

Chapter Eleven

"I don't think the crew much like you," Eleanor said, watching the glowing cone of a volcano slowly slide past in the distance. For the moment there was no weather, and the passengers had all gravitated to the observation room after a large meal with fresh and exotic supplies.

"They aren't required to," Jonathan replied, though he wasn't blind to the implications. It was his expedition and he was paying them, but they were the ones who ran the ship. A true mutiny seemed unlikely, especially as they got further from human civilization. Beyond the Verdant Expanse was where things began to get truly strange, and even for him details often fled the mind. He would be the only one who could properly interpret the maps, but there were innumerable ways that a hostile crew could stymie the ultimate goal.

"It does seem rather ungrateful," he continued, idly tapping his fingers on his notebook. "I have spent significant effort to ensure that the *Endeavor* and those inside her have been safe."

"I guess," Eleanor admitted, wrinkling her nose. "You used to be a lot more personable, though. Almost charming, even. Not like now."

"I understand more now," Jonathan said. "Charm didn't save my last expedition; being personable does little to bring us to our destination. I am the way I am now so that we can reach sunlight."

"Be wary you do not lose yourself entirely," Antomine warned. He didn't look up from the well-thumbed book of scripture he was perusing. "Obsession is too dangerous to leave unchecked."

"And yet, it is the reason you are both here," Jonathan said, scornful of their displeasure. "The wild dark won't be convinced by the indulgent beliefs of Beacon. A careful, safe, and measured approach is for those who have the safety of walls and guards."

"We carry civilization with us," Antomine disagreed. "Every moral stricture, every code of behavior is with us. Out here in the dark, what separates us from beasts and inhuman monsters rests entirely in our heart and souls." His white pupils lit with religious fervor as he lowered his missal. "We *are* the light in the darkness. Carrying that light with us is ever more important the further from Beacon we get."

Jonathan pressed his lips together against any choice words that might emerge. The light that Antomine carried with him seemed a pale and pathetic thing compared to what Jonathan knew, but the young man had a certain faith in it nonetheless. Nor could Jonathan deny that the inquisitor had his uses.

"I have found that certain concessions must be made out here," Jonathan said instead, trying to steer the conversation away from something that might well spark tempers further. "Perhaps we have run into an unfair number of the inevitable hazards to be found outside of Beacon, but there is more to come. If anyone finds the conditions too harsh, it is far too late now. We're nearly on the other side of the Verdant Expanse."

"What exactly *is* past the Verdant Expanse?" Eleanor asked. "I've seen the maps, but they don't tell me much, and people back in Beacon talk about it like it's the edge of the world."

“It might as well be,” Jonathan said, regarding the absolute darkness ahead of them, where there were no spots of glow from sheltershrooms or lava or phosphorescent rivers. Just an abyss, like the sky above. “Nothing here has any real contact with humans. There are no inhabitants we would care to encounter. No patterns or cycles to the weather that I’ve been able to understand.”

“Or landmarks to navigate by,” Eleanor suggested, waving her cigarette holder at the front window.

“Indeed,” Jonathan said, inclining his head. “Getting lost would be terribly easy — and terribly deadly.”

In the following days, Jonathan ended up spending more time on the bridge than the observation deck, poring over the maps and trying to match it with the small pieces of landscape the *Endeavor’s* lights revealed. They navigated by triskolabe and dead reckoning, as Jonathan refused to use the strange circle-compass he’d created until it was time to approach the city of Angkor Leng. After all, its direction was a mere perceptual trick and not true guidance.

Beyond the end of the Verdant Expanse, thin, razor-edged towers jutted upward from the ground, which was oft as not shrouded in some dense mist that reflected zint in varied and muted colors. Dull copper or azure, sometimes muddy red and other times pulsing indigo. It flowed and shifted like a living thing, and Montgomery kept the *Endeavor* well out of reach.

“The map doesn’t even help,” Montgomery grumbled, one hand on the wheel as he watched columns of sharp black stone drift by, most of them stretching upward far beyond the range of the spotlights and the maximum height the ship could reach. His hand twitched the wheel here and there as he personally steered the *Endeavor* between outcroppings of stone, the engines at half power while they navigated the maze. “Though I suppose it’d take generations to chart all this.”

He pulled levers and the *Endeavor* ascended to clear a projecting beam, a glassy stone arch connecting two of the towers. The spotlights showed a glimpse of some kind of disturbingly humanlike creature crawling along the underside, just for a moment before it passed out of sight. Montgomery grunted and directed some of his men to man the chase guns before looking at Jonathan.

“I saw it,” Jonathan confirmed, eyeing some of the archways that were much further up, only barely visible at the edge of the spotlights’ reach. He tapped his cane against the deck, the sound sharpening as he focused his thoughts, and rose, absently adjusting his suit. “Keep going east. There should only be another twenty miles or so of this.”

“Hope so,” Montgomery replied, eyes fixed ahead as he steered the ship. Jonathan strolled out of the bridge and went up one deck, finding Antomine in the observation room. His guards were, as usual, not in evidence, as they seemed to spend all their time in their own rooms. Marie was seated there as well, repairing some clothing with needle and thread.

“We need to expect creatures coming down from above us,” Jonathan said without preamble. “I’m not sure if they can damage the envelope but it’s best to be ready to deal with them.”

"It is times like this that I am more than satisfied with my decision to arm the *Endeavor* with better cannon," Antomine said, but Jonathan ignored the barb. They had already seen that the most potent dangers in the darkness were those that could not be met with force of arms.

"I will fetch Eleanor," Marie said, putting her sewing aside and gliding smoothly out of the observation room. Jonathan saw that Antomine didn't give her more than a casual glance, despite Marie moving with the sort of grace that ought to have fixed the eye of any man of Antomine's age. Like Jonathan, Antomine was a man compelled by secret knowledge, whatever had been revealed to him to make him an inquisitor.

"So have you any idea what they are?" Antomine said idly, standing up and picking up his hat from where it lay next to his chair. "You have been through here before, yes?"

"Not this way," Jonathan said grimly, pausing at the door to his cabin. "I wish I knew everything east of the Verdant Expanse, but there is too much, and some of it you will never encounter more than once. But I've learned to trust my gut, and I don't like what I saw."

"Reasonable enough," Antomine said, and continued on to get his guards. Jonathan stepped into his cabin to retrieve his rifle and pistol, checking the ampoules to ensure they were fully charged before continuing to the above-deck hatch. He couldn't even tell that it had been replaced, save for a few scuff marks.

Stepping outside, the towers seemed even more claustrophobically close, and the wind carried a strange and sour scent like that of rot. Looking up at where the swivel lights cast illumination on stone projections above, it was clear how close some of the formations came to the envelope. Blue zint-light pulsed as the engines flared, struggling to keep the ship level and stable against the unpredictable currents gusting through the gaps.

The rock surfaces were corrugated and contorted, ridges coming to gleaming points and forming suggestions of some great and grotesque pattern. From the narrow glimpses, confined to the points where spotlights found rock, it was impossible to tell whether the design was the work of malevolent natural fortuity or some ancient and twisted hand. The sound of the wind blowing through these rippled surfaces formed a soft susurration of half-formed whispers, plucking at the mind yet refusing to congeal.

Eleanor came through the hatch only moments after him, hatless, her long red hair blowing in the wind. She was followed by the maids, all three women bearing pistols, and then a moment later they were joined by Antomine's guards while the inquisitor himself remained below. Jonathan braced himself with his cane as the ship lurched, engines and wings gimbaling to veer away from yet another sharp-edged spire of stone looming out of the dark.

As if cued by the motion, the chase gun at the bow of the ship opened up, the staccato flashing illuminating an arch above as the gunner walked his fire over a sizeable overhang. Pale corpses dropped from a seething mass that reminded Jonathan of a nest of spiders before the group splintered. The forms scampered out of the spotlights, moving smoothly over the more-than-vertical rock.

"That looked like people," Eleanor said, voice holding an odd note.

"There are no people out here," Jonathan said firmly. "No matter what they look like." There were creatures, and things, and beasts, but not people. He had learned that long ago.

“Starboard,” Sarah said suddenly in warning, and Jonathan turned, shifting his rifle to aim at the shadows that could be seen crawling down the nearest stone tower. His shots were joined by ones from James and John, punching holes in a half-dozen of the things that had been crawling down toward the ship. They wailed and slipped and fell, plunging far, far downward where the mist boiled up eagerly to meet them.

The sound of impacts came from above, along with the screeching of metal. Eleanor looked upward to the envelope and vanished. A few moments later several corpses plummeted from above, landing with unpleasantly wet crunches on the deck with dark blood leaking from holes punched precisely through hearts.

The creatures were grotesque and twisted mockeries of proper human form, each one stretched and distorted as toys of some cruel child. Neither dignity nor humanity remained in the tormented figures, whose flesh and bone were bent and twisted into new and appalling function. Yet in defiance of the revolting desecration of the body, they still wore scraps and tatters of clothes, some of them recognizable as drastically frayed and faded airman’s uniforms, or dresses long out of fashion.

“I thought you said there were no people out here,” Eleanor said accusingly, returning to scowl at the horrendous corpses.

“There surely are not,” Jonathan said with grim certainty. “I have no idea who these things may have once been, or where they came from, but they aren’t people anymore.”

As if summoned by the revelation, or perhaps merely watching or listening from a safe vantage, Antomine emerged from the hatch. The broad brim of his hat flopped in the wind but it stayed firmly on his head as he approached one of the bodies. The young man evinced no distaste for the corpse, deformed even though it was, as he inspected the clothing remnants, the dark blood, and the sallow skin.

“Samson’s Redoubt,” Antomine said, holding a ragged patch of insignia between finger and thumb. “Vanished two hundred years ago. How did these poor souls get here?”

“I doubt we’ll ever know,” Jonathan said, eyes focused on the razor-edged stone drifting far too close for comfort. “Or that we’d want to.” The whispering wind seemed to peak for a moment, and the spotlights caught a milling nest of hundreds, maybe even thousands of the former people on a rock face ahead of them. The decayed and decrepit edges of buildings broke the disturbing whorls and patterns in the stone; part of a city somehow transplanted into the side of the spire.

“This is blasphemous,” Antomine said in a hard voice, his white-pupiled eyes flashing. He straightened up and vanished back down the hatchway along with one of his guards, leaving them with one fewer defender on the deck. Eleanor snorted.

“That was useful,” she said bitingly, readying her daggers once again as more of the creatures crawled into the spotlights and toward the *Endeavor*. The deck lurched as the ship suddenly surged upward, Montgomery clearly having spotted the nest and not wanting to risk passing below it. It was too close to avoid entirely, but if they had *hundreds* of the things crawling over the *Endeavor*, Jonathan doubted the ship would survive.

Everyone winced at the sound of screeching metal as more landed on the envelope, somewhere out of sight, and Eleanor growled something under her breath. Several of the former humans thudded onto the deck, and Jonathan hurriedly aimed his rifle to remove them before they could crawl down and make trouble among the crew. He only managed to pick off two more of the creatures before the ampoule ran dry, so he unsheathed his cane, holding the blade in one hand and his pistol in the other.

He rushed at the nearest abomination and, considering the proximity of others nearby, simply disposed of it by kicking it with a meaty crunch and sending it hurtling over the side. Several of the creatures lurched at him as the first one plummeted into the depths below, horrible long fingers reaching. Judging from the sounds of tortured metal, there was a hideous strength in those fragile-seeming digits, making Jonathan focus on keeping them away with his sword as he discharged the zint pistol at point-blank range.

Antomine's second guard, the one who had remained behind, plied his baton with near-inhuman strength, sending attackers flying off the side of the deck with clockwork regularity. The two maids worked in familiar concert to keep themselves from being flanked, keeping their backs to the metal spine of the ship where the envelope joined the deck. For several long moments the sounds of combat rose over the whispering wind; the hum of zint discharge, the wet and slithering sounds of metal impaling flesh, the crack of bones and the thump of boots.

A deeper, louder zint hum suddenly rose from somewhere below, rising up and up in pitch and frequency in a way Jonathan had never heard before. Something about it set his teeth on edge and he took several steps away from the edge, disengaging from one of his opponents and squeezing off the last shot in his pistol's ampoule. His sword, already shed of its blood, swung wide to sever an arm and draw a horrible noise from a snaggle-toothed mouth.

"Brace!" He warned, steadying his stance. He didn't know what was going on, but his gut warned him to watch his footing. He couldn't tell if Eleanor had heard him, from where she was upon the envelope, but there was no time to check. One of the *Endeavor's* cannons lit off, the zint blaze like a stroke of lightning before a beam of solid light lanced out and into the column of stone supporting the lost settlement.

The zint discharge swiveled as whoever was manning the cannon hauled it across, the terrible coruscating light cutting straight through the stone. Jonathan cursed as the enormous section of stone, rising up far beyond sight, began a slow and stately topple. Antomine – for such a discharge could only have been his work – had at least had the foresight to angle the cut such that it fell away from the ship, but the cracking and groaning foretold the cataclysm to result from its collapse.

Endeavor's engines surged, powering them forward as Montgomery threw caution to the wind and veered into the forest of spires. The creaking and groaning of the toppling tower grew ever louder even as they fled it, the ship barely missing some of the other columns that appeared in the forward lights. Jonathan took a half-step back as a shelf of corrugated stone swept by barely a hands-breath from the deck, ripping a section of rail from the edge with a harsh metallic snarl.

A hoarse shout came from below, and Jonathan glanced around. Judging the upper deck secure enough, he ducked back through the hatch and slithered down the stairwell. The gun emplacements dotted the mid deck, and sounds of a struggle came from the stern chase gun.

A zint gun flashed, and Jonathan arrived to find one of the creatures lying dead, a terrified airman, and a damaged chase gun. A minor incident, considering, but there were only so many spares for the gun, and with Antomine below-decks he really should have been taking care of such things.

The ship continued to jolt and sway as the cracking and booming of the falling stone built to a crescendo, a roar that vibrated the decking underfoot. The wind from the impact of the collapse swept over the *Endeavor*, the final cry of something dark and terrible that made the lights gutter as candles in the wind. Metal groaned and creaked from the force of it while the ship lifted and spun like a cork in a river, and Jonathan was forced to grip a holdfast while the airman clung to the rail. The corpse flopped over and fell into blackness, along with the airman's hat.

Shrapnel smashed into columns both near and far away, and flying fragments pinged off the hull despite the distance. Jonathan pulled the airman inside, then staggered around the mid deck to ensure there were no other intruders still holding on. When he spotted Antomine, looking bedraggled for the first time since Jonathan had met him and coming the opposite way, Jonathan planted himself in the inquisitor's way.

"What were you thinking?" Jonathan demanded in a low growl, even as the ship's engines continued to labor to keep it from slamming into unyielding stone. "You could have killed us all."

"Would we have fared any better if *that* number of lost souls swarmed us?" Antomine returned, straightening up and squaring his shoulders. "And perhaps it does not matter to you, but putting them to rest was the right thing to do. The Inquisition was *created* to deal with such terrible things. Unless you wish to tell the crew you wanted to leave them to suffer because of cowardice?"

"We can be circumspect without backing into cowardice," Jonathan said coldly, dark eyes fixed on Antomine's own pale ones. "We are lucky we survived that — and there is no telling what you might have stirred. Or do you think that some displaced survivors are the only things inhabiting this stone forest?" Antomine's eyes flickered uncertainty, then he shook his head.

"There is no point in avoiding a current trouble for fear of an unknown future one." Antomine frowned at him and James — or perhaps it was John — emerged from one of the gunports to join Antomine, standing tall in implicit threat. Jonathan *did* still have his sword out, and while he simmered with fury at Antomine's recklessness, he was forced to concede this was not the best time for it.

"I hope for your sake those above were able to weather the jostling," he said instead, and *that* got Antomine's attention. The inquisitor frowned and pushed his way past Jonathan, who let the young man go. Antomine could see to Eleanor's disposition. The guard brushed silently by in Antomine's wake, and Jonathan frowned after them before sheathing his gleaming clean sword-cane and heading to the bridge to ascertain the status of the ship. By the time he made it, *Endeavor* had steadied somewhat, though the moment he stepped through the door the ship made another lurching dive to avoid a bizarre spiderweb of arches just ahead, pointed spines of rock creating a narrow maze of passages.

There, Montgomery and his helmsmen snapped orders and bearings in a tense silence, one Jonathan dared not interrupt. It was only when the forward spotlights found the jagged tops of far shorter stone columns, signaling the end of the stone forest, that Montgomery deigned to

notice him. The weathered captain blotted sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and beckoned him in.

“Reminds me of Gillar’s Folly,” Montgomery said conversationally and, considering that was where *Endeavor* had been previously turned into near-scrap, it was no praise. “Come on in, Mister Heights.” Without even pausing he glanced at the control console and continued speaking. “Envelope’s leaking. Connor, take three men with flight suits for repair.”

“Sir,” said one of the airmen, saluting and hurrying out of the bridge. Jonathan glanced after him and then strode to Montgomery’s side, looking out over the landscape revealed by the *Endeavor*’s lights. A long slope stretched ahead of them, covered in virulent red creepers that slowly writhed in the light. Jonathan’s map had the area marked as a mostly barren expanse, sweeping up to an eye-rending symbol due east — a place to avoid at all costs. Something easier said than done, for the very land contorted itself around the terrible ancient ruins there.

“I hope you have some place we can tether,” Montgomery said, removing his pipe from his jacket pocket. A match flared and he puffed smoke. “We need to assess the damage and make repairs. And think about finding one of the terrestrite veins you have marked here. No telling how much lift gas we’ve lost.”

Jonathan studied the map, pinned on the huge board at the navigator’s station. Straight line distance was not the only consideration, as hazardous terrain, uncooperative winds, and terrifying denizens all made for complex navigation. His map had been created from journeys on foot, which was a different proposition from the air, and he certain hadn’t intended to stop in the area. Yet only a fool would think that plans would go unchallenged by the vagaries of the world.

“Here, I believe,” Jonathan said after a moment, tapping a small symbol that was uncomfortably far south from their original line of travel. “We can reach this and still make it to the Trembling Valley without wasting too much time.”

“How the hell are we supposed to find it?” Jameson muttered, looking in dismay at where the terrestrite vein was surrounded by flat nothing.

“It’s exposed. We’ll spot the glow,” Jonathan told him, and Jameson nodded understanding. They didn’t need to navigate by landmarks if the vein itself was a landmark, though being the only source of light in the area led to its own problems. He had skirted it the last time he was there, but the only other options were unacceptably far away — or unacceptably close to the lethal ruins.

Montgomery gave orders and the ship began to turn, adjusting to its new heading. Jonathan left them to it, habitually brushing off the sleeves of his suit before returning to the deck above and finding out what had become of Eleanor. He very much doubted something so simple as an unsteady ship would inconvenience her, and indeed he could hear her voice berating Antomine long before he reached the observation room.

A glance showed that all the passengers were there and none had been flung off during the rough handling, though to judge by Eleanor’s tirade it had not been pleasant. Sarah and Marie both looked somewhat ruffled, even if neither of Antomine’s guards looked particularly put out. Behind their faceless masks, Antomine’s guards might well have been just as irritated, but it was impossible to tell and they certainly did not say.

Jonathan didn't interrupt as he walked in, leaning on his cane while Antomine faced Eleanor with a sour expression. The young inquisitor took the reprimand with good enough grace, at least up to a point. But he clearly wasn't abashed enough to take the lash of Eleanor's tongue for long.

"Enough," he said, voice hard as he interrupted Eleanor mid-word. "I will admit that the consequences were more energetic than I imagined, but I stand by it. We could not have fought everything, and there were no casualties." Antomine looked Jonathan's way. "You said yourself that it is not safe out here. These are simply the risks we have to take."

"It is not that simple." Jonathan frowned at Antomine and planted his cane on the floor, resting both hands atop it. "None of us obey the other; there are no chains of command between us. Nor would any of us agree to such a thing. Should one of us decide on something drastic, we must convey that with absolute clarity." Jonathan's dark eyes blazed at them, the sunlight in his soul granting him perfect confidence. "Otherwise we risk the expedition. *I will not have that.*"

"I didn't—" Eleanor began, then faltered under the cold edge of Jonathan's regard. Antomine returned Jonathan's gaze for a moment, but he too was forced to avert his eyes, naked threat hanging in the air.

"Neither of you share my goal. That does not bother me." Jonathan spoke in cool, precise words, dispassionately watching the pair and their attendant guards. "I will even help you achieve your own ends, within reason, and I will understand when you are forced to pursue unorthodox solutions. But if you endanger us through carelessness you will *walk* back to Beacon." He surveyed the two of them and decided that was sufficient threat. Neither of them needed to be told the consequences for threatening the expedition by design.

"The *Endeavor* will be proceeding to a zint deposit on the map, to refuel and ensure we are properly repaired," Jonathan continued. "This is not part of our plotted course, so I am less acquainted with what might be there than other places so far. I expect both of you to be very wary of whatever else we may find." There was little he could do to hold Antomine to account unless he was willing to remove the man entirely, and unfortunately Antomine's talents were still quite valuable.

"Mister Inquisitor can stand guard, I'm sure," Eleanor said scornfully. Antomine frowned but inclined his head, briefly hiding his eyes behind the broad brim of his hat.

Jonathan returned to his cabin, digging through his crates for supplies that he hadn't anticipated using quite so soon. He would be getting fire dust from the hold, of course, but the black market had allow him to create various instruments before leaving Beacon. They were modeled from the lost and obscure technologies he had glimpsed on his travels, their original purposes unknown but he had no doubt as to their efficacy. He set aside a series of metal stakes, shaped into unsettling totems; a stick of peculiar incense composed of ingredients smuggled in from the Invidus Croft; a waxed bronze plaque with an inscription in a tongue even Jonathan couldn't read.

None if it would stop a truly determined threat, but any single one would at least discourage curious wildlife. The inevitably obvious process of extracting and refining zint was bound to draw some attention, which was what the tripod-mounted rotary weapons packed into the hold were for, but the fewer encounters the better. Together, the occult tools he had created to

shield the *Endeavor* might well allow them a reasonable peace as they attended to the ship's needs — assuming the men could deal with the oddness such items produced.

A long, low call of some wild beast suddenly sounded from outside the ship, and Jonathan hastened to the observation deck to see the bioluminescent flickering of something massive off to starboard. The rippling blue-green only hinted at a shape of breathtaking size, and the spotlights helped not at all since, large as it was, it was still too far away to illuminate. Only one enormous fin emerged, at least the size of the *Endeavor* by itself, and with a flick propelled the enormous thing away — and sent the ship listing with the mere wind of its passage.

“That is why we must be cautious,” Jonathan told a gobsmacked Eleanor, still looking out the windows despite the shape being far out of sight. “The vast spaces this far east breed vast creatures. It takes more than swords and guns to stave them off.”

“I can see that!” Eleanor scowled and took a long drag on her cigarette. Privately, Jonathan did not know the identity of the thing either, but there was more in the world than anyone could dream, let alone know.

The terrain slid past underneath as they went south, red creeper turning into silver and gold leaves plastered against the ground, interrupted by glittering metallic gourds. On occasion, one of the oversized fruits rocked alarmingly under the lights, a restive stirring that fortunately never went anywhere. On two separate occasions the crew were forced to fend off flying things, large pestiferous beasts attracted to the ship's lights, though none of them near the size of the leviathan that had appeared outside of the forest of stone columns.

It took three days, during which the airmen patched the worst of the leaks and covered punctures in the wings and vanes. Most of the damage was to the envelope and steering surfaces, while the engines had made it completely unscathed — as well they should, considering what he had paid for them. Other purchases seemed to have been made more in vain, as the need for repairs uncovered that entire crates of tools and supplies were empty. Jonathan didn't know exactly where along the line the embezzlement had occurred, but it hardly mattered when the result was the same. There was significantly less in the way of replacement parts than anticipated.

It changed little in the immediate term, but it did mean he would have consider how to replenish some of those stocks in the middle of the wilderness. Especially since by the time the dull glow of terrestrite appeared ahead of them, they had amassed a long list of required items that would rather challenging to acquire so far out. Yet when they neared the terrestrite vein, it became clear that the difficulties would be different than the ones he had anticipated. The *Endeavor's* spotlights shone not on rock and brush and wild fastness, but on rumbling machinery, suspiciously new and gleaming. As they drew closer, lights of a town shone from the darkness, and the trappings of human infrastructure; walls, tall and white; mooring towers, sturdy and solid; streets, busy and bright.

So far from human lands, an impossible flame of civilization shone in the wildness of the dark.