

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nothing interrupted the work of the portable zint distillery. There were odd noises from the dark, and the ever-present liquid sounds of the lakes above, but no creature breached the circle of the *Endeavor's* spotlights. Jonathan almost regretted that, for he would have welcomed a brief spate of exertion, but it was better for everyone else that the refueling was performed without issue.

Antomine took more samples of raw zint, likely in another fruitless attempt to repair his broken Lux Guard, and disappeared into the ship. Jonathan preferred that to trying to make stilted conversation, and preferred to stand quiet vigil while the ship prepared for the final stretch — and the journey home. He was more than ready to leave, but found the moment of pause a useful respite, a deep breath before forging ahead.

Once they had finished refueling, the ship ascended until the boundary of one of the floating lakes came into view, where they tethered to one of the flower-trunks while they took on water and nearly half the crew went fishing. Admittedly, several of the rods were long iron poles as thick as a thumb, and the lines consisted of spare tether cord. Many of the shadows that could be spotted in the depths were quite large, after all.

It was, perhaps, a bit of a risk, but running out of supplies was a far more pressing problem. The cook even picked through various leaves, weeds, and pods dredged from within the water by early casts in order to find something edible. There were diseases that could strike an airship with limited supplies, and while they had thus far avoided them, there was no sense risking it at this juncture.

Jonathan leaned against the rail on the above-deck platform, watching the hose pull water into the zint-light purifier while several men monitored rods that had been hastily bolted to the deck. Already several man-sized fish had been hauled from the water and dispatched with zint rifles, and half the above-deck was given over to butchering and disassembling the catches. The stench of it had driven Antomine and the women back below, but it didn't really bother Jonathan. He'd dealt with it before, as no ship could carry all the food it needed for an extended voyage.

All of the peaceful, useful toil actually made him uncomfortable. The east was not supposed to be pleasant or helpful; men were of the west and to find safety and succor was ill-omened. Of course it was nothing so blatant as Terminus, and there were still minor issues. A fish broke a line and sent the airmen at the pole flying across the deck, bruised and battered. One of the large fish had parasites that broke out while it was being gutted, and had to be beaten to death by the airmen helping the ship's cook. Minor incidents such as that were only to be expected, however, and barely seemed worth noting.

In all, he was glad when they had refilled their larders and the engines started them moving once again. There was nothing he could point to but an impending sense of trouble, but to Jonathan that instinct was reason enough to move on. They edged back out of the shallows of the Lofted Lakes, skirting the border of the area toward the north.

Here and there rivers ran below them, in complete opposition to the vertical nature of the lakes themselves, but someone else would have to solve that particular mystery. Once, he might have spent the time to investigate and catalogue the wonders of such a landmark, as well as the potential dangers for any future visitors. Though so far east, it was unlike there would be many

of those from Beacon, and he would have been better off selling such information in Ukaresh. A consideration for Eleanor or Montgomery, perhaps, but he no longer had any interest.

The Endeavor circled north and then swept eastward, ever eastward, navigating the final map. Unlike the others, which had been fleshed out by generations of explorers, both human and not, that one had been penned solely by Jonathan. Not that there was much to it, as in truth his last ship, the *Discovery*, had not covered much ground before coming to grief in the Grave of Wood.

Only he, Captain Hardiman, and Stoneface had managed to make it to the Bright Defile. Only he had survived to leave. Only he had he returned, ready to cross the final threshold.

Jonathan stood in the observation room as they left the Lofted Lakes behind, flying out over a sodden and swampy plain shot through with faintly luminous mycelium. Thin yellow-green threads lay haphazardly over the ground like spilled yarn, pulsing in a slow and deliberate pattern. Forms of odd beasts – or perhaps even people – skittered away from the *Endeavor's* spotlights, but their shadows were visible tending to the fungal line. The *Discovery* hadn't been equipped for a proper investigation at the time, being mostly concerned with surveying the new lands beyond the Arch, so he had no idea of their true nature.

Wind buffeted the ship, increasing over the next few days as they crossed the swamp toward the Grave of Wood. As the deck began to sway and pitch beneath their feet, Montgomery gave the order to keep everything battened down and secured. There was nowhere obvious they could tether to shelter from the conditions, not until they reached the Grave of Wood, and simple wind wasn't threatening enough for that regardless.

Yet with a strange sense of inevitability the cruel crosswinds rose and gusted and came together into a true storm, which bore only a marginal resemblance to its cousins in the west. Threads of lightning shot through boiling clouds rising up behind them, wisping together to form crackling spheres darting this way and that, accompanied by a growl of thunder that sounded more like the howl of the damned than a natural phenomenon. Light began to waft up from the network of filaments below, rising to color the pursuing clouds, and Jonathan descended to the bridge.

"Mister Heights," Montgomery greeted him, gesturing backward at the growing spectacle behind them. "How worried should we be?"

"I admit I haven't seen this before," Jonathan said, regarding the same scene. "But it can hardly be less dangerous than one of our own storms. The special protections from Angkor Leng may help, but wind is wind."

"Haven't spotted any shelter," Montgomery grunted. "Have to see how much we can outrun it." He started passing orders, and the engines surged as they were run up past their usual maximum. Jonathan gripped a holdfast, one hand automatically reaching for a cane that wasn't there before he simply widened his stance.

The yellow-green light continued to be sucked up into the growing clouds, limning them with an unhealthy radiance and showing the scope of the tempest. The bridge rattled with the force of the engines, minor repairs and replacements that didn't quite fit correctly shaking and showing gaps in the forward windows, on consoles, in the mirrors used to view behind the *Endeavor*.

Montgomery grimaced. Jonathan hadn't been involved in the inevitable maintenance, and he had no idea of the story behind some of the repairs, but clearly their time in the east had been more wearing on the ship than he had thought. If the seams were showing in the bridge, the same would be true throughout the ship. But the captain didn't order any reduction in speed, as the clouds behind them grew ever larger and a pair of dark, lightning-shot funnels reached toward the ground.

They never reached. In a peculiarity of the east, the questing funnels instead found each other, merging into a single, long bar of illuminated wind, churning and growing as it seemed to pull the entire storm into it. In a matter of minutes the clouds had become an enormous rolling cylinder, growling and howling and ripping at the ground beneath it.

Lightning and stolen fungal threads roiled through the phenomenon, and sparks flew as rocks ground against each other in the wind. In an instant it transitioned from a maelstrom of wind and rain to one of stone and light, chasing them with scouring debris and balls of lightning like the shots of a cannon. Perhaps it was simply a mindless thing, one of the many hazards of the lands far from Beacon, but to Jonathan it seemed to hold an almost personal ire toward the *Endeavor*.

"Anything you can do about *that*, Mister Heights?" Montgomery asked, only half serious.

"The only thing I have left is an amphora of unflame — and I don't think there's anything there to burn, hot *or* cold." Jonathan considered the rolling cylinder that kept growing, stretching wider and wider behind them. "It could even make it worse. I believe we're relying on you for this one, captain. If we can make it to the Grave of Wood we could tether there."

Montgomery snorted and then returned his gaze to the landscape ahead of them. The flashes from the balls of lightning, which on occasion collided in brilliant destruction, gave a far further view than even the most powerful spotlights, but Jonathan wasn't certain how to read the brief glimpses. While his eyes might have been better than most, that didn't mean he knew what to look for. Most of his time in the area had been spent on the ground, which was a far different prospect than looking for a place safe from such a terrible storm.

"There," Montgomery said after the next flash, pointing at something in the far distance.

"Right," said the pilot, who had apparently seen the same thing. He worked the controls and the ship tilted, creaking and groaning as the engines and fins pushed them onto a new heading.

Jonathan's presence on the bridge was entirely superfluous, but he stayed for the unlikely possibility his expertise was needed. The crew were tense, with the howl of wind filling in the silences between words, the only real sound being that of the pilot making rapid adjustments to the vanes and engines. It wasn't clear to Jonathan what difference any of it made, but he trusted the pilot knew what he was doing.

Once or twice a runner arrived, bearing news of some issue or another as the buffeting and jolting stressed the *Endeavor's* bones. It sounded like fully half the crew was on repair duty, but they could hardly slow down. Even if the rolling cylinder of destruction hadn't gained on them, it had only gotten larger, stretching miles in every direction.

An explosive clap of thunder sounded from behind, followed by a pattering as of rain on the skin of the ship. Then it was joined by louder metallic clangs, and Jonathan caught a glimpse of

several pieces of rock off the port side, falling through the beams of the *Endeavor's* lights. Somewhere far below them there was a larger, louder report as the main body of the bolide impacted the ground.

"Is that *throwing things* at us?" Eleanor's voice came from the bridge entrance. She gripped a holdfast with one hand, the other one holding her cloche hat in place as the ship bumped and swayed.

"I doubt it's at us specifically," Jonathan responded, waving at the bridge windows. "I've seen other chunks of rock go flying — but none of the large ones have been this high. Small favors."

"Very small," Eleanor said dryly, wincing as another explosion of ball lightning sent a staccato flash and hammerblow of thunder through the bridge. In the light cast by that brief fulmination Jonathan could finally see what Montgomery had spotted earlier — the arrayed headstones of the Grave of Wood, resolving themselves from the distant landscape.

At this distance they seemed frail things to block the enormous sideways cyclone that battered and crushed the landscape behind them, but if they were actually fragile they would have been gone long ago. Like everything else to be found in the dark, that which remained was protected or guarded. Even humanity's cities and rails were only kept intact by dint of constant and sustained effort.

"Anything else we should know before we try and take shelter there, Mister Heights?" Montgomery asked pointedly, as the engines drove the *Endeavor* toward the proud and solemn cemetery that stretched before them.

"Only that we cannot take anything *from* the Grave. I would imagine not even the wood itself, though I hardly had the chance to test such a speculation. Simply tethering there is safe — so far as I know, at least." He could give no certain guarantees, as the rules of places were often puzzled out with great and laborious effort and cost. Jonathan's visit had been brief and harried.

"Right," Montgomery drawled, clearly less than pleased by the reply, and returned his attention to the forward view. The storm nipped at their heels, the blowing gale helping them stay ahead of the vortex itself, but at the cost of shaking the entire vessel. The Grave of Wood grew closer, the looming shapes resolving themselves into enormous, carven biers, the crystalline figures atop distinctly bodies but with faces shrouded in cloth to obscure their features. There was no time to properly appreciate the sight as Montgomery stood behind the pilot, issuing a running litany of orders as the *Endeavor* began to drop altitude. The bos'n shouted orders into the speaking-tube, his voice booming over the roar of the wind and the creaking of the *Endeavor's* frame.

One of the panes of glass at the side of the bridge abruptly crazed and cracked, the twisting too much to take, prompting one of the crew to run over with a cloth to push the broken glass out before the wind could send it whipping onto the bridge. The smell of salt rushed through with the outside air, as they came in among the enormous biers, along with the earthy scent of wood. But it was all dead and dry smells, lacking the touch of anything living.

The pilot swung the ship, the entire vessel rolling more sharply than Jonathan would have believed possible. Engines labored as it cut crosswise to the gale and powered into the lee of one of the biers, which was more than tall and wide enough to shelter the ship. The pounding

growl of the storm was abruptly muffled, and several brave airmen jumped down with tethers, using zint devices to embed them into the rocky ground by the base of the grave. Behind the wooden wall, the sound of the ravenous cyclone grew closer, and airmen hurried outside to throw cloth tarps and metal shutters over what they could.

Before the storm could actually reach them, there was a slow sliding noise and the impression of some great shadow passing over them. In the light of the storm they could see a massive sinuous silhouette, rearing up over the graves like some great snake. It struck with blinding quickness, out beyond the graves and into the storm.

Groaning and howling turned to screaming as the wind shrieked. A strange shadow-play cast itself on the next bier from the silhouette of the snake and the light of the storm, the crew watching in horrified fascination as the guardian coiled itself around the storm as if it were solid. Even Jonathan was not expecting the immense titan to simply consume the lightning-shot storm, the luminous threads vanishing into the obscured darkness of the snake's gullet. The sound of the wind and storm and pattering debris died over the next few minutes as the snake swallowed the cylinder whole and returned to the graves. For a moment seemed to look at them, then it vanished into the darkness among the biers.

"I take it that's the reason that we need to be careful?" Eleanor asked, staring out into the blackness beyond the *Endeavor's* lights.

"Indeed," Jonathan confirmed. "I did not get a good look at it last time, but this place is guarded. Though from what I have seen, it only reacts to disrespect toward the dead."

"Are those actual bodies then?" Montgomery broke from his running conversation with his crew to hike a thumb at the wooden monument that sheltered them. "Or just tombs?"

"I think both," Jonathan said. They seemed of the appropriate size for the construction of the Arch of Khokorron, though clearly not related to the builders of Tor Ileek and Angkhor Leng. It was difficult to piece together the history of such ancient civilizations when only a few isolated pieces remained. "Regardless, we won't be investigating them."

"Not after seeing that," Montgomery agreed, and resumed giving orders. The *Endeavor* itself was listing slightly, betraying damage to the envelope from the headlong flight. It would take more than minor damage to take the *Endeavor* out of the air, but there was no telling what sort of subtle failures lurked in the machinery of the ship.

"Captain, the *Discovery* is only slightly deeper in, if you think there might be useful supplies aboard," Jonathan suggested. "I know it was fairly stocked when we left it."

"Maybe," Montgomery said doubtfully. "But not after what, three years? And with all this salt about, I don't know how much is going to be any good. Better to leave that to the last."

"Very well," Jonathan said, though his fingers twitched with the desire to continue onward. There was nothing visible, but he could almost feel the sunlight, so close now. He contained himself, asserting control over his own impulses, and turned away from the forward windows. Penelope trotted past, giving him a haughty look, then sniffed at the air coming through the broken glass and sneezed.

"Well, at least it's not too bad out there," Montgomery said, and Jonathan nodded.

“The last of the trek we will have to make on foot,” he said. “The actual terrain is unremarkable. It is the entrance to Bright Defile, and sunlight itself, that is special.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Montgomery said, clearly more worried about the damage to the *Endeavor*. Jonathan forgave the captain for his skepticism; after such a journey, it was likely difficult to believe that the destination was really worth it.

Jonathan left the captain to his business and went to his cabin. Over the course of the trip all the crates had been opened, and no fair few had their contents removed. His esoterica was spent, the spices and snacks he’d packed all consumed. Most of what remained were his books and notes, over half of which he’d removed at one point or another for consultation. They were packed back more loosely, sprawling into containers that had been emptied of their contents.

He went through his effects with deliberation, though in the end there was nothing he could bring to aid him on the final leg. There were no tools, no tricks, no references or records from those who had gone before. At last, the *Endeavor* had reached the edge of the map, where none before had returned. Save him.

Which was not to say he had made no preparations at all. The last time he had seen sunlight, he could go no further because he had neither the understanding nor the will. He hadn’t earned it. He had been too concerned with himself, with his place in the world, with what he could be gained or lost.

This second journey had been spent clarifying his mind, honing himself to the singular purpose of stepping into sunlight. He had deliberately discarded his prior concerns, shedding them as unworthy of the person he must be. And now he was here.

Ultimately, all he ended up doing was putting the cabin in order, straight and neat. He stood at the door looking in, hands clasped behind his back, ensuring his mind was as organized as his space. Then he turned and shut the door behind him, proceeding not to the observation room, but to the abovedeck hatch.

Emerging into the salt-scented air, he saw the extent of the damage to the *Endeavor* and the airmen doing their best to fix it. Lightning had scored part of the envelope and the rear of the ship, blackened in the ship’s lights, with debris scattered all over. Most of it was stone and wood and fungus spat by the storm, but shattered lights and fixtures had strewn glass about as well.

The ship was clearly battered, but none of it seemed particularly dire. He was quite nearly tempted to return below and convince Montgomery to continue onward to the site of the *Discovery*, but held himself back. To simply rush ahead heedlessly would be to betray the journey he had undertaken, to ensure he was prepared for Bright Defile. Jonathan had to see through the end properly, if he was to cross the final barrier.

“You seem restless,” Eleanor said, emerging onto the deck behind him. She squinted up at where one of the airmen was inspecting the envelope, then back down at him. “Having second thoughts?”

“No,” Jonathan said, uncertain of Eleanor’s angle. He didn’t think they were precisely friends anymore, and as far as idle curiosity went there were surely more interesting subjects around. “I merely want to make sure there is nothing I have forgotten.”

“Always seems like whenever you pack, you miss *something*,” Eleanor observed. “If you left an important object back in Beacon, it’s a little late.” Jonathan snorted, not quite a laugh. What he had left back in Beacon remained behind on purpose.

“No, I need only bring myself. Antomine has some tools, I suspect, as I don’t imagine the Illuminated King merely wants an eyewitness.” The inquisitor wouldn’t be able to appreciate sunlight properly himself. Knowledge was jealous, and Antomine was committed to the secrets of the Illuminated King. A light that would not survive trying to adulterate the purity of what Jonathan had witnessed.

“You know at this point I’m wondering if I should even go myself. What with all the insistence you have about how amazing it is.” She reached into her greatcoat for her cigarette holder and inserted half a cigarette; clearly Eleanor was nearly out. “Last time didn’t turn out so well for me.”

“I won’t force you, but it does seem rather odd to come all this way and not at least lay eyes on the destination,” Jonathan said. He didn’t believe that either she or Antomine would be required, but their presence certainly wouldn’t hurt.

“Maybe.” Eleanor lit the cigarette with a match and took a deep drag, staring out at the huge wall of wood by which they were tethered. “I don’t want to end up like you. No interest in anything, no real life. No freedom. Rather not have that kind of knowledge controlling me.”

“Sunlight does not seem to me to be the sort of truth *you* would seek,” Jonathan said after a moment, not quite agreeing with Eleanor’s assessment but seeing no point in arguing. “You may simply feel you need to turn away the moment we see Bright Defile. There is no disgrace in that.”

“I suppose.” Eleanor exhaled smoke, and Jonathan decided she would come. Her curiosity hadn’t been entirely crippled by what had happened with the Black Garden. Unlike with the Garden, he was not going to suggest she actually try to understand the secrets involved. Eleanor was a creature of the dark.

“You know, I have to ask,” she said abruptly. “How is it you always look like your suit’s just been pressed? It’s just eerie, but I also wish I knew how to do that.”

“A small and esoteric technique I discovered on my return, walking from here to Beacon,” Jonathan said modestly. “I don’t know if you have the proper background for it, but I can relate some of the details.”

Whether or not Eleanor truly understood the particular oddities of the knowledge he imparted, they spent some time talking as airmen attended to repairs. The sound of banging and clanging echoed through the ship, and the groan of metal as bent fixtures or fittings were forced back into shape. Even the lights went out on occasion, as glass piping was replaced or repaired.

“We should probably take a couple days,” Montgomery told him, after Eleanor took her leave and impatience drove him to find the captain. “Just to make sure the *Endeavor* is in proper

shape. But we *are* lower on supplies than I'd like, and if there's any metal or glass on the *Discovery*, we could use it. *Those* should still be good."

"I believe so," Jonathan said, which wasn't a lie. He wasn't entirely certain of the disposition of the *Discovery's* supplies, but they had not encountered the same troubles that had hounded the *Endeavor*. His last expedition had been considerably more innocent, not weighted down by the deeper knowledge that had dragged furrows all the way from Beacon to the Grave of Wood. "The *Discovery* was mostly myceliplank, however — I doubt there will be much carisium there."

"Right," Montgomery said, casting a glance to the side of the bridge where the broken pane of glass had been replaced by a thin sheet of iron. It made the view distinctly lopsided, but they certainly couldn't leave it open. "Well, something is better than nothing," he said with resignation. "You said it's not far. Where, exactly?"

Jonathan removed the last, smallest notebook from inside his suit, flipping to the sketch he had made of the Grave of Wood. It was at best an estimate, an extrapolation from what could be seen from the lights of the ship. He had no idea of the true extent of the place, but the only part that mattered was the path toward Bright Defile.

"There is a main thoroughfare, which we can locate by looking at the relative locations of the biers." He handed the notebook to Montgomery, who carried it over to the navigator. Despite the strangeness of the place, navigation within the Grave of Wood required no special preparation. At least, not to get to Bright Defile. Whatever other secrets it might hold would have to wait for someone else to investigate them.

"I would not suggest going any further than the *Discovery*," Jonathan cautioned. "In fact, it might not even be possible. The final approach to Bright Defile will have to be on foot."

"Under the circumstances, that's likely for the best," Montgomery said, eyeing the darkness outside. "If sunlight is really as big a thing as you've been saying, I'd rather not risk the ship."

"That is fair," Jonathan allowed. Even he wasn't certain what would happen to the artifice of man, were it fully exposed to that light of truth.

Airmen freed the tethers on the ground and the ship shuddered back into motion, cautiously sliding out of the shelter of the tremendous wooden bier. The pilot used the angles of the monuments to steer the *Endeavor*, as they were simply arranged in a sort of a fan radiating out from the entrance to Bright Defile. Relatively simple calculations were all that were needed to point them toward the thoroughfare.

Spotlights played over bare rock and drifts of dirt, accumulating against the sides of the biers. It was clear nothing had disturbed the area in a long time, not even to leave prints in the dust and earth. They moved slowly, the engines kept low either from damage or an abundance of caution or both. Jonathan stood at one side of the bridge, studying the features revealed by the ship's spotlights until he spotted something familiar.

A particular body, whose cloth draped nearly to the ground, heralded the center path. Smooth-polished metal slabs, like flagstones the size of a city block, formed a clear avenue stretching due east. The *Endeavor* swung onto a new heading, and soon enough the form of the *Discovery* loomed out of the dark, next to the prize that had tempted it.

The ship hung close to the ground, much of its lifting gas escaped over the past few years, with a smaller and squatter profile than the *Endeavor*. Tether chains held it fast next to a clearly defaced bier, an enormous sledge leaning against cracked and broken wood and chunks of salt, with the gleam of something shining coming from within. Jonathan didn't know what the bier held, and nobody ever would; trying to cross inside was what had brought the guardian down upon them, and that was not a mistake that Jonathan would repeat.

"Make sure everyone knows not to try and go inside," he told Montgomery, though he'd already warned against trying to take anything from the graveyard. "Only the ship is safe." That fact was demonstrated by the lingering zint glow from the bridge of the *Discovery*, showing that the guardian had not bothered with it. Anything of the east would have extinguished the zint as a matter both of course and of nature.

"Right," Montgomery said grimly, and had the pilot bring them in closer to the derelict. The long iron poles driven in by the *Discovery's* tethers were still firmly planted in the ground, but the *Endeavor* drove her own. There was no telling what wear there had been in the intervening years. He joined Antomine on the cargo deck, brushing off the sleeves of his pristine suit as the crew readied the descent line.

Their preparations were interrupted by Penelope, the ship's cat, appearing from the stairwell in a tumble of paws just as a frantic meowing sounded from beyond the open hatch. With a snap of wings a second cat, a ragged tom in tortoiseshell coloring, flew in the hatch and landed on the deck. Jonathan recognized him as Dreyfus, the *Discovery's* ship cat, somehow still alive after the attack and years alone.

There was a brief standoff as the two cats stared at each other, ears twitching and the occasional low growl bubbling to the surface, before Penelope sneezed and sauntered away. Dreyfus followed after, and immediately found a friend in Sarah, jumping into the surprised maid's arms as she came down the stairs.

"Where did you come from?" She asked the tom, who responded with a purr.

"That's Dreyfus, the *Discovery's* ship cat," Jonathan informed her. "I am not certain how he survived these past few years, but I suppose it hardly matters."

"Perhaps not," Sarah conceded, already turning around to return to the upper decks and take care of the cat. The entire incident created a sense of guarded optimism among the crew, though of course the *Discovery* still needed to be inspected before salvaging could begin in earnest. Jonathan and Antomine led that detachment — Jonathan because he was familiar with the ship, and Antomine because it truly was his business to inspect the final fates of the men aboard.

Surprisingly, Antomine had *two* Lux Guards with him by the time the descent line was rigged, showing that he had somehow managed to repair the damaged one. Jonathan gave him a sharp look, but Antomine didn't comment. The best explanation that Jonathan could think of was that the encounter with the Players and seeing the Game had stirred some understanding on the inquisitor's part, but that was only a guess.

Jonathan stepped into the descent line, riding down to the smooth surface, where the other ship nearly touched the ground. The presence of the *Discovery* in person stirred vague and discomfiting memories, emotions that roiled up before being burned off by the soothing surety of

sunlight. The humble vessel was a strange relic of a profound discovery, and yet at the same time merely useful scavenge. A waypoint, but not the destination itself.

The salt-heavy air had preserved the myceliplank fairly well, other than some cracking and shrinking that loosened the individual boards. The chains holding the *Discovery* down had corroded, but in the still air and protection of the Grave of Wood, they weren't near to failing. There were no traces of any disturbance, despite which Jonathan kept his pistol ready, along with a borrowed cutlass, as he followed Antomine and the Lux Guards inside.

It was exactly as he had left it years ago. Here and there uniforms puddled on the floor, with no trace of their owners. As if those wearing them had simply evaporated — which was not far from the truth. Antomine stopped at each one and muttered a few words, the Lux Guards alert as they swept through the ship. An effort soon completed, given the vessel's size, so Antomine gave the signal for airmen to come aboard and begin scavenging.

"This the furthest east any human vessel has gone," Antomine remarked, looking out to where the thoroughfare continued into the darkness beyond the lights. "And yet it is an abandoned derelict. There is a lesson there, I feel."

"The greatest risk is always the unknown," Jonathan said. "That is the lesson, and it's something that anyone could conclude just by going through life." Antomine gave him a disapproving look for the answer.

"Such churlishness does not become you, Mister Heights." Antomine waved a hand at the *Discovery*. "We are all expecting that you can keep the *Endeavor* from following in her wake. Can you?"

"I believe so. In fact, I would suggest that the *Endeavor* herself goes no further." He nodded to the *Discovery*. "Let this be the line where no ship shall pass, and we can proceed on foot from here." In any case, proceeding by foot would be faster than waiting for the ship.

The time had finally come.