

Chapter Two

The fires of the Industrial Quarter blazed, turning the gently falling snow into a steady drizzle that rattled softly upon the roof of the carriage. Johann drove Jonathan and Montgomery through streets crowded with big, rumbling transports, the thin carriage wheels skittering occasionally on the wet stone of the road. The chauffeur had his hat jammed tight down over his ears as he gripped the steering wheel with one hand, the other holding the throttle lever.

Montgomery watched, his own hands twitching and his big weathered face turned down in distaste. Jonathan felt the side of his mouth twitch up in half a smile, but his heart really wasn't in it. His old friend Captain Hardiman had been just as uncomfortable being a passenger, preferring to walk rather than let someone else control any vehicle used. But Captain Hardiman hadn't made it back.

The carriage went past white-brick tenements crowded up against the walls of the ironworks, where only the orange glow of gas lamps pushed back the darkness. Paradoxically, the darkest part of the Industrial Quarter were the huge stacks where luminiferous terrestrite was extracted and distilled, the low thrumming of an enormous, drawn-out *zint* vibrating the carriage windows. They loomed up from the center of the Industrial Quarter, columns of glass and steel that occasionally flickered from a stray discharge.

Johann navigated them past the stacks, where the grim armor of the Crown's guards barred the gates that led through the tall wrought-iron fence, to the far side where the shipwright industries sprawled up and along the scarred cliffs of Haphan's Bluff. The shipyard offices stood at the top with docking masts projecting from towers above and continuing down the cliff face. The skeletons of half-finished airships were visible only as illuminated splotches past the rain and snow, despite the powerful spotlights that covered the bluff. He stopped the carriage out front of Campbell Yards, hurrying around to open the door for Jonathan and Montgomery.

"Thank you, Johann," Jonathan said, picking up a small case from the carriage bench before he descended to the rain-slick cobbles.

"Certainly, sir," the chauffeur replied, closing the door behind Montgomery. "Shall I just drive around the block a few times while you're busy?"

"A fine idea," Jonathan agreed before striding forward under the decorated iron gate proclaiming the name of the engine manufacturer. Montgomery fell in next to him as they hurried to get out of the rain.

"Mister Heights! Mister Montgomery!" An ebullient mustachioed gentleman in a thick leather smock beamed at them from the entrance, taking their offered hands in quick succession and giving them a vigorous shake. "I'm Carter. I understand you're in the market for new engines?"

"Yes, sir," Montgomery replied. "We'll need four of them, cross-mounted, high efficiency for the *Imperious* weight class. Was hoping to see your models."

"Excellent, excellent! Yes, I have it out on the floor already, right this way!"

Carter led them past offices with myceliplank paneling and used a key on a heavy iron door, opening it with a grunt to usher them into a large open warehouse where airship parts hung on chains as thick as Jonathan's wrist. Everything had the gold-grey luster of carisium, the only

metal worth using on airships, and the sheer amount of it was impressive to Jonathan's eye. His last ship had been mostly myceliplank, aside from the envelope superstructure.

Jonathan's cane clicked on the floor as he trailed Montgomery down and to the warehouse, where a cigar-shaped piece of metal three times the size of a man was mounted in an apparatus with a huge gauge at the top. Carter ignored the other workers who were assembling, repairing, and polishing engines in the rest of the warehouse and gestured excitedly at the one he'd clearly prepared for them.

"This is our newest model, the *Carter* eight-oh-one!" He beamed proudly. "We've replaced the auxiliary pumps with inline turbines—" Jonathan only half listened as Carter extolled the virtues of the design, far more concerned with studying the people in the warehouse. Campbell Yards had an excellent reputation, but the downside to ensuring that the Reflected Council took interest in his business was that everyone else took interest too. Trouble was inevitable, though when and where was still up to question.

"—and the glass is tempered using a new technique to render it nearly as tough as carisium." Carter reached out to rap on the glass panel that took up almost the entire back of the engine. Jonathan raised his eyebrows and hefted his cane, nodding at the engine.

"May I?" He asked.

"Go right ahead! I daresay you'll find it difficult to crack the stuff," Carter said confidently.

Jonathan flipped the cane around, holding it by its tip, and swung the metal handle into the glass. Everyone but Jonathan and Carter winced at the sound of the impact, which echoed throughout the warehouse, but the glass remained unbroken.

"Impressive," Jonathan said, and glanced at Montgomery. "Your thoughts, Captain?"

"Oh, she'll do alright," Montgomery said, looking at the engine with raw avarice. "If everything that Mister Carter said is true, the *Endeavor* will be able to fly rings around anyone else in her class. At least, until everyone else upgrades to 'em."

"Mister Carter," Jonathan said, hooking the cane over one arm and lifting up the small case. "Might I ask, how much better would those engines perform with one of these?" He opened it, revealing four of the luminiferous gems and, less importantly, a small number of gold plates for a down payment.

"Oh. Oh my." Carter stared at the gems, practically drooling. "I say — we can test it out right now. May we?"

"Certainly, if you can guarantee no damages," Jonathan said, plucking out one of the gems in its setting and closing the case again.

"Of course not," Carter said, almost affronted. He turned and started shouting, and in moments someone had dragged over a worktable and a pair of people had clambered up onto the engine, popping open the casing and working at the interior. One of them extracted a disk nearly a foot across, a complex network of glass tubing with brass fittings, and passed it down to Carter. Placing it on the worktable, he carefully took the gem and opened a fitting in the center of the disk and carefully slotted it in.

The disk was returned to the engine and a glass tank full of zint dangling from the ceiling pulleys was pulled over and drained into the engine. Jonathan watched the proceedings with interest, though he couldn't see exactly what happened inside the engine. All he could see was that the engine's back panel began to glow and the mounting apparatus clicked as all the slack was taken up.

Carter began turning a dial on the side of the engine mount, and the glow brightened. Jonathan held out a hand, not feeling anything from the luminance, but the gauge at the top began climbing. He was hardly familiar with the specifics of airship design, but the better the engines worked, the faster they'd get there and the less risks they'd take. The mount creaked as the pressure grew, until the dial finally stabilized.

"That is *marvelous*," Carter said with an almost boyish enthusiasm, stroking at his moustache as he regarded the readout. "I don't suppose you'd disclose where you got those? The synthetic versions aren't nearly as effective."

"Not at the moment," Jonathan demurred. Carter drooped, from his posture all the way down to his moustache, and shut off the engine. The dial dropped and the mount groaned softly as it settled back into its resting position. "I believe we're ready to confirm the commission."

"Aye, I can't wait to see those on the *Endeavor*," Montgomery confirmed.

"Then," Carter said, marshalling his enthusiasm once again. "There is just one small matter. These *are* a restricted item still and—" Jonathan reached into the pocket of his coat and plucked out the coin, holding it up for Carter to inspect. The man gingerly reached to take it, examining it closely on both sides before returning it.

"Everything is in order!" Carter said, clapping his hands together. "I see you brought a deposit, in addition to the gems," he said, nodding to the case that Jonathan held. "Give me a moment and I will write you a receipt."

"And you will ensure that these specific gems will be used in our engines," Jonathan said. It was not a question.

"I will stake our reputation on it," Carter said firmly. Jonathan nodded and reached inside his suit pocket for a pen.

"It does my heart good to think that the *Endeavor* is going to better than ever when she's fixed," Montgomery said as they left Campbell Yards, heading out to the front gate where the carriage should be parked. "She's a wonderful old girl, and she deserved better than to be scrapped just because His Majesty stirred up trouble at Gillar's Folly. Without warning anyone." Montgomery brooded on it for a moment, his head bowed against the rain.

Jonathan opened his mouth to reply, then paused, looking into the darkness beyond the illuminated raindrops. His cane swept upward with a blur, the deflected knife disappearing into the darkness with a metallic clatter. He opened his mouth to warn Montgomery, but stopped when he saw that the captain's hands had already dipped into his heavy overcoat and come out with brass knuckles.

"Who's there?" Montgomery demanded, fists coming up defensively. "I'll have you!"

“Four,” Jonathan muttered quickly. “Three in front, one behind.” He hadn’t even quite finished the sentence before the ones at the front rushed in. Montgomery, no fool, immediately spun around and dashed off to deal with their flanker, leaving the bulk of the attackers to him.

There were three men with knives, all with ruddy skin and trimmed beards, each in a blue sailor’s uniform. He noticed that they each wore a pistol, but hadn’t used them, perhaps attempting to keep the ambush unseen. Jonathan’s sword hissed out of his cane and he lunged forward, having no desire to be surrounded. While he didn’t know who had sent them, the ambushers were badly misinformed about whom they were up against.

Jonathan took the first man through the throat with the lunge, but the other two had commendable reflexes and closed in with their knives out, trying to get inside the range of Jonathan’s sword. Even with his wide and storied experience, Jonathan preferred never to fight against poor odds and took several quick steps back and to the side, flicking his sword to deflect another thrown knife.

There was a grunt behind him and Jonathan risked a momentary look back, seeing that Montgomery had seized his opponent’s knife hand and was dealing with him by the simple expedient of repeatedly punching him in the face. Heartened by his companion’s resilience, Jonathan focused on his own combatants, one of which was still advancing and the other of which had begun to draw his pistol.

Abandoning any attempts at finesse, Jonathan leapt forward and drove his blade through the chest of the closer attacker, grabbing at the dying man’s pistol with his other hand. The man made a choking noise, his rancid breath washing against Jonathan’s face. It took another instant to free the pistol and then he spun to the side, leaving sword and man to collapse to the ground.

He aimed and pressed the trigger, the zint humming three times before his last opponent crumpled. The pistol was more powerful than Jonathan had expected, leaving sizzling holes in the lifeless torso, and Jonathan gave it a look of respect before stowing it inside his own coat. A glance showed that Montgomery’s opponent was downed as well, the captain still driving his knuckles into the man’s bloodied face with single-minded determination.

Jonathan bent to retrieve his sword and, after a moment’s thought, the remaining guns. They hadn’t been nearly so impressive when he’d left on his last expedition, but clearly the technology had been perfected in the years he’d been gone. Blood ran out onto the rain-slicked stone and was carried away by the water as he walked over to Montgomery, who was just straightening up.

“Damned parasites,” the captain muttered. “Scum like that give airmen a bad name.”

“You’re familiar with them?” Jonathan inquired, looking around for the other half of his cane.

“I know their type,” Montgomery grunted. “Their ship folded or they got kicked out. Plenty of desperate folk hang around the yards.” He waved a blood-slicked hand at the ruined face of the airman on the ground. It wasn’t clear that the would-be ambusher was still breathing. “You could hire ten of these types for a silver.”

The front door of Campbell Yards opened and their security came running out, white-uniformed shapes appearing out of the rain. Jonathan shook his head; if things had been left to them, it

would have been too late. Fortunately, he had learned how to properly defend himself out in the wilds, and of course Montgomery was practically built for brawling.

“If you could bring them up to speed, captain, I would like to go check on the carriage,” Jonathan remarked. “If they’ve hurt Johann, I will be *very* upset.”

“Yeah, maybe they can save this one for questioning,” Montgomery said, none too gently kicking the body at his feet. Jonathan nodded and hurried off, following the street. Fortunately for his peace of mind, Johann was unconscious but alive. Someone had merely taken a cosh to the back of his head and left him in the carriage on the side of the road.

As he eased his chauffeur upright, Jonathan considered why the attack might have happened. He had invited the attention of the Reflected Council and anticipated the Crown, but neither of them would have any interest in *removing* him and would be more competent at it besides. Hiring some random toughs seemed rather more amateur, but he supposed by now word would have spread. It wasn’t like Jonathan had no enemies at all, either among other explorers or academics whose theories clashed with evidence brought back from expeditions.

“I’ll talk to Eleanor about it,” he muttered to himself, and patted Johann on the shoulder as he stirred. “Easy there, Johann, you’ve had quite the blow.”

“What — sir? I’m not sure who...” Johann struggled to talk, and Jonathan eased him out of the carriage out onto the wet and windy street, helping him walk around a little to recover and hoping the drizzle blowing into his face would help Johann recover his faculties.

“You’ll be okay, Johann,” Jonathan said, his voice calm and soothing despite the volcanic fury inside at someone who dared to attack him and those that supported his work. “We’ll just go straight home and you can rest.”

Johann tried to protest, but Jonathan managed to get him seated in the back of the carriage, leaning his head against the cold glass of the rear window. When Jonathan pulled the carriage inexpertly up to the gate, Montgomery was waiting, shoulders hunched against the cold. He removed his hand from his pocket long enough to wave, trudging over as Jonathan opened the door to the forward compartment.

“I’m afraid Johann will be under the weather for a bit,” Jonathan said. “Would you care to drive?” Montgomery’s weathered face lit up, and he clambered in as Jonathan took his place next to Johann in the rear. While propriety may have kept him from the wheel before, he certainly wasn’t going to pass up an excuse to be the one in control.

Jonathan kept alert to any other ambushes on the drive back, but it seemed like the ruffians had been the only thing at that particular instant. Which pointed to perhaps something spur-of-the-moment, and indeed it was likely the four thugs had come straight from the dockside only a few minutes away. Nevertheless, when Montgomery stopped the carriage in the crowded lot down the street from the estate, Jonathan removed one of the pistols he’d filched earlier and handed it over.

“Better be careful going home. It’s just barely possible whoever it is will go after you, too.”

“Yeah...” Montgomery chewed on the word, taking the pistol and checking it over with an efficacy that showed he had more familiarity with the weapons than Jonathan. “I’ll have my men

make sure the lodge house has proper lookouts. Treat it like being at one of those southern ports.”

“An excellent plan,” Jonathan said, helping a still-groggy Johann out of the carriage. “I’ll see what I can do about ensuring nobody else interrupts us.”

“As you say,” Montgomery said. He didn’t mention how Jonathan had killed three men, which again confirmed Jonathan’s opinion of him. Both able and discreet was exactly the sort of officer he preferred. They parted at the front of Jonathan’s building, the captain heading off to find a hired carriage while he helped Johann up the stairs. Agnes opened the door for them, flustered and unable to decide whether she should take Jonathan’s coat or help Johann.

“Please, sir, could you stay out of trouble?” She asked, a little bit exasperated as she hung their coats. “Come on Johann, I’ll get you supper. Sir, we have a guest in the front room. I think he’s from the Crown,” she added, her voice dropping. “He had the badge on, and his eyes were — it just gives me a bad feeling, sir.”

“Thank you, Agnes,” Jonathan said. “Excellent work, as always.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“I think I’m going to retire early if you don’t need me, sir,” Johann said, his eyes clearer though he still winced when he moved his head. “Just need to put ice on this.”

“Go ahead and call in a physician,” Jonathan said, and nodded to Agnes. She nodded back and guided Johann away to the kitchen. Jonathan ran his fingers over his suit, despite the fact that it hadn’t been mussed, and hefted the pistols he’d acquired. The guest could wait a few minutes while Jonathan took care of more immediate matters.

He mounted the steps to the second story, into his study, and to the heavy safe in the back. The pistols went into the bottom compartment, to be examined more closely later, and he pulled the money-tray out of the top. It had neat rows of coins in their various sizes; gold, silver, carisium, copper. Taking a generous stack of the large silver coins to pay the physician, he returned the money to the safe, locked it, and brought the payment downstairs to Agnes.

“If you don’t mind me saying so, sir,” Agnes said as she took the heavy coins. “This next expedition you’re planning — it seems dangerous. That sort of person coming by and Johann being attacked. It’s just — it got rather strained last time, sir.” Jonathan winced. Though his estate had been in good shape prior to his last expedition, he’d taken so long getting back that the finances had been stretched to the breaking point.

“Yes, I’ll be making sure that the preparations this time are more robust,” he assured her.

“Since I doubt either of you would want to come along.”

“Don’t even joke about that sir,” Agnes said, her eyes going wide. “I’ve lived in Beacon my whole life and I’ve got no use for wandering beyond the walls.”

“Nothing to worry about, I’m planning to write a letter of introduction to the Wagner family for both of you,” he said. The Wagners weren’t so much his friends as his father’s, but they were still on reasonable terms. Most of Jonathan’s own friends hadn’t returned from the last, disastrous expedition.

“Oh, thank you, sir,” Agnes said, and bobbed another curtsey before heading off to send a message for the physician. Jonathan took a breath and braced himself before crossing to the front room.

The guest stood as Jonathan entered, putting aside one of the books Jonathan kept on the stand, and while he had been expecting something unusual he hadn’t been expecting the visitor to be so young. Or *apparently* young; he looked like he was no more than sixteen or seventeen, but when he moved it was with the unconscious grace of someone twice his age. As Agnes had warned, his eyes were an odd pale blue with white pupils. Regardless of age, he was dressed in the appropriate white and blue uniform with the torch-and-crown embroidered on it.

“Mister Jonathan Heights?” The stranger offered his hand, and Jonathan took it despite something about the stranger raising the hair on the back of his neck. “My name is Antomine. I will be joining your expedition, on orders of the Illuminated King.”

“He mentioned he would be sending a representative,” Jonathan said, shaking Antomine’s hand. The man’s grip was firm, but not crushing. “While I certainly wouldn’t wish to impugn any agent of the Crown, do you happen to have credentials?”

“Oh! Yes, that is completely reasonable.” The smile Antomine flashed him was perfectly boyish, more suited to the face he wore, and his hand went to the chain about his neck, fishing an amulet out from beneath his uniform. It had one of the same faintly glowing coins as Jonathan had been gifted by the Illuminated King.

“That’ll do for your bona fides,” Jonathan admitted, waving Antomine back to his chair and taking a seat in the other armchair. “I have to admit though, I am not entirely clear on the Illuminated King’s interest in my expedition. Nobody I’ve run into actually *believes* in sunlight, and even if they did, some phenomenon at the eastern edge of the world isn’t of any particular import.”

“My liege’s reasons are his own,” Antomine said, face firming into a serious expression that didn’t fit with his youthful features. “But His Majesty has always had a deep and abiding interest in illuminating the secrets beyond humanity’s borders.” His pale eyes shone with a zealous light. “Yours would not be the first expedition that His Majesty has assisted, overtly or not.”

Jonathan set his jaw against several choice responses. He wasn’t surprised by Antomine’s reticence, but confirmation that the Crown was bringing a secret agenda aboard his ship was quite unwelcome. A simple soldier or observer or even some toady could be managed, but Antomine seemed to be a more direct agent of the Crown, by the sheer unease he managed to instill if nothing else.

“Then perhaps you’d like to elaborate on your role on the expedition, instead,” Jonathan said, leaning back in the chair as Agnes came in bearing a tray with two glasses and a pitcher of beer. “Thank you, Agnes,” he said. “Have you had supper yet?” Jonathan asked his guest, not just being hospitable. It was far easier to extract information from someone over a meal than when they were on their guard.

“Not yet,” Antomine said, perking up in the way that adolescent men always did when there was food in the offing. Jonathan couldn’t place Antomine’s precise age, the man seeming to bounce between being a downy-cheeked youth and a sharp, calculating adult. Worse, he couldn’t tell whether either part was an act.

“Dinner for two, please, Agnes,” he said, and his housekeeper curtsied in response. “So, your role?” He prompted Antomine. “This isn’t a simple two or three week journey to a border town. It’s going to take months. I would expect over a year before we can return to Beacon.” Privately, he thought even that was being generous.

“Mostly I’ve been trained as a chaplain,” Antomine said, watching as Jonathan poured beer for them both. “So in addition to the duties of a priest, I have some facility both with languages and zint weaponry. Pistols and rifles, or even cannon.” He raised the glass and took a long drink, before putting it down and looking directly at Jonathan. “And I will not abide any corruption by the things out in the darkness. Humanity belongs to the light, and all the foul secrets that turn them away need to be purged.”

Jonathan felt the words like a blade to his neck, a sudden certainty that Antomine was talking about him directly. To him directly. He wasn’t sure whether that was just his own guilty conscience or if Antomine knew more about his past than seemed possible. Either way, the young man was far more of a threat than Jonathan had first thought, but not one he could do anything about. Not within the walls of Beacon, at least.

“That does make a lot of sense,” Jonathan said instead, schooling his voice to be mildly approving. “I’m sure the men will appreciate someone like that when we’re out past the edge of the map.”

“That is my hope,” Antomine said with a smile that seemed to lack any humor. “I knew you would understand when I saw your collection. Quite a fascinating exhibition of what might be found out there, though all quite safe.”

“It would be impolitic to have anything controversial out where anyone could see it,” Jonathan replied, picking his words with great care. “I wouldn’t try to strain your credulity by claiming I had *never* found such things, but I’ve never seen any value in boasting about them.”

Antomine chuckled, any reply he might have made interrupted by Agnes returning with two plates on a tray. At a glance he could see that Agnes had taken a bit of extra care to provide only the choicest cuts of the bourosteak, and the orange florets had been arranged tastefully with a bit of reduction drizzled over them. It was more artful than usual, as Agnes recognized that their guest was someone of higher status than Jonathan commonly hosted.

“The physician came by, sir,” Agnes said quietly.

“Any issue?” He asked, all too aware of Antomine listening in.

“No sir, just a poultice and to keep from hard alcohol for a few days,” Agnes replied.

“Excellent,” Jonathan said, his mind relieved. Head wounds could be deceptive. “Thank you, Agnes.”

She curtsied and breezed out again, clearly uncomfortable with Antomine’s presence. He hardly blamed her. Even the way Antomine cut the meat had a sort of strange edge to it. Energetic, yet precise and focused beyond what the simple act should require.

“Trouble in the household?” Antomine asked mildly, spearing a piece of steak with his fork and lifting it to his lips. Jonathan considered him for a moment, then decided to take advantage of

the man's connections. It would probably be faster and easier than trying to get Eleanor to look into it.

"We – that is to say, Captain Montgomery and I – ran into some thugs outside of Campbell Yard. I believe we left one of them alive, but my chauffeur was injured so I left everything to the yard's security."

"That is certainly deplorable," Antomine said, regarding Jonathan with interest.

"Indeed," Jonathan replied, more or less expecting Antomine's lack of surprise. "Considering the Crown's interest in this expedition, I wonder if I might prevail upon you to direct an inquisitor that way."

"It wouldn't do for you to fail before the first hurdle," Antomine agreed, cutting another piece of steak. "I will have someone look into it. Though you have more than enough people that wish you ill."

"I am aware," Jonathan said shortly. Even if it wasn't his fault, even if he had made sure the proper people got the proper remuneration, the fact remained that he was the only survivor of the last expedition. *His* last expedition. There was plenty of bad blood to go around. "But yes, extend my appreciation to whomever takes it up."

For a time the talk turned to more unthreatening topics, such as whether the glacialium had brought a heavier than usual snowfall – they hadn't – and the newest publication by the Marvin Press on the history of Beacon — something Jonathan had only skimmed. It wasn't polite to discuss real work over a meal, but Antomine chose topics that didn't have any real meat and it only made the atmosphere more strained. Jonathan had to keep revising his opinion of the man, not so much about how dangerous he was, but what *type* of dangerous.

"Thank you for the meal," Antomine said at last, putting aside his glass. "This discussion has been very instructive. I may be dropping by from time to time, to see how the preparations are going, but I don't believe I will need to take a direct hand. However, do ensure that there will be a place for me and two attendants aboard the *Endeavor*."

"That won't be a problem," Jonathan lied. Having three unwanted agents of the Crown foisted upon him was not a small imposition. He'd been figuring on no more than six passengers, eight on the outside, and that was after figuring Eleanor's inevitable shadows into the equation. There was no way that the Council would let her board unaccompanied, and Jonathan hoped her outriders would be of a similar bent and background as Eleanor herself — he would be uncomfortable were she to be the only woman on the expedition.

"I expected not. After I saw the plans for the *Endeavor's* new layout, I knew there'd be plenty of room." Antomine smiled broadly. Jonathan inclined his head, but didn't say anything. He himself hadn't seen the plans since, as far as he knew, they were still being drawn up by the engineer for Marshall Shipyards.

With that twist of the knife, Jonathan showed Antomine out, the young man taking his wide-brimmed hat from Agnes and sauntering down the stairs to the street below. The carriage waiting there gleamed pure white under the streetlights, the newest model, and was blazoned with the torch-and-crown of the royal arms. Jonathan let out a long breath as it drove away, half expecting to see the white-pupiled eyes when he turned around.

“You were right, Agnes,” he said as he shut the door. “He gives me a bad feeling, too.”