

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Jonathan preferred not to spend much time within the sargasso. He was only using it so they could get their bearings, which was so against the nature of the place that it was certain to resist. Yet, compared to some of what could be found in the east, a place that was merely becalmed was not particularly fearsome. In truth, he suspected the careful business of using fire dust would be more hazardous than the place itself.

He descended to the bridge, nearly bumping into the crewman sent to fetch him, and found Montgomery in deep conference with the navigator. The captain straightened up when Jonathan entered, and gestured wordlessly to the triskolabe, where the various instruments contained therein drifted aimlessly. That was unexpected, but hardly concerning.

“It should clear once we burn away the mist,” Jonathan said, waving at the plumes of vapor drifting outside the front window. In places it was thick enough to throw back a wall of white from diffracted zint-light, in others it merely hazed the view of drifting and decaying shapes in the water or air.

“It seems a tricky proposition to do that without incinerating the ship,” Montgomery observed. “We’ll need to tether somewhere.”

“Certainly,” Jonathan peered out the front window. “Any cluster of vessels will do, but the larger the better. More fuel for the fire dust to work.”

“Is that a good idea?” Montgomery said skeptically. “It’s bad luck to burn a ship, and there’s no telling what’s aboard these things.”

“Then perhaps we can find something already wrecked to break apart,” Jonathan said, a touch impatiently. “I’ll grant you that simply throwing fire dust into the air is not a sufficient approach, but it should be a straightforward operation to halt and find some fuel.”

“Right,” Montgomery said grimly and started passing orders to the pilot. There was no need of a navigator in such a place. From the peculiarly soft feel of the engines, any sort of movement was difficult, and Jonathan wasn’t certain anything that drifted away in the mists could be found again.

He left Montgomery to it, having little input on the search for proper anchorage. The man knew the requirements, and no esoteric knowledge was necessary. Jonathan’s main contribution would be handling the flame dust, and that required more care than actual skill.

In anticipation of the next steps he descended to the cargo deck, bypassing crew who were removing supplies from crates there for maintenance, and proceeded to where the fire dust was stored. Lifting the obsidian cask from the careful packing, he broke the wax seal and lifted the lid enough to see the shifting, orange-glimmering stuff inside. It occurred to him only belatedly that if someone had pilfered the fire dust, he wouldn’t have known and they would have had to resort to more desperate measures to escape.

He repacked it and latched the crate shut again, not knowing when they would actually need it, before returning to his cabin. Neither Antomine nor Eleanor were in evidence on the passenger deck, and only Sarah was in the observation room. It made him uneasy, as driving his fellow passenger to Antomine rather than keeping her on his side shifted the balance of power, but he

doubted it could change anything at this late date. They had come too far to simply turn around; the real concern was doing something contrary to Jonathan's advice and thus imperiling the expedition.

After so many issues he had very few preparations remaining in either his safe or his crates to address any trouble they might find. The next time they were forced to tether and resupply, they would have to hold off whatever things lurked in the dark by might of arms and force of will alone. Thus far they had not been overly careless, but it had been amply demonstrated how even the smallest lapse in judgement could result in catastrophe.

A knock came at the cabin door, interrupting his search through his earlier notes; an effort to find anything he may have recorded regarding the environs outside the sargasso. He had thought it unlikely, but lacking any better use of his time he had sheafs of old paper scattered over his desk. Jonathan opened the door to find one of the airmen, and raised his brows in silent inquiry.

"We've spotted a ship," the airman said. "S'got Flame Cult insignia and we think it has people on it!"

"I see," Jonathan said, pressing his lips together to keep from berating the man. None of that was relevant to him, save for the fact that this was quite far from where the Cult of Flame normally operated. Though considering the properties of the sargasso, there was no telling from where – or when – the ship in question hailed. He picked up his cane and followed the crewman down to the bridge, where the ship in question was clearly visible.

It was an older airship, with a body of myceliplank and an envelope of treated canvas, quite unlike the sleek metal of the *Endeavor* but still clearly of human design. From the bulky shape underneath the tattered envelope it was some sort of cargo hauler, and the red insignia of the Cult of Flame was painted over it in a dozen places. Some of the icons were faded with time and others newer, but overall it gave off the air of a venerable vessel, aged but not old.

Jonathan wasn't sure what it used for lifting gas, as it was still mostly buoyant despite significant damage to its envelope, but it had also tethered itself to the underside of one of the floating alien wrecks. Ropes ran from the listing airship to the odd derelict, some inscrutable geometric shape that seemed to be all wood skeleton, with nothing remaining of whatever machinery might have provided locomotion. It was hard to miss why Montgomery thought it had people — they were clearly visible, waving frantically from tilted railings.

"I see nothing untoward about them," Jonathan said, studying the scene for a moment. There were certainly things that preyed upon the unwary by pretending to be in distress, but Jonathan didn't think this was one of them.

"Aside from being Cult of Flame heretics?" Antomine interrupted, arriving at the bridge and stepping through the door. "I would think that was issue enough."

Montgomery frowned at Antomine, but Jonathan himself was indifferent. While trafficking with the people of the Godforge was technically forbidden, there was a brisk smuggling trade and he'd never found the south particularly objectionable. It certainly wasn't as strange as the east.

"Flame Cult or not, they're still men, and a good captain doesn't leave airmen in distress," Montgomery said stiffly. "Especially not in a place like this."

"I'm for it," Eleanor butted in, appearing behind Antomine and crowding in on the three men. "Don't know that I get a vote but we're getting out of here anyway, wouldn't take much to at least tow that ship with us. Besides, we're using the fire dust to break the mists right? Wouldn't the Cult of Flame be able to use it better than we can?" She talked rapidly, as if afraid she wouldn't be allowed to finish her sentences, but Jonathan had to credit her logic.

"They would indeed," Jonathan said approvingly, though more to support something that would undermine Antomine's point of view than out of any real emotion of his own. Eleanor gave him a flat look, which he ignored. He hardly expected her to be happy over a single endorsement. "Even if they have no proper clergy among them, the lay members of the Cult of Flame still have enough passing familiarity with their god to handle it more safely and apply it with more finesse."

"You cannot be seriously thinking of consorting with such people," Antomine said in disbelief. "I can cede that it's necessary to deal with unsavory elements here and there, but this is hardly necessary."

"You're getting a lot more upset about a bunch of lost guys than actual monsters," Eleanor said with a sneer.

"It is not the completely alien that is the most tempting, but that which is closest to the familiar." Antomine frowned at Eleanor, his hand reaching for his inquisitor's medallion. "The Cult of Flame serves a god that has its own interests in mind, not those of humanity. Yet it cloaks itself in a familiar skin, which is the greatest danger."

"You've got a hard time convincing me that a bunch of poor bedraggled airmen are a greater danger than She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed," Eleanor said, tone contemptuous and cutting. "I for one would like to do something to help people where there *isn't* something monstrous at play."

"You say that now, but I very much doubt you've met one of their clerics," Antomine said darkly.

"Nor will we now, I expect," Jonathan said. "Else they would have already done what we intend and burned their way out."

"No Cult of Flame ship flies without at least a junior deacon," Antomine pointed out.

"Accidents happen," Montgomery grunted, turning back to the bridge viewport. "Heaven knows we've seen enough of that out here. I'm not going to propose we give them half our supplies or anything, but we can definitely work together to leave this place."

Antomine gave Montgomery a sharp look, then glanced around at the rest of the bridge. Jonathan could see the calculation behind his eyes; if he pushed on the topic he would not find friendly ears. The fastest way to undermine authority was to assert it when it would have no effect, so Antomine eventually decided against forbidding the enterprise.

"I will preside over any meetings or discussions," Antomine said instead. "And ensure that nothing illicit occurs."

"I'd welcome that," Montgomery said politely, and as far as Jonathan could tell he actually meant it. Ordinary men had far more respect for the role of the Inquisition than people like himself or Eleanor. The captain began giving orders and the men worked the bridge controls, steering the ship around to the half-floating vessel and the strange apparatus to which it was tethered.

Even if Jonathan didn't see or sense anything beyond the obvious, Montgomery wasn't foolhardy and had the artillery and the chase guns manned before they moved any closer. Their approach was cause of apparent jubilation from the other ship, haggard men shouting and jumping and clapping each other on the back.

The men of the south spoke a different tongue than that which was common in Beacon, but most airmen had a smattering of the language. As did most inquisitors, for obvious reasons, so Jonathan was not surprised when Antomine followed the bos'n out onto the exterior walk below the bridge to take part in the shouting exchange that followed. Jonathan himself could follow most of it, but Eleanor scowled, brow wrinkling as she listened.

"Why is it — I can tell something." She struggled to voice what exactly bothered her so. "There's something odd behind their words. I can almost see a pattern behind it?"

"The more you learn, the more you can see and interpret," Jonathan said, standing at the doorway with Eleanor. He didn't notice what she was talking about himself, but he was familiar with the phenomenon. Something about her experience with the Garden must have given her insight that he lacked. "But it is best not to try and pursue such connections unless you know exactly what you are doing. I believe you have no desire to become conversant with any more profound secrets at the moment."

"Thanks," she said flatly. She didn't turn away, though her expression contorted into one of deliberate non-concentration, her shoulders hunched and her hands shoved in her pockets.

The negotiations didn't take overlong, and soon enough the bos'n returned. Montgomery had the ship move closer, airmen in flight suits running lines over to the other craft. Some crew stayed on the guns, just in case, but the Cult of Flame men didn't seem to have any mischief in mind.

Soon enough the two ships were connected, a rope bridge strung along the tethers, and the ranking airman clambered his way over to the *Endeavor*. Montgomery met him in the canteen, which was cleared out for the purpose, allowing Eleanor and Jonathan to attend along with Antomine. In a way this was not his business, nor Eleanor's, but Montgomery was no fool and knew that it was better to have the expertise and muscle they represented.

"Lieutenant Azhir — reporting, sir!" The lieutenant was a classic example of a southerner, short and swarthy, skin reddened and rough, as if chapped by too long next to a fire. Instead of the tattoos that many airmen wore, southerners used brands, and Azhir had several symbols on his upper arm that indicated successful voyages.

"Sit down," Montgomery said, waving at an empty chair across from him, and Azhir dropped into the seat. "Tell me, Lieutenant, what happened to your captain?"

"He was — with the deacon," Azhir said, casting nervous glances at where Antomine stood glowering, hands clasped behind his back, with the Lux Guard looming at his shoulder. His command of the tongue of Beacon was rough, but understandable. "Something came from Tor Ileek. Dark fire. And the deacon invoked His Name." Azhir did not dare to speak the name of the fiery god he worshipped. "We were safe — but they were gone. Scorched shadows." His hands waved in eloquent accompaniment to his chopped words.

Montgomery very carefully did not look in Jonathan's direction, but Eleanor snorted. Jonathan merely found it interesting how it implied the Cult of Flame ship had arrived at the sargasso through a different body of water. Not that he was surprised; the sheer variety of vessels implied a broader net than merely some small river in the east.

"I see," Montgomery said instead. "My condolences. And how did you arrive in this place? We were south of Ukaresh, which is quite far from Tor Ilek." More than a month of journey, though some paths through the east were shorter than others. There might well be routes available to the Cult of Flame that men of Beacon could not take — like the Bitter Pass, where their fire would keep them warm.

"We followed the Khorus river," Azhir said with a shrug. "We were — we headed south, but then this happened. That was two weeks ago. The wrecks have only so much."

"Well, you're in luck." Montgomery gestured toward Jonathan. "This gentleman knows how to get us out of here, and while we don't have much in the way of spare supplies, we can at least get you out, and near Ukaresh."

"We have fire dust," Jonathan said, when Azhir's gaze swung his way. "If we burn the mists off, we will be able to exit at a particular point. In truth I am surprised you didn't manage it yourself." The man's expression cycled through surprise, greed, awe, and suspicion as Jonathan spoke, finally settling back into a reserved politeness.

"We had already traded our supplies," Azhir explained. "Our hold is full of metals and spices. Can't burn metals or spices."

"What exactly was your ship's mission and destination?" Antomine interrupted, after clearly holding himself back during the earlier exchanges. Azhir hesitated, eyeing the inquisitor's uniform and the symbol around his neck, but did answer.

"We were just trading goods at Monake," Azhir protested, which Jonathan recognized as another name for Danby's Point. He hadn't been aware it was frequented by the Cult of Flame, but that was the point of smuggling. Besides, they merely needed to tether some other place than Beacon's outpost, and the Inquisition would be none the wiser.

"Trade what?" Antomine demanded, still glaring at the man.

"I don't have a manifest," Azhir protested. "The usual goods. Valuables, information."

Antomine gave him a hard eye, but if there had been an ulterior motive for the journey, it had been lost with the deacon and the captain. What was left was a ship with cargo that was dead weight and a number of desperate men. Even when they were freed of the sargasso they would have to contend with the weather of the east — but the Flame Cult had their own ways of dealing with such things. After a few other sharp questions resulted in more protestations of ignorance, Antomine let it drop. It would have seemed a perfunctory investigation, save for the fact that Antomine could sniff out lies and untruths with ease.

"We were hoping you'd be able to give us a hand with the fire dust," Montgomery said, taking out his pipe before realizing he had nothing to smoke, but pointing the stem at Azhir regardless. "I expect you have more facility with that than we do, and can get it done more quickly with less hazard."

“Yes, sir,” Azhir said firmly, despite his worn appearance. “Any airman of the Godforge knows powdered flame.”

“Then I don’t see any reason to stay here.” Montgomery gripped the stem of his pipe between his teeth, even though it was unlit. “Send me four people who can handle the fire dust and we’ll figure out how we’re going to do this.”

“Yes, sir!” Azhir leapt to his feet, saluting with fists pressed together, rather than with one hand like they did in Beacon.

“That was suspiciously easy,” Eleanor muttered, as Montgomery had the bos’n show Azhir back to the Flame Cult ship.

“They want out, and it’s clear that they wouldn’t have a chance taking over the *Endeavor*,” Jonathan said. “They have nothing to lose by cooperating in good faith.”

“And yet they are still part of the Cult of Flame,” Antomine said. “Nothing they do can be trusted, for as much as they share our form they share little else. I agree they are desperate men, and are not likely to deliberately compromise this chance — nevertheless, keep a close eye out. Something simple and straightforward to them may be anathema to us.”

Eleanor shook her head, but Antomine was right. Someone from the Cult of Flame might well casually set something — or someone — ablaze, simply because to them that was a better state to be in. Then there was the hidden pattern in their very words that Eleanor had noticed, something that might seduce the unwary or, worse, enlighten them to see the fire that southerners did. Jonathan imagined that was unlikely, simply because Montgomery had flown south before, but there was no inoculation against knowledge.

Montgomery left to supervise the transfer of crew, with Antomine following. Eleanor impatiently blew away the lock of hair that had stayed over her face and frowned at Jonathan. Then she suddenly marched out of the room without saying anything. He had no idea what had set her off, especially since she had been so in favor of helping the Flame Cult ship, but she was still clearly suffering from an excess of insight.

Jonathan took himself to the cargo deck, so as to take possession of the fire dust, and eyed the floating wooden hulk to which the Flame Cult vessel was tethered. Any material would have worked, as it hardly mattered to fire dust, but the construction might make it easier to tow pieces into place — assuming the properties of levitation were retained by its fragments.

Enacting the plans took time, more than Jonathan had anticipated. The southerners had to be brought aboard the *Endeavor* and approved by Antomine, the plans discussed and refined, and men outfitted with flight suits and tools to begin breaking apart the floating wood. The Flame Cult men ended up being Jonathan’s responsibility, as he was the one handling the flame dust, a charge that Jonathan accepted so as to ensure they were on their way as soon as possible. He wished to be done with the sargasso and resume their course.

“We merely need to set the mist alight and drive it back,” he told the four cultists in the language of the south, his hands resting on his cane as he regarded them severely. Three of them quailed under his attention, which Jonathan found rather pitiable, and the fourth was far too fascinated with the cask under Jonathan’s arm.

“Pay attention!” He snapped, and they all jerked and composed themselves into a more acceptable demeanor. “We are far more concerned with avoiding igniting *ourselves* than we are with efficiency or scope. On the previous occasion I visited this place it only took a small pinch of fire dust and a complete circle. We need to fully break the surroundings of the mists, but that is all. We need no further ritual, no greater pattern.”

“So, a circle ritual,” one of them said, and Jonathan had to restrain himself from using certain choice words. For the Flame Cult there probably was no distinction between the use of fire and a religious ceremony, in any context and for any reason.

“As simple as it can possibly be,” Jonathan said. “I remind you that we are not devotees of your god and we have a member of the Inquisition aboard. It will be in your best interests to err on the side of what will achieve the ends I have outlined, even if you deem it blasphemous.” That drew some uncertain looks, but judging from the general quality of the men – far below the crew selection Montgomery had decided on for the *Endeavor* – they were the sloppy sort. Nobody had poor habits in just one area of life, and if they were willing to take half-measures when they dressed and walked and talked, they would be more willing to cut corners on religious observances.

Perhaps that was why Azhir had sent them over. That one was no fool, at least, but as the ranking officer he was in charge of preparing his ship to finally move once again. Jonathan would have to work with the material he had been given.

Once he was sufficiently certain the flame cultists wouldn’t immediately do something stupid, he allowed them access to the cask. Unlike a resident of Beacon, they could touch the fire dust with no fear of instant immolation or even worse fates. Indeed, it seemed to want to leap out of the cask into their hands of its own accord, more like a living thing than a proper tool.

Jonathan only allowed them to take a small portion, the minimum amount necessary to set into place on a single fragment of wood. *Endeavor’s* crew could only free pieces of the floating remains so quickly, and Jonathan stayed on the railing of the bottom deck to dole out materials as needed.

“God, I’m so useless,” Eleanor said abruptly, appearing next to him as he watched the operation play out under the *Endeavor’s* spotlights. “My idea and I just sit and watch. Every time I look at them I don’t see people, just...” She wrinkled her nose, taking an aggressive pull of the cigarette that dangled from the long-handled holder she used. “Things to harvest.” She glared at him, clearly blaming him for the state of affairs, which he had to admit was not unwarranted.

“It is no sin to understand your own rules and limitations, and conduct yourself accordingly,” Jonathan said after a moment. He was aware that Eleanor was hardly looking for answers, even had he any to give, but he could at least try and soothe her conscience. For the most part she would have to work through her troubles herself, but he would prefer that she not do any damage in the meantime.

Eleanor grunted and wandered off again, and the Cult men returned for another portion of fire dust. They seemed entirely incapable of placing the stuff without a brief, ritualistic chant, but it was perfunctory and made no difference he could see. Even Antomine couldn’t find any issues, though of them all he suspected Eleanor would have been the best at discerning it. Something

he would not recommend she try, not while she was still raw and vulnerable to the deeper patterns of reality.

The *Endeavor's* crew continued to cut a goodly amount from the floating wooden geodesic, which was large enough that the removed chunks were barely noticeable. Each one was anointed with fire dust and towed out to a safe distance, slowly building up a perimeter. Some of the material made its way back to the *Endeavor* for curiosities and keepsakes, though Jonathan suspected it would be harder to get past the Inquisition's strictures than the raw gold they'd picked up.

As straightforward as the process was, it still took several hours, during which the only other noise in the sargasso was the faint lapping of waves far below and the occasional sigh of mist-scented wind. Jonathan preferred the desolation to other possibilities; fighting some beast or lurking predator would have made establishing the fire dust circle a fraught proposition.

"Everyone's clear," the bos'n reported once the preparations were complete and both crews had retreated to their respective vessels. The ring of floating wood was barely visible in the blowing mist, a staccato ring of dark specks enclosing them, and the remainder of the fire dust was packed away in its cask. Jonathan stood at the rear of the bridge, for whatever contribution he could make once the mists were burned away.

"Light it up," Montgomery ordered, and a thin snake of flame raced away from the *Endeavor*; a rope sourced from the Flame Cult ship that served as an impromptu fuse. The fire dust ignited next, a sudden billowing wall of flame and heat, orange-red tongues reaching up and consuming the mist around them.

In the wash of flame, every airman on the bridge flushed red with a sudden fever, an instant malaise as the fire dust recalled the heat of the dream from Angkor Leng. They would likely never be truly rid of it, barring some insight sufficient to throw off the lingering touch of the convalescent god. Some of the men noticeably wilted, but none of them dropped despite the onset. There was nothing to be done save work through it.

The light of the fire and the sudden removal of the mist cast illumination out to reveal a vast expanse of water, derelicts and wrecks scattered throughout it. Then that, too, began to burn, the vista wavering as the fire consumed the mirage itself, ripping great rents in the apparent landscape. What was left was a stretch of barren and desolate hill, dry and parched, with a series of long-empty canals and fallen locks. Then the fire died away, leaving the two ships and the skeletal floating wood.

Fire bloomed from the engines of the Flame Cult ship, a propulsive inferno that sent the damaged vessel off to the south. It was abrupt, but Jonathan didn't blame them for wanting to leave. Antomine had still wanted to down the vessel with the *Endeavor's* guns, though he was careful not to say so too loudly, and clearly disapproved of the act of charity when it helped Beacon's neighbors. Fortunately it couldn't rightly be called treason, as the Flame Cult was not at war with Beacon and neither the *Endeavor* nor her counterpart were official navy.

The accomplishment certainly improved the general air aboard the ship, which had been dour and strained after Ukaresh. Enthusiasm had been lacking for some time, though Jonathan didn't consider it a true issue. The men had their gold and looted objects to comfort them, with



thoughts of becoming rich when they got home. There had been difficulties, but nothing he would consider a true catastrophe.

“Seems straightforward from here,” Montgomery said, eyeing the map. The expanse of hills led eastward, to where they could find a less deceptive river and make their way toward the Arch of Khokorrón. “Anything I should know about this route, Mister Heights?”

“It’s not one I’ve taken before,” Jonathan admitted. “I have crossed these hills in the past, however, and while I would not wish to be caught in the open, there is little in the air to threaten us aside from the usual. Caution is warranted, but whatever laid waste to this area has left little behind.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Montgomery promised.

The next several days passed without anything of interest passing into the beams of the *Endeavor’s* searchlights. Partway through, one of the east’s capricious storms blew through, and they had to hastily drive stakes into the packed earth to tether the ship. The raindrops fizzed and bubbled against the ground, here turning it into luminous mud, there sprouting plants that withered and died within moments. The legacy of Ankor Leng protected them from the deluge, proofing the ship against the chaotic effects of the weather.

“The hell is that?” Eleanor demanded, peering out the observation window after the weather cleared. The *Endeavor* finally had broken out of the hills and into an equally desolate valley, and below them massive figures stood frozen in an eternal battle. Towering clay statues wielded enormous iron weapons, each one humanoid but rendered faceless by a smooth helmet — one not unlike the Lux Guard wore. The statues were locked in combat with enormous skeletons, strange twisted animals long of claw and fang, grappling and biting the clay. No single figure was smaller than a house, and though they stood statue-still, they exuded an impression of savage motion.

“The Dead Battle,” Jonathan named it, dismissing the macabre panoply and looking ahead.

“Which means the Arch of Khokorrón is near.”