

Chapter Twenty-One

Jonathan strode confidently through a deep warren underneath the streets of Ukaresh. Freed of his human companions, Jonathan felt no need to maintain his restraint, and the rapping of his cane on the tunnel stone tolled like approaching doom. The crowd parted in front of him of its own accord, averting their gazes from the sunlight burning behind his eyes.

The tunnels were stone and metal, lit by tubes that cut the already cramped space in half and forced the subterranean inhabitants to squeeze by to one side or the other. A spiderlike being with a head bearing three faces looking in three different directions tried to crowd in behind Jonathan, then thought better of it and diverted down a side-passage. A troupe of wild-furred creatures with grotesquely distorted limbs, eyeless and yet in every other respect bearing perfect and flawless skin and features, ambled in the opposite direction and flattened themselves away from his presence.

There was no telling how many of the strange beings were from their own distinct race and how many had been changed, corrupted, or controlled by secrets and mysteries found out in the dark — if there was a difference between the two to begin with. Just as in the city above, the tunnels below were punctuated with rare but sudden bursts of violence, whether one being preying upon another or a disagreement escalating to its inevitable end.

He bypassed all of that, walking down toward the Pits of the Condemned — one of the few places that traded in living beings. Those consigned to the Pits were generally those who had attracted the ire of the truly powerful, either by demonstrating too destructive an appetite or too unruly a temper, and were not to be allowed in even a place so free-spirited as Ukaresh.

Even for him, there was something disconcerting about the vast, hushed space deep beneath Ukaresh. Arched galleries ran in every direction, lit by flickering torches whose flames never consumed their chalk-white wood. Broad and voracious holes gaped in the uneven brickwork of the floor, hungry maws that sucked down light and sound, hiding whatever might be in their depths. Every stone above and below radiated weariness and age, defaced engravings of the same long face repeated at every intersection, watching sadly from gouged-out eyes.

Through it all wound a faint strain of strange music, both soothing and entrancing. It was quiet but pervasive, an orchestra in miniature on a stately amble through a complex assemblage of notes. While the music itself was pleasant, the source was anything but.

“Welcome!” The sing-song voice of the Keeper of the Pits rang out as the creature itself ambled into view, a blasphemous amalgamation of myriad limbs from insectile to avian emerging from an enormous steel barrel. It had added an additional head and neck since Jonathan had seen it last, with bulging eyes and a stitched-closed mouth. The Keeper’s voice came through four other heads, voices harmonizing despite none of them sharing any similarities. Some eldritch engine growled and puffed within the metal torso in a steady beat behind the music, venting steam and sound through pipes emerging from the rotund body.

“Greetings,” Jonathan said, using the same tongue. Trade pidgin, a cobbled together awkward bastard of a language, ugly yet serviceable — much like the Keeper itself. “I am looking for something large. Something robust. A life that could drown mine.”

The esoteric functions of the Arch of Khokorron were very much a mystery, but he knew enough to understand it would require more than a perfunctory offering to let him cross it a second time. Something – someone – of importance, of power and history. Nor did he have any desire to use any of the passengers or crew — that was far too dark a deed to survive the cleansing light of what awaited in Bright Defile. He had doubts any of them would suffice to begin with; even someone of Antomine’s stature couldn’t measure up to Jonathan’s presence.

“Certainly, good customer!” The Keeper sang cheerfully, punctuated with a sharp whistle from the steam venting through its back. “We have many new entries to the Pits! Come this way!” The engine inside the Keeper’s body grumbled, and it moved off through one of the many identical arches. Jonathan followed at a safe distance; it was only his own discretion that would keep him from joining the other condemned in one of the endless holes that stretched in every direction.

There were no cries, moans, or pleading from any of the pits, but the enforced quiet was only more eerie. The only noise was the Keeper humming musically in four different pitches at once, a disconcertingly harmonious effect. Something so offensive to the eye should not be so pleasant to the ear. Even the noise of Jonathan’s cane was muffled, refusing to echo from the worn bricks.

He memorized the turnings, as every point within the Pits was identical save for the staircase up. The Keeper had its own sort of integrity, but it was not to be trusted for anything but keeping and delivering merchandise. Those who entered its domain did so at their own peril, but Jonathan was confident in his own ability.

The Keeper stopped at one pit in particular, no different from any of the others, and hummed a high note. The torches flared, the light suddenly reaching the bottom of the pit and revealing a creature with stripes of all colors, bearing a particularly feline cast yet with a cruel tilt to its eyes and jaw. It seemed almost frozen at the bottom of its pit, as if suffering from some particularly soporific effect — though Jonathan knew it was music that soothed the savage beast.

“This one is old! And heavy! And large! And has killed so, so many things!” The Keeper seemed pleased with its selection, and Jonathan had to admit it was a good one. Despite the nature of the Pits, Jonathan could feel the weight of the being’s presence, something that bespoke an understanding of profound secrets.

It would do for Jonathan’s purposes. He would let the Keeper think what it wished about his reasons for purchasing that particular creature, though Jonathan would have to leave it in the Pits until it was time. There was no way he could contain such a thing, whether in the *Endeavor* or some place in Ukaresh.

“I will take it. You will hold it here until I am ready to retrieve it?” Jonathan hefted the heavy case he’d brought with him. While gold and silver were valued enough currency in Ukaresh, some things were valued far more, by the right people.

“Yes! Yes! What will you pay?” The Keeper rounded on him with deceptive speed, the heads peering at the case. Jonathan hung his cane on the crook of his arm as he opened it up, withdrawing several musical instruments packed within: a violin of rich red wood, an ivory flute, and a brass trumpet. All of them were well-used, and while not in the best shape that was hardly the point. It was the hours of music they had played.

“Will these do?” Jonathan asked, setting out the instruments on the ground and stepping back. Three of the Keeper’s limbs picked them up, bringing them for its various heads to inspect. Then reached up to open a small hatch on the top of its body and dropped the instruments in, slitting its eyes in pleasure.

“Very good! Very much good!” It seemed happy, and yet belying its words it took the opportunity to lunge suddenly at Jonathan, the warbling sounds of strings and woodwinds coming from somewhere deep inside it. Jonathan took a quick step back and grabbed his cane, belting the Keeper across the nearest face and not bothering to control his strength. The Keeper skidded back from the force of the blow, myriad limbs gripping the brickwork, and then it laughed like a symphony. “I will wait! You will return!”

“I will,” Jonathan confirmed grimly, staring down the abomination and letting the sunlight surge through his soul. Five pairs of eyes stared him, then one by one looked away, blinking as smoke rose from their eyelids, scorched by the sight. Satisfied that he’d made his point, he turned away and traced the path back to the stairs.

He ascended to the city proper, determined to find some rather more mundane purchases while he was out and about. Even if much of Ukaresh was suffused with items and services for those with exotic tastes and temperaments, ordinary interests and appetites still existed. Jonathan trusted none of the food or drink, as there were additives common to the east which would not sit well with humans, but other things were relatively safe.

At one stand he purchased several dozen potted flowers – with gold, as he didn’t know the particular vendor – and had them sent to Crispin’s building. At another stand, he acquired several sacks of spices he recognized to replace the flagging stocks of flavorings aboard the *Endeavor*. Venturing into a region of close and smoky ceilings, he negotiated for billets of steel and brass to be sent back, though there was no carisium so far east.

The only other business he had in the city waited on Eleanor, and there was little he could do to speed that along. While he was not privy to the secrets of the Black Garden, he was passingly familiar with what knowledge there was of the place, buried somewhere below Ukaresh. Of the secretive Sisters of the Immaculate Thorns that safeguarded it, and the rumors of the fruit they could provide.

He had witnessed one particular feat himself, one that he needed to pay for his passage through the Arch of Khokorron. There had been other options, but none so sure as the fruit of life that the Sisters could produce. As a man, he could not even speak to them, but Eleanor would be welcomed.

Returning to the *Endeavor*, he found Crispin directing the cleaning away of several corpses from the landing where the airship was tethered. The bug-man clicked his mandibles in Jonathan’s direction, clearly happy about the largesse, and Jonathan inclined his head. Despite the disturbing appearance and odd habits, Crispin was well capable of safeguarding the *Endeavor* from most forces in Ukaresh.

There were no airmen posted at the base of the descent tether, but when he tugged on it he could see a pair of heads peer out of the hatch above — the brawny and wiry pair that he had seen so often. Then the descent line started moving, and he held onto the rings as it brought him up to the ship. He had intended to return to his cabin and wait for Eleanor to reappear, as it

would be on her terms, or Ukari's. Yet Antomine was waiting for him the moment his boots touched the deck.

"Mister Heights," he said severely, white-pupiled eyes glowing. "You will account for what Ukari has done to Eleanor immediately."

Jonathan frowned, planting his cane on the floor and regarding Antomine. The Lux Guard stood silently behind him, but of the two he found Antomine more dangerous. All the more dangerous for confronting Jonathan in front of witnesses, which forced him to consider the *Endeavor's* crew. He didn't want to start having trouble so far into the journey.

"I mere suggested an opportunity that, given the knowledge, she would have sought out of her own accord," Jonathan replied, choosing his words with care. Not only would Antomine detect any lies, but he would have to account for his lies under sunlight. Untruth would burn, and if he was not careful, so would he. "It was mere fortune that She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed found her interesting and so hastened the process."

"We do not tempt people into corruption, nor hand them off to foreign rulers," Antomine said, biting off each word with obvious ire. "I have been understanding of your actions on this expedition, Mister Heights, because the Illuminated King is very interested in sunlight and there are certain realities to traveling in such savage lands. But that is not the same as allowing you to do whatever you like."

"I hardly forced Eleanor to do anything," Jonathan said, utterly unmoved by Antomine's veiled threats. "She made the decision all on her own."

"Don't be disingenuous." Antomine scowled, fingers toying with his inquisitor's medallion. "If you know what someone will do if you tell them a certain thing, you're as responsible for their actions as they are, if not more so. The Inquisition deals with the temptations of forbidden knowledge all the time, and those who indulge in them are often more victim than heretic."

"If you blame me for Eleanor's behavior, then what are you proposing? That you become her guardian, a grown woman with knowledge of secrets the inquisition does not condone?" Jonathan shook his head slowly, fingers tapping on the handle of his cane. "I do not think you would find that a worthwhile endeavor."

"She does not deserve any less consideration due to her secrets, or her choice of employers," Antomine said, pointing a finger at Jonathan. "If choice it was! She has told me that you were the one who introduced her to the Reflected Council to begin with."

"I do not imagine you actually care much about some years-ago decisions," Jonathan said, refusing to rise to the bait, though somewhat surprised Eleanor had revealed so much about her past. "If you have some wild idea about my manipulations of those aboard, I can merely state that I believe *everyone* on the *Endeavor* has some part to play in our journey to find sunlight. Myself, you, her, Captain Montgomery, the crew — everyone. I do not believe it unreasonable that I would bring people I find skilled and competent."

"Do not confuse the issue," Antomine said, clasping his hands behind his back. "What have you led Eleanor into, and why? You are many things, Mister Heights, but you do not strike me as needlessly cruel or depraved. I have even seen flashes of compassion, from time to time, so surely you have some purpose for it."

"I cannot precisely tell you," Jonathan said, and held up a hand to prevent a protest. "If I were to expound in detail, then you would be subject to a price that you could not pay. I dare not even hint too much, for even if you were to figure it out from logic and reason, the penalty might still be exacted upon you. What I offered Eleanor was power of her own — but also a chance to help me with the price I shall not speak."

Antomine peered at him suspiciously, clearly not convinced. Yet, Jonathan was speaking the truth and Antomine had already shown the ability to detect any kind of falsehood. More, as an inquisitor he knew well the nature of secret knowledge, and how too many details could result in some searing revelation or creeping horror. Or simply render someone vulnerable to a greater power.

"I do not believe that your goals are worth such a sacrifice," Antomine said at length. "Anything that demands that kind of price is not to be trusted. It is already done and cannot be undone, but the Illuminated King will make the judgement about whether it is worthwhile." The young man scowled at that, but his orders had clearly prioritized finding sunlight over the usual considerations of the Inquisition. "However, I cannot trust even the most innocuous of actions from you any longer. These purchases — the metals and spices I understand, but the flowers?"

"Perfectly mundane, I assure you," Jonathan replied, somewhat amused that Antomine had latched onto so small a detail. "There are places where a cold fire — rather like unflame — burns without light. Any time we need disembark, we simply take a flower or two on the end of a pole and use it to ensure we don't run into any of these pockets."

"That is suspiciously reasonable," Antomine replied, not sounding reassured.

"It is a trick that I learned some years ago from a native," Jonathan explained. "There are tricks for all the hazards here, but we are already protected against most of those thanks to our time in Angkor Leng."

"Yes, and I commend that foresight even if I now suspect the path itself," Antomine said, disgusted. "I will not offer toothless warnings about what may happen if you continue to threaten the integrity of the men and women on this ship, but neither will I allow you to act with impunity. I will inform the captain and crew you are to give no orders and go on no excursions without me being notified."

Jonathan thumped his cane on the deck, a sharp beat like the booming a great drum, cold fury warring with cold calculation. He refused to let Antomine curb his behavior or present the slightest barrier to his destination — and yet, Antomine's threat was fairly toothless despite his words. The greatest threat the inquisitor posed was influencing Montgomery or his crew to simply turn around and head back to Beacon, and it was far too late for that.

There were still dangers ahead, but Ukaresh and the price required to pass the Arch of Khokorron had been some of the things Antomine would most object to. He still might, but he was hardly capable of stopping either Jonathan or Eleanor from leaving. So there was, perhaps, no real reason to defy Antomine just yet. Not until he tried to cross the line they had both been maintaining.

"When Eleanor returns, we will be going back into the city. That will be the last excursion, as you put it, here in Ukaresh, and then we should be on our way. I do not foresee any troubles, for our business is entirely straightforward — but of course I can make no guarantees." He

refused to directly agree to Antomine's terms – not that they had been put in the form of a question – but would stretch a point to meet him partway.

“And that business — that price you mentioned?” Antomine asked. Jonathan let his lip curl in a sneer.

“Indeed; I have already finished my mundane tasks. The days are long past when I would wander such a city for the novelty of it.” Jonathan waved it aside. “Is there anything else, Mister Antomine? If not, I believe you have a captain to see.” It was perhaps unwise to rile the inquisitor, and let him know how little Jonathan thought of his authority, but so far from Beacon there didn't seem any point in pretending. Perhaps if Jonathan intended to return, there would be cause enough to be conciliatory, but he'd already burned all his paths back.

Antomine gave him a long, level look, and then turned on his heel to head for the stairs. The airmen scurried afterward, clearly relieved the confrontation was over. Jonathan took a moment to double-check his immaculate suit, letting the others get ahead, before he ascended to his own cabin to wait. There was no telling how long Eleanor would be — though he doubted it would be more than a day or so. Unless something went terribly wrong, and Jonathan would be forced to consider less palatable alternatives.

He settled himself in his cabin, stretching out on his bunk. As much as he was driven to move forward, there was little to be done at the moment, so it was better to reserve his energy. He would need it to deal with the final task in Ukaresh.

What woke him was a feeling of hysterical avarice, a bloody living hunger descending upon him from above. His hand shot out to grab Eleanor's wrist as he rolled out of his cot onto his feet. She laughed at him, hair disheveled and eyes wide, burning darkly as she tried to wrest the hand with the dagger from his grasp.

“Eleanor!” His voice was a whipcrack as he tore the weapon from her grip, feeling something darker and wilder trying to grasp at him from her touch. She didn't respond to her name, struggling to claw at him with savage ferocity, cackling and lost in some bloodthirsty fugue.

Jonathan let the sunlight well from his soul, pushing back the shadowed hunger trying to clutch him, the red tooth and claw of whatever accompanied Eleanor. Her manic laughter faded somewhat, but then she lunged at him with a sudden look of sultry lust. He found that no more palatable than her murderous reverie, and held her at arms length for a moment before slapping her sharply.

The impact jarred her, and her eyes cleared. Jonathan had seen the like before; knowledge was jealous and secrets were dangerous, and being exposed to some profound facet of the world could break people. Those who had already glimpsed things beyond the ordinary were often more robust, but if the understandings were too disparate it could be even worse. He had thought Eleanor would have had no issues, from what he knew of her, of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, and of the flavor of the secrets involved. Clearly he had misjudged.

“Jonathan,” she said, tittering, and then baring her teeth. “Did you know? What it's like? What they *do*?”

“I am not privy to the secrets of the Black Garden,” Jonathan said, studying her closely. She was wilted, bedraggled, smelling of blood and sap and other things. Stains spotted her clothing,

some of blood, others of less determinate origin. At the same time she brimmed with a fierce vitality, an inexhaustible energy that didn't sit on her correctly, like an ill-fitting coat.

"Oh, it's just—" She laughed, and then sobbed, and then hiccupped to a stop and then glared at him. "Let's go kill something," she said, more a demand than a request. "Let's go *harvest* something."

"I had, in fact, intended to do just that," Jonathan said cautiously, releasing her at last. He was more than a little disturbed by her manic behavior, by the sudden appetites behind it. She had always had a cruel streak, paradoxically matched with her empathy, but that had transmuted into something else. Something he had certainly not intended.

"Yes!" Eleanor's fingers curled, the glint in her eyes taking on a sinister cast. For a moment he could see the lamia of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed lurking in Eleanor's bared teeth, some faint shadow of that great devouring mother. She threw open the door of his cabin with a bang as he tugged at his suit by reflex and secured his cane from where he'd placed it by the door, then hastened after her. If nothing else, he didn't want her to attack anyone else on the way out.

Fortunately for all, she hadn't carved a bloody swath on her way in, but he was certain he would have noticed the sort of malevolent hunger let loose aboard the ship. Eleanor might not have even been fully coherent if she'd been allowed to indulge that way. There was no question about how she had returned to the Endeavor without incident, however; he was familiar enough with Ukari's humor to be certain on that score.

Jonathan kept himself right at her shoulder as she pelted down to the middle deck, a crippling bloodthirst rolling out ahead of Eleanor like a great crimson tide. Sarah popped her head out of her cabin, and the sight of him and of Eleanor's dark glee was enough to send her back inside without saying a word. Antomine was not in evidence, which Jonathan assumed was calculation rather than fortuity. Antomine or his Lux Guard might have been able to hold Eleanor off physically, but it was better to not invite an attack to begin with.

She breezed out of the ship, jumping down rather than taking the tether, which was something she would hardly have done before. If anything she would have leant on her other esoteric knowledge, rather than brute force. He followed at a more sedate pace, despite her obvious impatience, not wanting to indulge the compulsions she was following more than necessary.

The creatures inside Crispin's respite had no desire to stand in Eleanor's way, giving her more space than they'd afforded him before, despite her every movement being designed to affront. Even Jonathan felt himself slighted for what reason he knew not, and he tightened his grip on his cane as he focused past that unnatural provocation. Only once they were outside again did he manage to get in front of her, calling her attention with the sharp crack of his cane on the stone.

"Eleanor! This way," he told her, directing her along one of the streets. "We'll be headed underneath Ukaresh; I have what you want waiting there."

"Fine," she snapped shortly, distracted from appraising the passers-by like cuts of meat. "It better not be far." She licked her lips, and it looked like her teeth had been stained with blood.

“It won’t be long,” Jonathan assured her, though it was, in fact, a not inconsiderable distance. One that would be shortened both by Eleanor’s frenetic energy and the sanguine menace she carried which cleared streets ahead of her.

He did not regret his choice of introducing Eleanor to the Black Garden, for it was entirely necessary, but he had a certain burden of responsibility. Eleanor’s new personality and drive was utterly unsustainable, and a mockery of her true goals. Jonathan knew he’d have to do something to help her master and suborn the secrets she had discovered — or at least reconcile with them.

That would be later. For the moment he needed the naked awareness she exhibited, that of one whose mind was newly exposed to some fundamental aspect of reality and was acting in perfect accord with it. In such a state of mind he knew she would be able to perform the dark miracle that the Black Garden was known for. Once the deed was done, he could help her into a frame of mind that was more controlled and less potent.

The back of his neck prickled from Eleanor’s panting bloodlust, and he kept himself at ready in case she should see him as a target again. He was no victim, and betrayed no weaknesses, so that was unlikely, but as flush and unbalanced as she was there was no telling what she might do. The occasional crazed tittering echoed from behind him, and Eleanor’s footsteps were inconsistent. She’d stop to look at something, rush forward to match pace with him, then dart away again like an overexcited child. Admittedly, one with a dagger, hungry knowledge, and a willingness to kill. Had there been anyone willing to stand in their way Jonathan doubted they would have survived more than a few seconds.

After an interminable walk Jonathan arrived at the Pits of the Condemned once more, bringing Eleanor down the long ramp into the still gallery of arches. Eleanor laughed and darted forward, looking fearlessly over the edge of one of the pits. Disconcertingly, her voice didn’t seem to be muffled by the ancient solemnity of the place, nor did she seem to notice the gouged-out eyes of the watching engravings.

“Oh, yes. I can feel so much here to harvest.” She looked like she was about to jump down into the pit, but a sudden crescendo from the Keeper’s music broke her focus, along with a tuneful clatter as the creature approached on its grotesquerie of limbs. Eleanor whipped around to face it, her dagger appearing in her hand.

“Keeper, I wish to be taken to my purchase,” Jonathan said, stepping up next to Eleanor and holding out his cane to keep her from attacking the beast. Not that he would personally object to the Keeper’s destruction, but there was no telling what that would unleash.

“Of course!” The thing said musically, dozens of different types of feet padding against the stone as it directed them through the endless identical arches. Eleanor hopped from foot to foot, fingers flexing unconsciously as she looked at the pits they passed. Jonathan kept as close an eye as he could on her, worried that he would lose her in the pits that stretched out in every direction.

Soon enough they were at the purchase, and the Keeper hummed its note to illuminate the sacrifice. The massive near-cat was still frozen at the bottom of the pit, and the Keeper hummed a different note. The walls of the pit shrunk, not moving, but distorting as if they had previously been seen through a thick lens; some trick of the light rather than true distance.

“Can you harvest this one for me, Eleanor?” Jonathan asked, taking care to keep his tone polite even though that was the entire reason he had brought her along.

“I can.” Eleanor fairly crooned the worlds, stepping forward with her dagger raised. He could not properly understand what came next, for it touched on dark and obscure secrets forbidden to him, but there was an impression of blood, of dark and crawling vines, of great leaves and roots reaching down into the heart of the world. Of the savage thirst of growing things.

Then it was done, and there was no more sacrifice, just a spreading pool of blood on the floor and a single fruit in Eleanor’s outstretched hand. It was red and smooth and beat like a heart, enclosed by a translucently-thin lacework scrap of hide and fur. It seemed like some demented paper lantern, but for the terrible vitality it radiated with every thudding contraction.

Eleanor laughed delightedly, stripping off the skin-husk and lifting the fruit as if to take a bite of it herself. Jonathan’s grip on her wrist stopped her, as he plucked the fruit away with his other hand. She whirled on him with a murderous glare, hand bent into a claw and going for his face. He jerked his head away and hastily stowed the fruit inside his jacket, feeling like his hand was wet with the blood — though it came away completely clean — and focused on Eleanor.

The corruption of her mind by the Garden’s knowledge was worse than he had thought; the simple act of taking the fruit had driven her entirely feral. It was something he could have dealt with in time, save for the Keeper’s presence, musically huffing and so obviously ready to spring. Jonathan whirled, pulling them both out of the lunge of the stitched monstrosity, and at the same time felt vines clawing at the edge of his vision as Eleanor tried to enact the harvest once again — on him.

When it came to esoteric knowledge, all of it was true, even — and especially — if it was entirely contradictory, so possession of some was not necessarily proof against others. Yet Jonathan had faith in sunlight, in the purity, sanctity, and the reality of it. He let it burst forth from deep inside him, a sudden scorching blaze to drive back the dark grasping roots of nature’s hunger.

Just as he intended, the presence of the sunlight denied the primacy of the dark vines and crimson appetite. What he did not intend was how the Black Garden responded, peering out through Eleanor and taking in the light. Neither of them understood each other’s secrets, but that was hardly necessary for the knowledge to join together in a palpable *twisting* of the Black Garden’s nature. The darkness shifted to something greener, something greater, flourishing in the one true light. It shocked through Eleanor, and echoed down to the source of the secret itself.

Despite being green, it was no less consuming, for the Garden itself seemed to burst forth into the Pits of the Condemned. Something clawed its way out of Eleanor to bathe in the pure radiance of Jonathan’s memory, and while both Jonathan and Eleanor were protected, the rest of the pits were not. The Keeper made a musical noise of confusion and amusement as it gained two new limbs, woody trunks bursting forth from its barrel, and it waved them cheerfully — before the barrel itself burst asunder and a blood-slick trunk soared upward toward the ceiling, roots cracking the stone of the floor.

Eleanor screamed, trying to wrestle herself away from Jonathan’s grasp, blood leaking from her eyes and tongue and nails as around them, every pit trembled. In every direction, by the

flickering light of the torches, hundreds of trees grew, one from each pit, making the ceiling tremble and the ground shake. The Garden had come to the Pits.

Jonathan reluctantly put away the sunlight, the scorching, domineering radiance fading from his mind as Eleanor slumped. The Black Garden, no longer black, continued to grow regardless, limbs piercing through the ceiling. Chunks of stone rained down into the Pits, and Jonathan simply turned and ran, dragging Eleanor after him. He sprinted toward the staircase, and just before he ascended he caught sight of one of the endless identical defiled engravings.

It was smiling.