

Chapter Nine

There was no time to be cautious. Jonathan knew not what creature the crew had disturbed, what phenomenon they had uncovered, or what difference there might be between the two. What he had was an instinct from long years of delving ancient ruins and trekking across the lightless landscape that made him gut-certain it was nothing they could fight.

Jonathan led the retreat, pelting back along the corridor that had brought them there as furnace heat rose at their backs. The hot air went from zephyr to wind to gale, snatching at their clothing and driving them forward. In the far, unlit reaches of the ruins, there was a vast cacophony from beasts and vermin as they were stirred from their lairs; hideous cries of great and mournful things, their calls loathsome and freakish to the ear.

Occasionally they caught a glimpse of one of the foul beasts of the decrepit city, things of stretched and spidered limbs or hulking muscle, rendered in colors both bright and dim. All of them were headed in the same direction as Jonathan and the expedition — away. Exiting the monolith, they caught the sight of something massive plunging into the distant river, the merest hint of some cruel and ghastly shape with a size rivaling that of some of the buildings.

The dreadful unending roar behind them grew in volume, rising higher, and Jonathan risked a quick look back despite being unable to see the place they had come from. An apocalyptic glow issued forth from behind them, of a bright and hungry hue that he could not name, one that might have unmanned him were it not for the sanctity of the sunlight rooted deep within. It stalked them with the cruel playfulness of the wicked and sadistic, nipping at their heels when it could have overtaken them at any moment.

Its distasteful savagery impelled him to further efforts, racing ahead of the group to shove open doors that had closed behind them on the way in. The ring-locked door, especially, needed a few moments to twist the large, circular handle on the interior before it slid aside, only just in time for Eleanor to squeeze through, followed by the rest of their crew. If they were to escape at all it would be with some nature of surprise, but it was clear the thing would not hesitate to consume any who might fall behind.

Two of their number were being hauled bodily by the rest, one of them the man who had been attacked on their way in, and the other the babbling maniac who had most likely stirred the thing. If it came to it, Jonathan had no idea whether the airmen would choose to save their fellow crew, or the treasure. The ruinous regard of that luminous incandescence promised a fate beyond human imagining.

Out they went, sprinting through halls they had cautiously walked before and stumbling up staircases. Everything shook and rumbled with the rage of the thing behind them, cracks appearing in the worn and rotting but heretofore imperishable stone. When their party emerged into the dome, they needed no lantern to find the stairs as the dreadful light cast everything into a shadowless relief — even the extra degrees of the circle. Despite their rush Jonathan took notice of heretofore unrevealed symbols and engravings in the distant roof that, under other circumstances, would have been enough to draw an expedition all on its own.

The heat made it hard to breathe, the exhaust of some immense blast furnace billowing up behind them as they ascended the final stairwell. There were no noises but the sound of boots on stone and the panting breath of panic and a full sprint before the roar burst into the dome

beneath them. The proximity of salvation, *Endeavor* waiting above, spurred on those who might have been flagging, and even the limping fellow pressed gamely on as boot leather began to smoke. When they burst out into the cooler air and clean zint-light of the outside, it was a blessed relief, but the shouting from the crew stationed at the descent line — the brawny one and the wiry one, whom Jonathan vaguely recognized — was panicked.

“Come on! The captain is leaving!” The brawny one shouted, and Jonathan scowled, sheathing his cane-sword and dashing to reach the descent line before it could be freed. He more than understood the haste; the strange radiation seemed to be spreading out and issuing from cracks and rents in the city ruins, some rising force ready to sweep them all away.

Eleanor and Antomine piled on behind him, the former panting and puffing from the sprint while the latter seemed entirely unaffected by the exertion and threat both. Then the companions and crew, Antomine’s guards scooping up the injured airmen and Eleanor’s maids taking an extra share of the plunder as they grabbed onto the descent line. Pulleys worked and hauled them upward, Jonathan jumping onto the deck and rushing for the cargo, for he had a final surprise in mind to ward off the killing pounce of the unnamable thing. It was the work of a moment to pull out an amphora of unflame and return with it and, as Antomine pulled the last crewman aboard, Jonathan cast their salvation down from on high into the rising pyre.

Clay smashed as the amphora hit the top of the dome and a dark liquid leaked out, seeming to spark black before erupting into atramentous flames. The malignant cold of the spreading dark fire suppressed the malevolent heat that had risen to caress the bottom of the ship. Someone cut the descent cables and the tether lines released of their own accord a moment later, the unflame turning the metal brittle from cold.

The black fire and the horrific light met, touched, and embraced like old lovers. The unflame dripped down into the dome, out of sight, and the light seemed to drink the darkness, drawing it in like wine from a poisoned cup. In that moment of quiescence the deck lurched underfoot as Montgomery, having seen what was happening from the bridge, ordered engines to full and emergency ascent.

Everyone stumbled and Jonathan was forced to brace himself with his cane as he watched the stygian conflagration and the ravenous light merge together into something all the more awful, then leap outward, racing through ancient streets and decrepit halls of antiquity. Tor Ilek was more visible than he had ever seen it, all its crumbled glory revealed by the doom some poor airman had awoken. For one terrible instant Jonathan had a fleeting glimpse of what impossible architectures that forgotten race had wrought, even as it was consumed by the loathsome child of two horrors, one from the distant south and one from far beneath.

Even as they pulled away, the river seemed to boil, unnamable colors of light leeching into steam and seeming to reach up toward them. For a moment the gluttonous howl of ruin drowned out the thrumming zint at the engines, then slowly faded as they pulled up and way. The remains of Tor Ilek seemed to founder, the ruin surrendering to lecherous forces as the river churned over falling debris and turned it into a graveyard of rotted stone, drowned tombstones jutting from a watery necropolis.

“What the hell was *that?*” Eleanor demanded, voice taking on a shrill tone he had not previously associated with her. Jonathan couldn’t properly blame her. He had the assurance of sunlight, without which he might well be shaken. Once she voiced it, others found their tongue as well,

especially those who were still attending to the stricken man whose eyes stared into space and whose only words were in a language not fit for the human tongue. The tiniest reflections of that hideous light seemed to glimmer in his pupils, the remnant of an experience impossible to fathom.

"I do not know," Jonathan said, flat and cold enough to stifle the questions. "The darkness is full of things we have no names for and have never encountered. Every expedition comes back with records of new beasts or phenomena, and more questions than answers." He pointed his cane at the still-open door where the faint, frustrated glow of Tor Ilek was dying a final death. "The treasure here is not without risks."

"That was more than a risk, that was a damned *catastrophe*," one of the airmen said. Jonathan raised his brows at the man.

"We're alive, we have what we came for. Hardly catastrophic." He glanced at the one true casualty and then looked to Antomine. "Though I believe that this man would benefit from your professional care." Jonathan suspected Antomine had more faith in the Illuminated King than in God, but even a hollow recitation of religious screed could be a comfort in the face of the abyss.

"Yes, indeed," Antomine said, reverting to his more cheerful, boyish self. "Think about it, men! You have a small fortune now!" A very small one indeed, after customs, taxes, fees, auction cuts, and other such incidentals, but still a substantial sum for anyone used to airmen's pay. "I'll have Conrad back on his feet in no time." He beckoned for his guards to support the stricken man, who still only spoke in that crackling, flickering language of some prehistoric fire.

The other crew busied themselves hauling their bounty off to the canteen, and Eleanor hefted her bag before heading up the stairs. Jonathan began to follow her, one hand on his case where the instrument he had fashioned lay, but Montgomery intercepted him as they ascended to the middle deck. The phlegmatic captain didn't seem as disturbed as his crew, but the corners of his eyes were pinched with stress.

"A moment of your time, Mister Heights?" Montgomery asked.

"Certainly," Jonathan said, equally politely, and followed Montgomery back to the captain's cabin. The weathered man set out two glass tumblers and poured something that smelled high-proof, several fingers in each glass. Silently, they both drank.

"Hell of a thing," Montgomery said, putting the empty glass down. "I've been out here before but never seen anything like that. Are you expecting more of that sort of thing in the future?"

"It's possible," Jonathan said, setting the drink down after only a swallow on his part. While it was potent, it was quite good, subtle and fruity, but he'd already known that Montgomery was a man of refined tastes. "I didn't – and don't – expect anything too esoteric until we are further east, but you know as well as I there are no guarantees." Montgomery grunted in acknowledgement.

"I'm going to have to issue extra brandy rations for a while," the captain said. "What are the odds that any of your resupply places will have decent alcohol?"

"Better than average," Jonathan said, swirling the drink in his glass in consideration. "We're headed across the Verdant Expanse next, and it is flush with distillables. Even if we can't find

the caravans I'm looking for, we'll be able to stop and forage. I'm sure you have the equipment here on board and fresh fruit and produce might do as much for morale as the liquor."

"It might, at that," Montgomery admitted, obviously contemplating the relative luxury of fresh food of any sort, let alone the exotic offerings of the Verdant Expanse. Such choice victuals were rarely on offer for airmen, or even lesser nobles for that matter. Not that the Expanse would yield its merchandise without effort. "I'll let the crew know."

"I appreciate it, Captain," Jonathan said, and did genuinely recognize the value of Montgomery's even hand. Instead of bawling out Jonathan in front of the crew – or at all – and creating a situation nobody wanted, the issues were resolved calmly and without a fuss. Far better than other captains he had traveled with.

"It might also help if the crew were to know the fruits of the expedition — above and beyond what treasure they found, of course." Jonathan said as he withdrew the alien navigational implement he had fashioned from his case, placing it between them. Even if he could copy it, the actual principles were beyond him save for how it was used. "Lock two of the symbols in place, and the center ring will point at the third."

He demonstrated, sliding the rings through the articulations and latching each of them in place. The center ring with its own map symbol pointed off east and toward the north, and Jonathan rotated the apparatus, then slid it from side to side on the table. The direction never changed no matter what he did, but it did not physically move. Rather, it was like how a painting's eyes could follow the observer; an entirely perceptual trick.

"Now that's handy," Montgomery said, picking up to look at it more closely and trying to puzzle out the mechanism. Jonathan wished him luck.

"I can convey more of what I know to your navigator at your leisure," Jonathan told him, having no need to keep the device for himself. "The device is only accurate for a very few places, however, and should not be relied on for any other reason."

"Understood," Montgomery grunted, no stranger to the occult nature of many artifacts that worked inhuman logic and reason. "I'll set our course for the Verdant Expanse, then. Haven't been there for a while, but I *have* been there."

"Then I shall leave you to it," Jonathan said, finishing the remainder of the liquor in his glass and standing. "Once we are there, I will of course consult more closely."

"Certainly." Montgomery stood politely to see Jonathan out, before returning to the bridge.

In the following days, as the *Endeavor* drove eastward toward the Verdant Expanse, Jonathan found himself as the unofficial appraiser for the acquisitions from Tor Ileek. Normally there was a separation between passengers and crew, and for more reasons than just class and background, but Eleanor's acquisitive interest in the loot drove her to consult him. Very soon he found middle-deck crew at his door, hoping that he would tell them they had found something incredible.

A younger version of himself would have been far more interested in the jewelry and gewgaws that people had picked up, but now he had only an intellectual curiosity. Compared to the reality that was sunlight it was merely detritus of a vanished past, but it was at least something to

occupy time. Even at the *Endeavor's* top speed and with cooperative weather, the Verdant Expanse was still some distance away.

Amusingly enough, the airmen had made no discernment about *what* they took, only that it looked portable and even slightly interesting. That led to, among adornments made of gold, silver, carisium, or even stranger metals, there were ordinary forks and knives and spoons. Admittedly ones proportioned for something other than human, but they were still recognizable.

Other things were less familiar: fragments of statues with features that corresponded to no biology Jonathan could imagine, even with all his experience. Scraps of a material that looked like wood, felt like stone to the touch, and rang like metal when tapped with a hammer. Tiny crystalline cubes that seemed to move, just slightly, whenever nobody was watching them.

Someone had brought furniture somehow, which he had missed in the frantic flight. It was a low stool made of the same worn-but-imperishable stone as Tor Ilek that seemed to slope unevenly no matter how many shims were used to try and level it. Even with Jonathan's lantern, it wasn't clear how exactly the effect was achieved.

"This is likely the most valuable single item of the lot," he told the ecstatic airman. "Silver and gold are silver and gold, but this is the sort of curiosity that will draw the attention of collectors, without any risk of crossing the Inquisition. I advise you to find a reputable dealer to auction it for you — even if it is valuable, it is only valuable in the right circles."

"Thank you, sir," the airman replied, touching his cap respectfully. He took the stool off to store it safely, mostly just to keep it out of people's way. While he would no doubt boast about his acquisition, a theft could hardly go unnoticed on the ship and the penalty for betraying one's fellows so far from civilization was steep. There was no such thing as law on a ship beyond the Captain's word; only honor, custom, and prudence.

Almost a week after they departed Tor Ilek, the stricken airman — Conrad — returned to duty. He was no longer babbling nonsensically, but had become a darker and more taciturn man, one who refused to discuss what he had seen. Antomine kept the seal of the confessional and said nothing either, but even he showed some lingering malaise for a few days.

Sometimes such encounters, exposure to such truths, lit a fire inside a man and made them burn for another taste. Other times, it broke them entirely. It remained to be seen upon which road Conrad had been set but, so long as it did not interfere with Jonathan's expedition, he had no preferences.

Under the enforced schedule of an airship, the tension and excitement slowly faded. Even Antomine showed signs of boredom, and Jonathan was forced to lend out some of the volumes he had packed in his crates. Finally, though, the red and molten glow that limned the Verdant Expanse began to shine on the horizon. The fresh air that was piped through the ship from the outside began to smell of greenery and water and spices, and was warm enough that everyone but Jonathan shed their heavier coats or outer suits.

Eleanor couldn't resist going above deck, despite the wind, letting her hair blow freely as the *Endeavor* flew over the abyss that separated the Verdant Expanse from the rugged lands further west. Waterfalls of fast-flowing lava dripped down the rock face, pouring into unfathomable depths below, the glow growing faint and vanishing long before it illuminated any

sort of bottom. The molten rock cast a warm light upon the tangled green and brown that grew everywhere, the monstrous canopy reaching up hundreds of feet above the ground.

A geyser in the distance caught the light, the resultant steam forming a hazy orange cloud that blew away in the wind. In the distance lightning flashed over the cone of one of the enormous volcanoes, tall and tortuous mountains that constantly spat and belched ash and lava over the Verdant Expanse, simultaneously fueling and choking its growth. As the glowing rivers shifted they burned enormous swaths of monumental vegetation, but the volcanic rock would sprout trees within hours and be entirely overgrown in days.

Finding a place to tether in such a jungle was a fraught proposition, as any clearing was likely to be either temporary or the lair of something no sane man wanted to antagonize. Nor was it possible to simply fly straight through, for the volcanic climate and deluge of water pouring in from rivers both north and south brewed a potent cocktail of ill weather. Being battered this way and that by a sudden squall was an inevitable consequence of traveling it.

Jonathan took himself to the bridge with an additional set of charts, for the best way to find safe harborage in the Verdant Expanse was to take refuge with the natives. The caravans that prowled the dense canopies and tangled understory were themselves monstrous, and perforce capable of defending themselves against the hostile environment. Locating such moving targets among the trackless wilderness took experience and a keen eye for times and dates, not to mention for which volcanic peak was which.

Between the two of them, Jonathan and the navigator managed to determine the *Endeavor's* location on the map – such as it was – of the Verdant Expanse. With the information – that which could be trusted – from Tiuni, he could determine where the caravan should be. It was still imprecise, of course, but searching for a caravan trail was better than searching for some natural harbor.

Montgomery brought the *Endeavor* lower to the canopy, with sailors manning the zint cannons to deal with the wildlife. Huge dark forms moved on silent wings, flitting in and out of the upper spotlights aimed out into the hostile sky. Insects the size of carriages buzzed past, wings sounding like drop-hammers as they beat the air.

An airship was not necessarily an appetizing meal, but the light and noise was intrusion enough to annoy some of the inhabitants. Once, a great towering shadow of green scale rose from the treetops toward the ship, and it took a full minute of cannon fire to drive it away. Each impact popped with a stroboscopic glimpse of a triangular head nearly the size of the *Endeavor's* envelope, with teeth the size of a man and a long, legless body stretching to the forest floor below. The roar it gave off when the zint hit it rattled the decking, though it was clear they weren't doing all that much damage despite the sustained barrage. When it finally slunk away Montgomery ordered extra crew to the rear to sweep the area with spotlights, just in case it decided to follow.

After many long and wearing hours scouring the glimpses of dark green foliage below, it was Jonathan who spotted the trail — primarily by the canopy having been denuded just enough to reveal the flash of a dark river and the bright spots of fantastical fruits and flowers. Even hundreds of feet in the air, some of them were large enough to be visible to the naked eye, frantically blooming and spreading into any open space they could.

Following the trail once found was a simpler matter, the open canopy growing ever more clear as they neared the caravan itself. It was not long before undulating strings of ghostly white showed ahead of them, and Jonathan cautioned Montgomery to turn off the forward spotlights. Jonathan knew from personal experience they did not appreciate the bright beams of zint light, and if the *Endeavor* wanted to shelter and trade with them it behooved the ship to be polite.

“You may wish to join me out on the walk, Captain,” Jonathan told Montgomery. “I am certain the caravan will be sending someone to see what we’re about soon enough and I would hesitate to speak for all the details of the ship.”

“Sending—? Yes. Mister Jameson, you have the bridge,” Montgomery told the navigator, and retrieved his cap from beside his chair. The two of them trooped out to the bottom deck platform mounted between the forward spotlights, and Jonathan put one hand on the rail. The scent of ash and ozone joined the rich scents of overgrowth, a foretaste of one of the many volcano-fueled storms that swept over the Verdant Expanse. They had some luck, at least, in finding a caravan before being forced to shelter from the tempest.

Jonathan pursed his lips and whistled a short few notes. Montgomery gave him a look but didn’t comment, waiting beside Jonathan with his tousled hair sticking out from under his captain’s cap. Below them, one of the long ghostly streamers lifted up, casting faint shadows of enormous beasts as it came their way.

The long line of strange whiteness undulated toward them until suddenly a long, thin figure latched onto the rail, razor claws locking in place and an unblinking, reptilian head peering at them from the end of a long neck. Scales shone in pearlescent colors under zint light, and the white streamer resolved itself into an enormous flowing tail marked with glowing bioluminescent stripes. The caravaneer was twice the size of a human excluding the tail, which floated thirty or forty feet behind it, and each movement was short and sharp with absolute stillness between.

“I greet you by the red of the mountains and the green of the canopy,” Jonathan said in the caravaneer’s own language, which was mostly whistles and clicks. It was a tongue he’d learned in his youth, and despite all his practice his locution was only acceptable.

“May your travels be smooth,” the caravaneer trilled back, long glowing tail floating casually behind it. “What brings your journey to ours?”

“Shelter and supplies,” Jonathan replied, waving his cane to encompass the bulk of the *Endeavor*. “We need a safe place to moor our ship and scavenge for food and water. In offer, we bring stories of our own and the weapons of humankind’s ingenuity.” He took a moment to translate for Montgomery, though the exchange was obvious. None would expect the caravaneers to offer hospitality for nothing.

“The waters of the sky will soon arrive,” the caravaneer chirped in agreement. “You are welcome to share our clearing in the spirit that you will guard it as your own.”

“We thank you for your hospitality,” Jonathan said, and then began the detailed negotiations. He didn’t actually know the effective range of *Endeavor*’s weapons, or what the specifications for a proper tether point might be, or any other of a number of logistical concerns for resupply. Montgomery’s presence ensured that the *Endeavor* was located properly, where it could both benefit from and contribute to the caravaneer camp.

There were also certain rules that were peculiar to each caravan, which Jonathan was certain to make sure he understood. In a way caravaneers were more understandable than many nearer-human types, like the fractured, but they were no less dangerous. A perfectly calm group of the reptiles could erupt into violence with absolute coordination and no obvious incitement.

Montgomery soon returned to the bridge to direct the ship down closer to the caravan, where great lumbering reptiles the size of the *Endeavor* took heroic bites out of the foliage. Massive teeth sheared leaves, trunks, vines, and flowers with contemptuous ease, huge feet trampling the ground behind flat for the rest of the caravan to cross. Most of that was composed of enormous, house-sized sleds towed behind the vanguard, but there were dozens of smaller vehicles tended by the long-tailed types.

“Do not touch *anything* there without invitation,” Jonathan told the crew and passengers assembled on the bottom deck, in anticipation of going down to the surface. “If you cause an injury or are responsible for a theft, they will kill you and we will do nothing.” He surveyed people with cold eyes, holding Eleanor’s gaze for a moment. “*Nothing.*” He rapped his cane on the deck for emphasis. “If you merely cause offense we will be forced to leave, and scavenge for supplies without the support of natives. You all have already seen how perilous that would be.”

“We’ll be on our best behavior,” Eleanor promised, though both her maids give her skeptical looks. Jonathan wasn’t too worried, as Eleanor was not stupid, but his warning was entirely serious. If she had the poor judgement to steal and get caught, that was on her own head.

The sound of claws tapping against metal announced the arrival of one of the caravaneers with a waist-thick braided vine, which was passed to skittish airmen to tie to a tether hook fixed into the keel of the ship. The other end was tied to one of the harnesses for the gargantuan pack-beasts, where it had settled down to ride out the weather. The assemblage of enormous reptiles lay down in a rough circle, the sleds in the middle, and the smaller reptiles had lashed together a patchwork canopy of fabrics taken from the oversized transports.

“You can trade while we’re waiting out the weather,” Jonathan added, nodding to Montgomery as he emerged from the stairwell. “Afterward we’ll have the opportunity to accompany their hunting parties for supplies.”

“These things do not speak the human tongue,” Antomine said, clearly discomfited by the thought of dealing with the caravaneers. “How do you expect us to trade with them?”

“Lots of southerners don’t speak the language either,” Montgomery said before Jonathan could reply. “Pantomime works well enough when all you’re doing is swapping goods.”

“Hm,” Antomine replied, looking displeased under his broad-brimmed hat. “How much do we truly need these supplies?”

“We’ve got another couple weeks before we start rationing food,” Montgomery admitted, ignoring the looks being sent at Antomine. “But we’ll need to resupply on water sooner than that and unless you *like* jerky and hardtack, this is the best place to get fresh.” Antomine frowned in reply, but made no further protest.

“Right, you lot,” Montgomery told his crew. “Only six crew out at a time, stay together, make sure you run anything strange past Mister Antomine, and listen to anything Mister Heights tells

you. This is a chance to pick up luxuries and maybe even double your earnings if you find anything worth trading trinkets for, but don't be stupid."

"The best thing you could bring for bartering is raw metal stock," Jonathan told his audience. "Gold and silver are valuable enough, but not as much as steel. They'll be sending a gondola in a few minutes, so those that are coming, take that time to prepare."

He lifted up his own case, which was full of rolled steel rods, and strode over to the door to look out at where the vine was secured. It stretched and flexed as the wind caught the *Endeavor's* envelope, but was far stronger than it looked and bore the strain without complaint. Small flecks of light glimmered on it, phosphorescent insects inhabiting the vine rope, and against those lights a shadow grew as a sort of basket came into sight. The covered conveyance propelled itself by means unknown, the wooden arch connecting it to the vine tether moving of its own accord.

At Montgomery's direction, airmen rushed to run a rope bridge from the outside walkway to the basket's entrance, tying off ropes on handy protruding knobs under the arched door in the basket. Jonathan led the way inside, the interior lit with ghostly grey-green globes embedded in the walls, and once everyone was inside he rapped the ceiling with his cane. The basket lurched into motion, lowering them down into the caravaner's camp.