole he had dropped before gesturing for them to leave. There was no sense trying to shout above the din.

The way back down through the web of passages was much the same as the ascent, and even though the paint still marked things Jonathan made sure people continued to use their poles to probe the way. The strange spots of instant freezing were hardly static, and indeed they had to

redirect their path several times, rendering the painted guides useless. The zint lantern hanging on the wall by the exit remained a constant, however, and by its guidance they found their way down the levels.

On occasions the cold-spots were marked not by the dwindling supply of flowers or previously-applied paint, but by the crystallized corpses of flying-things, or even less identifiable creatures. The sudden commencement of noise and motion had stirred them from whatever depths in which they lurked, but they had already long fled. Just as well, as in the cacophony of noise, the sounds of any hostile beast would have been impossible to discern.

By the time they reached the lantern, and could see the *Endeavor's* lights through the open door, the noise had settled into a steady thrum and a brisk wind came from above, smelling of rock and snow and ancient dust. It hastened them out the door, onto the broad span. The *Endeavor* and the long stretch of metal were both shielded by the wide-flung doors, but the patterns flung by the burning-lights within the arch shifted rapidly. The sight was striking, but there was no greater meaning than the evolution of the Arch's passages — though that itself might well be esoteric knowledge for those alien to humanity.

"The way will be open now," Jonathan informed them as they reached the tether line and unstopped their ears. The din was still incredible, but outside it was mostly rendered as a low shaking felt through their feet and in the air. "It is perfectly safe; the only one at risk is myself."

"I'll hold you to that," Antomine said, giving Jonathan a sharp look. It was, as ever, a toothless threat, and Jonathan ignored it as they all rode the ascent line back up to the *Endeavor*. Montgomery returned to the bridge, while Jonathan went to his cabin. The fruit was exactly where he left it, wrapped in paper in the secret compartment of his safe and pulsing with terrible life. He stowed it in the pocket of his suit and joined the others on the observation deck as the ship swayed, the engines powering the *Endeavor* away from the span and around the miles-high doors.

When the entrance of the Arch came into view the machinery had shifted, no longer working in impossible patterns but pulled back to reveal a long tunnel several miles in diameter, lined with burning-lights and extending endlessly beyond sight. The wind picked up as the *Endeavor* turned and approached the entrance of the tunnel, pulling them along until suddenly they were inside.

The strange red of the burning-lights washed over them and through them, and the machinery of the tunnel assembled itself into vistas never before seen — and perhaps that did not exist. A slow creeping presence seeped in with the light, nothing like a person, but something cold and rigid and alien. Jonathan reached into his pocket to withdraw the fruit, knowing what the others were experiencing — a strange sense of being familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, as the very moment of ignorance turning to knowledge was taken from them to pay the passage. He didn't know why that particular toll was demanded, nor what was done with the proceeds, but it was one that couldn't be paid twice. Thus he needed the fruit, or another toll that could only be paid once — that of a life.

Yet the fruit was not there.

He immediately leapt to a certain conclusion, and whirled to look for Eleanor. A flash of her greatcoat showed her retreating to her room, and he leapt after her. It was impossible to tell

whether temptation had overwhelmed her, or pique, but it hardly mattered. He slammed into the closing door to her room, tearing it off its hinges as he chased after her.

Jonathan tore Eleanor from hiding, her form becoming visible as his fingers closed around her throat, slamming her against the wall. Her own hand gripped the fruit, half-raised to her lips and her eyes glinting with greed and malice as she fought against him. He seized her hand before she could close her teeth around her, her head straining forward to take a bite. Jonathan pried it from her grip with grim brutality, Eleanor's fingers creaking as he forced them away from his prize.

The sound of feet came from behind him as he pulled the fruit free, which he ignored because the red burning-light was collecting around him. Hurriedly he bit down on the fruit, once, twice, and again, chewing and swallowing it with haste. It tasted like nothing so much as dire fortitude, some monstrous vitality quivering on his tongue, and yet there was something even more. The fruit was a life, full and entire, not merely some excess hardness.

As soon as it came, collecting in his gut with coiling preparedness, the red light took it away again. Jonathan had no idea what the fruit would do to a human without the proper knowledge, as it was intrinsically part of the Garden's secrets, but its power and meaning were stolen by the Arch before they could be fully realized. Only the taste of blood remained, staining Jonathan's lips and tongue.

"Mister Heights! Let her down!" Antomine's voice thundered and Jonathan realized he was still holding Eleanor by the throat, her nails clawing at his wrist. He sneered at her and then let her drop, where she let out a choking, gasping wheeze. Jonathan turned to Antomine, seeing both him and the pair of maids, the latter standing with their daggers drawn.

"Surely you are not going to suggest that retrieving what was mine – something I needed to *survive this trip* – was untoward?" Jonathan raised his eyebrows at them.

"An extremity you brought upon yourself," Antomine said severely. "Your protestations of innocence are hardly credible with blood upon your teeth." Jonathan frowned and retrieved his handkerchief from his pocket, wiping at his mouth and finding that it came away dark crimson. He patted his lips and then folded the handkerchief, glancing down at a still-gasping Eleanor, trying to catch her breath.

"I care little about your judgements," Jonathan said, tucking the stained handkerchief in his pocket. "You may attend to her; I will be needed on the bridge." He took a step forward, and Antomine didn't move. Neither did Sarah or Marie, though neither of the maids looked at all confident. "Or do you intend to hold me here?" He flexed his hands, instinctively reaching for a cane he no longer had.

"That depends," Antomine said, producing a pistol. "Sarah, check her."

Jonathan looked on half in disbelief, half in bemusement as Sarah stepped forward to attend to Eleanor, giving Jonathan as wide a berth as she could in the cramped cabin. Eleanor's wheezing breaths filled the air as Sarah helped her upright, performing a brief inspection before easing her over to her bed. While she wasn't comfortable, she wasn't dying either; Jonathan had restrained himself out of respect for Eleanor's past help and whatever future aid she might be able to offer. There was that, but there was at least one other element.

The part of him that regarded her as a friend had become increasingly faint as they went further east. With sunlight drawing near, it became easier – if not obligatory – to shed some of what he'd needed to be to return back to the west, back to Beacon, and prepare for his journey. That didn't mean he needed to be monstrous. His goal was a thing of the light – however different it was from the Illuminated King – and not of the darkness favored by Ukari.

All of which wouldn't stop him from utterly destroying Antomine if he tried to truly stand in Jonathan's way. The inquisitor had been rather more skeptical since Ukaresh, but was constrained by what were surely orders to bring back the truth of sunlight. More pragmatically, he was constrained by personal weakness, as he was a creature more of politics and zint — things which held little sway so far east. Perhaps if Jonathan intended to return west, Antomine would have more authority.

"I," Eleanor said, wheezing the word. "Am. Fine." It was clearly a lie, but if she could still talk he clearly hadn't crushed her throat too badly. Antomine lowered the pistol and Jonathan brushed past him and Marie. He made a brief stop in the head to ensure that he didn't still have any blood on his lips or teeth before heading downward, leaving the drama behind him. There would surely be further repercussions, but that could wait for its own time.

He swept down one flight and headed to the bridge, the ever-shifting gears and panels and burning-lights of the Arch's passage visible through the portholes. Montgomery beckoned him inside, looking pensive and surveying the mechanical surroundings stretching in every direction. The *Endeavor* was clearly moving faster than even the engines could push it, with enormous baffles opening and closing ahead of them to alter their path of travel.

"I can't say I enjoyed that experience," Montgomery said, hands clasped behind his back. "Nor am I comfortable with being so enclosed. Tell me, Mister Heights, how long is this expected to last for."

"In truth, not much longer," Jonathan said. "It is a rapid transit."

"Odd that it's designed for airships," Montgomery said. "Instead of foot traffic. Not everyone flies."

"I suspect that if we were to approach on foot, we would find it accommodated that," Jonathan admitted. "The operation I performed merely nudged it to have the correct destination. The rest of this is of its own initiative."

"Pretty sure I like that less," Montgomery sighed, then reached out to pat the nearest console. "Though I'm hardly going to speak ill of machines."

"There should be a place to resupply once we reach the other side," Jonathan said. "A small vein of terestrite we found on our first expedition. Foodstuffs will require more effort, but there should be more than enough fish in the lakes there."

"I'm a bit worried about the return journey, considering what happened with Ukaresh," Montgomery admitted. "I'd thought we'd have more foreign ports available."

"Going west is far different," Jonathan assured him. Without the ontological effort of traveling east, supplies stretched further, navigation was simpler, and the very paths of travel were different. "There, see? We are nearly out already." He pointed to the walls, where black panels began replacing the metal ones, and the fantastical landscapes rendered in relief faded away.

The black panels multiplied, spreading out and around them until at last there was only black metal with a few lonely burning-lights. Spotlights suddenly shone on ground instead of metal as the *Endeavor* emerged from the other end of the Arch of Khokorron — or at least, one of the other ends. The aperture was far smaller than the incredible monument they had entered, set into a sloping hill at the far end of a vast barren desert.

Ahead was a spread of lonely blue points, winking in the blackness. Each one was a great glowing flower, illuminating one of innumerable spheres of water that bubbled upward from the ground: lakes with boundaries of air rather than earth. It was, withal, a far more hospitable place than whence they had come, if one that conformed even less to logic and reason.

“Lofted Lakes,” Montgomery said, glancing at the name on the map. “Even though you told me what to expect, it’s strange to see. I assume the zint is on the surface?”

“Aye,” Jonathan confirmed. “It’s safer to navigate below them, regardless. Above is unlikely and between can be hazardous.”

Montgomery nodded and began giving orders, and the *Endeavor* swung onto a new heading. Their path mostly skirted around the edge of the Lakes, heading north and east, but to resupply they would have to venture into the shallows. Which was just as well, since they needed to refresh not only their zint, but their food and water as well. Dark shapes swam within the enormous teardrops of the lakes, here and there breaching the surface to launch themselves from one body to another.

The *Endeavor*’s lights played over huge, leafy trunks buried into the ground as they drew closer, roots holding tight to the ground against the upward pull of the lakes, or the flowers, or whatever particular element gave the region its distinctive features. The sorrowful blue that stood at the heart of each of the lakes only cast a wan light, illuminating almost nothing but itself — though that made finding the zint easier, as it was the only source of light coming from below.

Jonathan stayed on the bridge, hands left to clasp together behind his back without his cane to lean on. He stood at attention, watching the *Endeavor* navigate around the trunks and illuminate a thick carpet of lichens and mushrooms growing in the damp below the lakes. While his presence wasn’t strictly necessary, the bridge was preferable to the passenger deck at the current moment.

The zint vein came into view, obvious not only by its glow but by the lack of any covering vegetation. Nothing grew on luminiferous terrestrite. It was a particularly ominous quality in some ways, though a reminder that it kept out the dark.

“I no longer have anything to particularly ward off the weather or wildlife,” Jonathan informed Montgomery. “We will have to be extremely careful venturing outside in these climes.”

“Aye, we’ll be cautious,” Montgomery said impatiently, and then started giving orders to tether. In deference to Jonathan’s warning, he had the area swept with artillery first, just to ensure there was nothing hiding in the fungal snarl around the glowing strand on the ground below. Bright flashes of zint reduced mushroom stalks and patches of creeping mold to luminous ash, and sent dark shapes scurrying away in a panic.

A crewman went to the fore chase gun, focused below as airmen with flightsuits descended to drive tethers into bare rock. Drops of water pattered down here and there, like inconstant rain,

from the vast dark shapes above; more than one airman looked upward nervously, as if afraid the suspended water would collapse upon them all at once. Jonathan half-expected a comment from Eleanor, but she still hadn't appeared from above.

He pursed his lips at the thought, then shook it off and went below, to the cargo deck where the descent line was being rigged. Lacking his cane, he borrowed a pike from the ship's armory; such a device was like to be more useful against the sorts of beasts that might find their encampment interesting. He hadn't handled one since he was a much younger man, on one of his father's expeditions to the south, but the weapon was simple enough.

The air outside was cool and smelled of fresh water and wet stone. The lakes made an odd, low rushing noise, completely unlike waves on a shore and yet still distinctly liquid. Under the glare of the spotlights, the place had little to recommend it; with the surrounding growth erased by the *Endeavor's* cannons, it was little more than a stretch of rock. Once they had retrieved sufficient zint, they would have to ascend to one of the lake boundaries to supply with food and water.

Jonathan expected merely to stand guard and stretch his legs, but as the portable distillery was being lowered, Antomine approached him with Lux Guard in tow. Jonathan favored the inquisitor with a dark look, loosely holding the pike as he kept half an eye on the area illuminated by the *Endeavor's* spotlights. Most of the dangers were held in the lakes above, but there were always beasts lurking in the dark.

"Eleanor's story of what happened was quite interesting," Antomine said, by way of an opening gambit.

"No doubt," Jonathan replied, already irritated by the inquisitor's manner. "It was fairly simple, so there couldn't have been too much of a story."

"*Events* are often simple, but motivations almost never are." The young man unfolded a small camp chair he'd been carrying under one arm, sitting down on it to show that it was just a casual talk. Jonathan wasn't sure how effective the technique actually was; he certainly had no illusions about his relationship with the inquisitor. The Lux Guard, in contrast, stood at attention facing outward, holding its rifle.

"I confess I am not terribly interested in Eleanor's motivation for stealing the one thing I needed at that very moment," Jonathan told him, tapping a finger impatiently on the pike handle. "The consequences are what matter, and they could have been dire."

"Indeed. While I still do not like being kept in ignorance regarding the Arch's price, I cannot argue the necessity." Antomine waved it away. "No, I am more interested in *your* motivations, Mister Heights. I would say you were more than capable of killing Eleanor in that moment, but you did not. Despite already showing you are more than willing to remove anyone who inconveniences you."

"No doubt you consider me some sort of monster," Jonathan said. It was clear what Antomine wanted: some sort of handle on Jonathan's behavior. A method of approach, whether to understand or to manipulate. "But regardless of what you think, I am not some barely-restrained thug. As you pointed out on the ship, Eleanor is not entirely responsible for her own actions. I did what was required, as she was not amenable to more gentle methods of persuasion."

“You didn’t even try,” Antomine objected. Jonathan snorted.

“In that moment, with the actions she had taken, do you think mere words would have made a difference? A half-second more and both of us might be dead — or you might have something far worse on your hands.” He didn’t point out that Eleanor still knew *how* to make the fruits, and if the temptation was truly too great she would succumb eventually.

“That’s an awful lot of calculation for what looked to be an act of passion,” Antomine said, lacing his fingers together over his chest. He didn’t look at Jonathan, instead casting his gaze beyond to the boundaries of the *Endeavor’s* lights. “I suppose I should commend your control. If it is *your* control.”

“I am entirely my own person,” Jonathan said testily, though he was more tempted to simply not respond to Antomine’s oblique question. “If I have control over my emotions rather than acting on impulse, I would think that is something to be commended.”

“It’s a surprisingly rare circumstance,” Antomine murmured. “As we have gotten further east I believe you have become more erratic. It is a worry, you see. While the Illuminated King certainly seems to think there is something to your tales of sunlight, and he would know, that faith becomes moot if you lead us into something we cannot handle.”

Antomine seemed to be worried that Jonathan was intending to purposely sacrifice the *Endeavor*, and those aboard her, in his quest. Perhaps it was a fair concern, for an inquisitor. Most people wouldn’t entertain the idea of a betrayal of that magnitude, but cultists and fanatics that found the wrong sort of esoteric knowledge had no issue with sacrificing entire cities. Jonathan wasn’t certain if he should be insulted or flattered by the thought.

“I have no desire to run the *Endeavor* aground on the same rocks that the last expedition did,” Jonathan told Antomine, shifting the pike from one hand to the other. “If we come to grief it will be in spite of my preparations, not because of them. At the same time, the places we must go are not safe, and in many ways. What happened with Eleanor was an unforeseen consequence, and as I am not omniscient there may be more of those. But not too many.” He smiled briefly, though there was little humor in it. “We are nearly to our destination.”

“Yes, so you say.” Antomine paused as a soft rustle came from somewhere at the edge of the pool of light, but nothing came of it. “If I am reading your maps right, we will follow the Grave of Wood to Bright Defile. It does worry me that the dangers of these places have not yet been enumerated.”

“What good would it do?” Jonathan asked, only half rhetorically. “To let people dwell on such things would only cause trouble. There are no preparations we can make beyond normal care and caution.” He pressed his lips together, then spoke reluctantly. “The Grave of Wood was where my last expedition did meet its end, but only because they succumbed to greed. It is guarded, but only against those who might disturb those interred. So long as we simply pass it by we are in no danger. And the Bright Defile is where sunlight may be found. The details of that even I cannot say.”

“Greed might be a problem — for Eleanor, if nobody else,” Antomine said pensively. “She is not in good control of herself. As you have seen.”

Jonathan started to reply, then thought better of it. Antomine eyed him, then drew the correct conclusion from his actions and twisted around to spot Eleanor and the maids heading toward them. It wasn't clear why; the three passengers weren't exactly on the best terms and there was nothing particularly special about the part of the perimeter Jonathan had staked out. Though perhaps it was simply that they *were* passengers. In the end, that alone held them separate from the crew.

"Floating lakes may be interesting, but I'm awful tired of all this stuff," Eleanor said, unfolding her own chair and dropping into it with a groan. "Too many things that just don't make sense or hurt to look at. And explorers do this all the time?"

She conspicuously didn't mention the incident just past, a wordless offer that Jonathan accepted. Eleanor had very obvious makeup on her throat to cover the bruising, and her voice was a little hoarse, but she seemed determined to ignore it. Sarah and Marie seemed less forgiving, their looks noticeably chilly. In truth he was surprised that the three women were actually getting along; he would have thought there'd be more friction between Eleanor and the ones sent to make sure she behaved.

"It is less condensed than we have experienced. Most of the time we would stop at a destination and spend weeks or months puzzling it out," Jonathan told her, watching shadows move at the edge of the spotlights. "This breakneck pace is the result of a significant amount of research and preparation. There were any number of things to be found at each place we stopped, but that was not our goal."

"I know, I know, sunlight," Eleanor said derisively. "Kinda getting tired of that."

"There is not much more to go," Jonathan said. "We will reach our destination soon enough, and then you can look forward to the trip home."

"Right," Eleanor said dryly. "I'm not sure that's the phrase I'd use, but better than going further east. What *is* further east of here, anyway?" She waved her hand around indicating the lakes, or perhaps just the general environs.

"I have no idea," Jonathan said honestly. "This is as far as my maps go. Bright Defile was a chance discovery, and so far as I can tell few humans have ever gone through the Arch of Khokorron. The east is not kind to humans, and many explorers prefer the south — or even the north."

"Which aren't much better," Antomine said conversationally. "Though so far we have found nothing more fearsome than the Cult of Flame and the Invidius Croft — threat enough, but manageable."

"If I ever go out of Beacon again, remind me not to go north," Eleanor muttered. "The Croft gives me the creeps. At least the Flame Cult guys seemed nice enough."

"Only because they needed our help. Do not mistake desperation for anything approaching acceptable behavior," Antomine admonished.

"Every time you bring up something like that, it makes me more surprised you came along at all," Eleanor said, pointing at him. "I don't think you've approved of a single thing since we left Danby's."

"I have a certain duty," Antomine said, unperturbed by the accusation. "If anything, it is all the more important that I am here to safeguard the men and women of the *Endeavor* than be comfortable back in Beacon. After all, where is the guardian most needed: deep within the locked keep, or at the gates?"

"I'd say we're well beyond the gates at this point," Eleanor said. Antomine chuckled.

"With that, I have to agree."