

## Chapter Seventeen

Jonathan strode toward the semicircle of airmen gathered at the enormous brass plate that served as the door. It was the only real entrance to the control room, as even if someone scaled their way up to the top of the hangar, they'd have to contend with the strange radiance and its uncertain effects on living things. Anyone coming that way would hardly be a threat.

The purple and grey of Umbraught light was felt more than seen; indirect reflections leaking in through the cracks in the walls where dried and dehydrated stone had pulled itself apart and stinging their eyes. None of the fractures were large enough to fit a person through, and since Antomine seemed more concerned with the door Jonathan only kept half an eye on them. Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do to fortify the door itself; the brass plate was moved through the same mechanisms they dared not touch, and it was far too massive to try and stop even if they could rig some sort of obstacle. Several moments went by, everyone waiting and blinking and squinting against an intrusion of a light they couldn't properly see, then the giant brass panel slid silently away.

A crowd of dark figures pushed through the opening, each of them nearly invisible but for strange reversed colors marking eyes and teeth and clothes. The intruders were shaped nearly like men, and each of them bore a sphere of baffling construction that emanated the painful light the Umbraught preferred. The radiance, faint as it was, still seemed to drown out the zint lanterns and shades, and somehow seemed to conceal their quick movements as they rushed forward.

The Lux Guard at the door was immediately thrown back. Jonathan didn't see what happened, but there was a clatter as the baton went skittering across the floor and then a heavy metallic crash as James – or perhaps it was John – landed heavily several feet behind the line of airmen. Even Jonathan was surprised, though only for a moment.

The Lux Guards had a certain reputation, one their efficiency on the journey had so far upheld, and seeing one so easily laid low made the airmen holding the door take a few steps back. Jonathan had no such problems, and braced himself as he swung the heavy gold club at one of the small, half-ephemeral figures. A black-limned blade rose to intercept his blow but simply snapped under the impact of several hundred pounds in motion. The Umbraught behind it folded over the impact and was sent flying back into its fellows in nearly as dramatic a fashion as the Lux Guard before it.

"What are you waiting for?" Jonathan demanded, taking another step forward and swinging the club – now smeared with dark blood – once again. That jolted the men forward, though Eleanor was faster. Her daggers flashed even in the strange suppressed light, her smile twisted as she vented emotion on the Umbraught. Antomine and his guards were for the moment useless, seeming to be weakened by the presence of the dark creatures and their inverted light.

The struggle was a brief one, even if there were nearly as many Umbraught as airmen. Neither side was truly trained for combat, and Jonathan and Eleanor, along with her maids, vastly outclassed the creatures. Jonathan mostly used the club, unwieldy as it was, to exercise his annoyance with being given obstacles at every turn. He pulped heads and limbs to demonstrate his displeasure, the length of gold barely stopped by impacts with the sky-dark bodies.

“Crush their lanterns!” Antomine called from behind, and Jonathan brought his boot down on one of the strange luminous spheres. It shattered like spun sugar, and it was followed by others as airmen brought down clubs and swords on fallen bodies. Eleanor and the two maids mopped up the remaining few Umbraught as they tried to run, though there was no guarantee they got them all. Jonathan would have sent runners *before* engaging an enemy force, and so he had to assume the Umbraught had done the same.

The last few spheres crunched and the stinging in Jonathan’s eyes went away. He blinked, and glanced over to see Antomine was paler than usual, kneeling by the side of his downed guard. The remaining Lux Guard picked up his companion, hauling him over to the side while Antomine waved off the ship’s doctor. The man scowled but moved on to the airmen, who weren’t entirely unscathed.

There were bleeding cuts, sprains and bruises, a fractured arm or leg; nothing life-threatening, but more than one man would have scars and need light duty for a time. While the ship’s doctor busied himself, Jonathan inspected the Umbraught more closely, finding them uncomfortably human-like, but twisted and distorted and wrought in colors no healthy flesh would ever take. With their own peculiar light gone the bodies themselves were fading from sight, growing ever more ephemeral and unreal. It seemed their very existence was incompatible with that of humans, the light that sustained them wholly opposed to the zint that human civilization was built upon.

Eleanor cursed under her breath as a dark, glass-like dagger dissipated like vapor from her hands. Jonathan watched as the bloodstains on his club wisped away into nothing, then turned to close the big brass door, having lost interest in their would-be assailants. The only question was whether more would arrive before the procedure had finished.

“Mister Heights, your assistance please.” Antomine called from behind him, and Jonathan turned with some degree of surprise. The inquisitor beckoned him over and, intrigued, Jonathan strode over to where Antomine crouched by the side of his injured guard. He left the club leaning against a crate on the way, as whatever Antomine needed wouldn’t include several hundred pounds of gold.

“If you could, we need some privacy and I will need you to remove this armor,” Antomine said, pointing at where part of the helmet had been crumpled like cheap tin — yet there was no blood, nor was the guard making any noises of pain. Jonathan grunted and provided the first request by simply taking a length of tent cloth and a couple of weighted poles from the supplies to form an impromptu shield. Removing the helmet was no real problem, the stiff steel groaning but yielding as he forced it apart, tearing the metal open rather than trying to pull it off.

The face under the helmet was not a human one. Not quite. Jonathan found himself entirely unsurprised as Antomine prodded a figure apparently composed of colored wax, the face formed and shaped and still bearing the marks of someone’s hand shaping the material. Liquid zint leaked out from the crack that ran from the base of the glossy jaw up to its temple, the normal blue-white color oddly faded and faint.

Antomine muttered to himself as he prodded the wound, though Jonathan would hesitate calling it such when the Lux Guard wasn’t even alive. With deft fingers he resealed the wax and took his inquisitor’s seal with its softly glowing coin, pressing it against the guard’s forehead.

Jonathan watched closely, but there was no effect that he could see. Judging by Antomine's expression, there was none he could see either.

"Be damned with those Umbraught," he muttered. "I knew I shouldn't have let the Lux Guard near them." He glanced over at Jonathan and raised his eyebrows. "No comment?"

"The situation seems clear enough to me," Jonathan replied. Perhaps Antomine was far too impressed by his own secrets, if he thought wax men animated by liquid zint to be anything more than a passing curiosity. It at least explained why Jonathan had never seen either of them without their armor, though that particular detail hadn't worried him before. Antomine stared at him a moment, then snorted.

"I suppose this is why I asked you for help. It goes without saying that this should remain a secret," he said, and waved at the helmet. "If you could close that up again."

Returning the helmet to its prior state was somewhat more difficult, and the ragged edges of torn metal didn't quite mesh, but it was enough to hide the wax nature of the flesh underneath. Antomine regarded the body – or mechanism, depending on perspective – and sighed. Then he nodded to the other Lux Guard, which picked up the armored corpse.

"I don't have the tools to address this here," Antomine said. "I would need raw terrestrite as well."

"We will be refueling after the Caldera," Jonathan replied. "If you think it can keep until then."

"It's worth trying." Antomine stood, apparently content the issue was decided, and turned to look at the entrance. "If there's a nest of Umbraught here, it must be purged. Now that they know zint exists, they'll hunt it down. Should they go west, there is no telling how much damage could be done."

"We are not a navy," Jonathan disagreed, having no interest in taking time out of the journey to sunlight to pursue the Inquisition's interests. "You know we don't have the time or resources to survey and cleanse a city the size of Angkor Leng." Whether the Umbraught were actually a threat he didn't know, but he had neither the time nor the inclination to pursue such a distraction.

"Mister Heights!" Antomine said sharply, drawing himself up and squaring his shoulders. "We cannot simply pass a threat by because you find it to be inconvenient. Civilization is built by doing more than the bare minimum to get by. Everything we do now can make it easier for those who come after us — or more difficult."

"I admit these things seem a threat to *you*, but not the rest of us," Jonathan said scornfully. "Nor have you offered any suggestion how we would possibly approach the problem."

"You have a number of things packed away that can do tremendous damage," Antomine said sourly. "Your fire dust or unflame, not to mention whatever relics you have stashed in your cabin. And while you may not find the Umbraught *personally* dangerous, it would not take much effort on their part to drain the zint from the engines and render us bootless. If you don't find the fellowship of man to be sufficient incentive, that should be."

"I see," Jonathan said, more than a little irritated that he hadn't considered that possibility himself. "I will put my mind to what can be done." Antomine had the good grace simply to nod, and then went back to staring at his fallen – or rather, broken – Lux Guard.

Jonathan left him to his contemplations, hunting down a collapsible seat from the supplies retrieved from the ship and sorting through his notebooks. Antomine had a point, but to expect Jonathan to conjure some solution other than a manual search was exceedingly optimistic. He would try, but most of what he had brought was meant to protect or hide, not destroy. Even trying to cover the city with fire dust wouldn't work very well, as it'd expose the *Endeavor* to whatever enemy forces there might be.

A small commotion pulled his attention to the book, and he looked up to see a group of men hauling up the golden club, presumably so it could be reduced to something smaller and more portable, and shook his head. It wasn't *that* heavy; he presumed that it was more that people simply wanted to lay hands on something that valuable. It wasn't every day that several thousand gold coins worth of raw metal came along.

"Thanks for not telling on me," Eleanor said, dragging her own chair over next to him and dropping into it. "No wonder they're so damned creepy."

"It's not my job to keep secrets he can't keep himself," Jonathan said mildly, since Antomine *really* should have checked on Eleanor's whereabouts before asking for Jonathan's help. True, she was a bit difficult to keep track of at times, but Antomine already knew that. "It does explain why I couldn't tell the difference between them."

"Really? I could," Eleanor said, shooting him a look that he mostly ignored as he flipped pages in his notebooks. "You know, it's interesting to know there's something that just completely counters the Illuminated King's power."

"No surprise it's been kept secret," Jonathan said. "If you're thinking you can use this to barter with your friends on the Reflected Council, I wouldn't. Some things are just too dangerous to bring to light."

"Was that a joke?" Eleanor gave him a startled look, and Jonathan paused.

"The wordplay was not intentional," he admitted.

"You used to joke all the time," she said, half by way of explanation and half in reminiscence. "But not since you came back." Jonathan had nothing to say about that, merely raising his eyebrows at something he was not certain was even an insult.

"Anyway, I suppose you're right," she continued, brushing past the issue after a brief pause. "We *did* already get a good amount of loot." That was vastly understating the value of the precious metals waiting to be loaded into the *Endeavor's* hold. The total exceeded the amount that Jonathan had used to pay for the expedition, and while that was divided among the crew and passengers, no matter how the shares worked out in the end, nobody was going to be impoverished. "It's just that I'd like a few extra daggers to deal with people back home."

"I'd worry less about that than completing the journey and returning home with what you've got already." Jonathan was certain Eleanor would be entirely happy going back now, since she surely had no investment in sunlight. That made their connection far more tenuous, for he could

no longer rely on Eleanor's own interest to drive her forward — though he was sure she would still leap to seize upon any treasure that crossed their path.

"Yeah, so this better keep our ship intact," Eleanor said, eyeing the hanger where the enigmatic liquid light still dripped from the strange lanterns. "Gotta say I feel better about outnumbering the King's people now. We still don't really know what Antomine can do but I never liked my chances with those Lux Guards of his."

"Hopefully it will never come to actual combat," Jonathan replied, turning a page in his notebook again. "I suspect his particular talents will be useful for some time to come."

"Yeah, plus nobody likes killing a priest." Eleanor said with the assurance of someone who knew. Jonathan looked up from his notebook, but Eleanor didn't elaborate. "Got any thoughts about how to deal with these zint-eaters?"

"Yes," Jonathan said bluntly. "It's rather extreme, however, so I am trying to think of another."

"If *you* think it's extreme, that sounds like it's something I ought to be scared of." Eleanor leaned over, trying to peek at his notebook.

"You shouldn't," Jonathan warned, but too late as Eleanor looked away, clapping her hand over her mouth as she gagged. "It takes some time to get acclimatized to the symbology I use for the more important things," he told her, unperturbed.

"You're — ugh! You're not wrong," she said, withdrawing a handkerchief from her pocket and scrubbing at her lips.

"No matter what I find, I believe we should be prepared to leave the moment the treatment is finished." There was no timer he could see, and he hadn't looked at a clock when it started, but there were some hours yet before it would finish and a serious attack by the Umbraught would be inconvenient.

"I can see you worrying," Eleanor said, straightening from her slump. "We should just set up some defenses!" She waved her hand airily, as if he could summon such out of the air. "I guess the guns we got won't work but isn't that why you brought everything else?"

"It is," Jonathan said, rising. "And it would be a better use of my time than mulling over something for which I already have a solution." One that would have to wait until the time was right.

While either of the products from the Cult of Fire would form a temporary barrier, they also ran the risk of damaging something the mechanisms needed. Instead he went through the items that he had removed from the ship and picked up the stick of incense, considering it for a moment before glancing at Eleanor.

"A match, if you would?"

"Sure." Eleanor eyed the incense with interest, rummaging through her pockets and offering him the requested item. He carried it outside and struck the match against the cracked stone of the wall, lighting the stick and wedging the base into a small gap between brass and stone. Immediately a fountain of smoke billowed forth, filling the street and blocking off any sight or

sound. Jonathan returned to the door by touch, stepping inside and glancing at the airmen still lingering by the door on watch.

“Do not leave without a tether, or you may not be able to find your way back. The incense should last several hours; long enough for the process to finish, perhaps.” It was, unfortunately, the only one of those he had, but they couldn’t afford to be miserly. “And make sure the Captain knows,” Jonathan added, tapping his cane on the ground for emphasis before striding back to watch the light suffusing the *Endeavor*.

It was far less wondrous than the first time, from the eyes of someone who had been enlightened by sunlight. The honey-slow liquid was so clearly a thing of artifice, a pretense at the purity and sanctity of what he’d seen — though at the same time, clearly not inspired by it. Whatever inspiration the builders of Angkor Leng had drawn from was something alien and uncomfortable, barely constrained by four walls. It seemed to be trying to burst from the simple confinement of the walls, yet couldn’t seem to quite manage to squeeze through the doors into the hangar or the cracks in the walls. By that alone he might have been able to puzzle out some of its secrets — if he had still cared to.

The airmen cycled through watches as the process went on, the intensity of the light waxing and waning over slow minutes. The dark cloud of protective incense didn’t come in through the cracks in the walls, but the smell did; something undefinable but dark and cold and rigid, the scent of an ancient geode freshly opened. It muffled any sound or sight of the outside, and while he doubted the Umbraught could penetrate its obscuring shroud, there could be forces of any size beyond it.

Deep into the third watch the rumble of machinery changed and the lanterns ceased to glow. The thick, liquid light slowly dissipated into the air, leaving the *Endeavor* superficially unchanged but with a feeling of being somehow more. It was in many ways the opposite impression given by the strange bronze plaque, where the *Endeavor* had, without changing, become something strange and unfamiliar — now she was even more of a comforting and familiar vessel, stronger and more trustworthy than ever.

“Right, you lot!” Montgomery roared out. “Pack it up! Back on board in twenty!” Airmen scrambled to put away the cups and plates and cards and dice that were scattered over the temporary camp. The geode smell had faded, and was nearly gone, which meant the obscuring incense was almost spent. Antomine approached him as everyone else carried equipment to the tethers.

“You have some way to prevent the Umbraught from coming after us?” It wasn’t exactly a question, or even a request. It was a requirement, and Jonathan frowned at Antomine from sheer habit. He didn’t appreciate being ordered around, even if it was something he already intended.

“I do,” he said. “I will have to board last, however. Angkor Leng will likely be rather unsafe for some time.”

“What happens to some savage ruin is no concern of mine,” Antomine said dismissively. “So long as the Illuminated King’s enemies are removed.”

Jonathan grunted, dismissing Antomine’s peculiarly narrow perspective. All that mattered was that the *Endeavor* could continue her journey, and whether that helped or hindered the

Illuminated King was irrelevant. There was no value in telling the inquisitor that, so he left Antomine to the process of getting his broken Lux Guard up to the ship again and made for Montgomery.

“What are you planning?” Eleanor asked suspiciously, appearing beside him as Antomine withdrew. “I don’t like how vague you’re being.”

“There is danger below the city,” Jonathan said, seeing no reason to keep it from her — but also no reason to elaborate on the details. “Simply disturbing it should be enough, so long as we are already in the air. Captain,” he said, addressing Montgomery, who was in the midst of exhorting people to hasten their labors and return to the ship.

“Aye, Mister Heights?”

“After you loose the tethers holding the *Endeavor* here, I would appreciate a lift-line for myself, and be ready to rise high and quickly. I have to perform one task from here before we leave, and I would prefer to leave the ground as soon as it’s done.”

“I can do that,” Montgomery said, squinting at Jonathan, but then shrugging and rattling off orders to the bos’n. Eleanor looked like she wanted to inquire further, but he took out his notebooks once again to verify what he remembered, and she eventually was forced to return to the *Endeavor* herself.

Cleaning out the control room took remarkably little time, the winches hauling up people and equipment. Soon enough the airmen untied the tethers, letting the *Endeavor* bob into the air, the engines pulsing in a steady rhythm to keep the ship centered in the hangar. The weighted descent line hung from the ship, and the *Endeavor* flashed her running lights to show Jonathan she was ready.

He looked over a particular line in his notebook one more time, and then slid it into the inner pocket of his suit. His hands flashed over the controls as he input the particular series of commands that had once caused an earthquake — once, twice, and a third time in quick succession. The gold mechanism above him squealed and spun, while deep below massive machinery groaned and heaved as the ground shook. There was a drawn-out metallic squeal, then the sudden and shocking crash of something giving way.

The ground’s motion stopped, and Jonathan sprinted for the descent line with his cane tucked under one arm. As soon as he grabbed on, the airmen above spun the pulley, hauling the line up while the *Endeavor* rose hastily into the air. The fever heat of the city hammered into him and then redoubled as the artifice that had kept the doom below Angkor Leng failed.

Something massive stirred below, and as Jonathan reached the deck and stepped out onto the metal a hallucinatory wave smashed into them. A nonsensical jumble of images and sensations washed over and through him, forcing him to rely on his cane to stay steady, yet that was merely the barest fringe of what was happening below. He did not understand it with his eyes or ears, but the events were so imprinted upon reality that he knew it intrinsically, like he knew light or sound or hot or cold.

Angkor Leng was part of, by chance or purpose, the fevered dreams of some convalescent god, sick and slumbering deep below the city. All the mechanisms below had been bent to the purpose of keeping that dream whole, but he had shattered the stasis and the dream was

ending. The fever heat was fever in truth, a sickness so profound that it had brought low something grander and older than any human could comprehend.

A god's dream was more firm than earth and stone, and as the *Endeavor* soared upward the dried and shrunken streets and walls of Angkor Leng twisted and shimmered, vanishing like popped soap bubbles. Gold melted, unimaginable rivers of the precious metal precipitating out of the vanishing buildings and forming glowing waterfalls down into the depths of the revealed chasm. Whispers and hints and flashes of things unknown and unknowable to man came out of that abyss, bouncing off the gold and summoning shapes both fanciful and terrible before they collapsed again as the dream moved on.

Beyond those hallucinatory flashes was a tremendous figure, resting fitfully in the crevasse, one whose shape and size baffled any rational processes. The sight of the strange being was entrancing and enticing, lending further weight to the profound delusions. Jonathan's hand shot out to hold back one of the crewman that could see out the hatch, and so tried to hurl himself bodily through the opening to reach what he saw.

Somewhere down in the fevered heat and gold-flecked darkness there was the smallest flash of a purple-grey light, instantly smothered by the phantasmagoric flickering of the landscape below. The Umbraught, whatever their provenance, were simply not real enough to persist in the fevered imagination of the afflicted deity. The *Endeavor*, far above, had passed beyond the realm of the dreaming and continued east. Jonathan could only conclude that the changes wrought by the strange liquid light might well have been the embodied whimsy of the being, a stray thought made manifest and harnessed by an ancient and long-vanished race.

Jonathan stood on the cargo deck as the *Endeavor's* engines worked, driving them further and further from the buried sickbed, and kept an eye on the airman to prevent him from hurling himself overboard. The ship had already lost too many crew to be comfortable, and it surely wouldn't do to lose any more. The molten glow of liquid gold slowly faded, as did the hallucinatory echoes, but fever itself still clung to those aboard. The airman Jonathan had prevented from jumping overboard was faintly flushed, sweat clinging to his brow, but his eyes cleared and he wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Thank you, sir," he said, looking a trifle nervous as he glanced hesitantly at Jonathan's face, but Jonathan just nodded and released him. Under the circumstances there was no call for the crew to be afraid of *him*, but perhaps the man was simply shaken by events. While Jonathan had some knowledge of what was buried beneath Angkor Leng, the true scope of it had been more than he'd expected.

Jonathan left the airmen to finish tidying up the cargo deck and mounted up to the passenger deck, finding everyone he passed stirring from a reverie. It was for the best that the controls had already been set before the fever dreams had struck them full force, else they may have been stuck in whatever realm of nonexistence the Umbraught had been banished to. As it was, everyone seemed to be afflicted by a lingering heat, fading but still present.

Everyone but himself and Antomine, at least. Jonathan was invested in something far more profound than some impotent godling and, while Antomine's secrets were his own, Jonathan suspected the inquisitor's obsessive loyalty to the Illuminated King was enough to throw off mere deific delusions. Like Jonathan, he had proceeded to the observation room and was seated calmly, unbothered by the last remnants of the god's presence.



Eleanor stood nearby in the company of her maids, shed of her greatcoat and fanning herself while Marie prodded at one of the vents with a screwdriver to try and force more air into the room. Jonathan raised his eyebrows at that, but ultimately he wasn't the one suffering from an internal heat. Eleanor glanced back as the sound of his cane announced his presence, a calm and collected tapping on the deck, and gave him a mournful look.

"All that gold, just gone," she sighed, waving her fan at the window. "There was whole *kingdoms* of the stuff!"

"Enough to render it no more valuable than tin or lead," Jonathan agreed, unperturbed by the loss. "What's in the hold should be more than enough for the moment."

"No such thing as enough," Eleanor replied instantly, looking back at the fading glow of the pit. Soon it would be gone, vanished into the darkness of the world. "You know, I didn't think you were meaning to *destroy the city*."

"It's easier to do what must be done when nobody argues about it," Jonathan replied, planting his cane on the floor as he regarded Eleanor.

"Yeah, it's easier for *you*," Eleanor snapped. "Not for us."

"I do not appreciate that you are hiding things for your own convenience," Antomine put in. "It was certainly well worth removing any Umbraught who might have known about our luminiferous technology," he continued. "But we do not need to be kept in the dark." Jonathan barely resisted curling his lip at Antomine's reasoning. The Umbraught seemed such a trivial consideration, but he supposed it was worthwhile to claim credit for something he needed to do in order to reach his goal anyway.

"Even I wasn't certain what would happen, and I judged it better not to distract anyone with the possibilities," he said, keeping his voice bland.

"In the future, do not make that judgement," Antomine said bluntly. "We are hardly children, to be shielded from the realities of the world."

"Very well," Jonathan said, though there was only so much he was willing to disclose. Ceding the argument at the moment hurt him not at all.

"With that gone though, how is anyone going to protect themselves in the east?" Eleanor took out her cigarette stick, pointing it at Jonathan before inserting a new cigarette and lighting it with a match. "I'm assuming you were telling the truth that we needed it."

"They'll have to find other methods," Jonathan said coldly. He was perfectly fine with burning all the bridges behind him on his path toward sunlight. To even for a moment consider undermining his commitment to reaching sunlight was a lack of faith that he would not, could not, countenance.

Eleanor wrinkled her nose at the reply, then shrugged. There probably *were* other methods, and the more she saw the better prepared she'd be to seek them out. Or for the Illuminated King to, once Antomine reported.

Jonathan left them in the observation room and went down to inform Montgomery of their next destination, though it was hard to miss. The path east narrowed down to the Crimson Caldera,

at least on their current path, so it was the only route available. After they emerged on the other side, however, it would be more difficult to get their bearings, especially since they would have to take the time to refresh their supplies. Terminus had let them fly much further than expected without needing to scavenge, but it was extremely unlikely they'd find a friendly port until they reached the foreign city of Ukaresh — if Ukaresh could even be considered friendly.

Days passed as they flew further east, following Jonathan's maps and the landmarks below. During that time those aboard, barring Jonathan, Antomine, and Penelope, the ship's cat, were afflicted with strange dreams and a mild fever upon waking. The near-illness evaporated with the memories of the dreams, but there was no telling how long the crew would suffer from the effect. Perhaps it would fade in time, or perhaps they would suffer it for the rest of their lives. Such was the risk any ran who ventured out into the dark.

The landscape to the south rose, funneling them away from the sheer, windswept slopes of jagged mountains, one of the east's many barriers. Here and there were narrow slot-valleys, where any airship that dared venture would surely be dashed to pieces by the ravenous winds, if they weren't seized by the monstrous inhabitants lurking within and seen only by the faint gleam of luminous eyes.

The northern approach narrowed, the tangle of wilderness ending in a crushing abyss from which blew a wind that bore the bitter tang of regrets, ever fresh, ever grudging, ever grievous. There was no way forward across that barrier either, not for anything living. It was the red glow on the horizon, at the end of a narrow spit bounded by impassable obstacles on both sides, that was their key further east. The Crimson Caldera.