

## Chapter Twenty-Four

"This is not a place we should be," Antomine said.

For all its fearsome appearance, the Dead Battle was one of the few places in the east where Jonathan had found no real danger. He could not deny that there were great forces at work, both from the sheer energy the figures seemed to hold, and from the fact that the Battle had changed every time he passed it by. Yet nothing there had ever moved when he had been there to watch, or even seemed to notice those who passed over or around or even through the frozen conflict.

Clearly the inquisitor didn't share his opinion.

"The Dead Battle stretches from the barren hills all the way to the threshold," Jonathan replied, turning from the forward window to give him a scornful look. "If you believe you can plot a course that goes around, you are free to try, but it is merely a curiosity."

"I thought you said there weren't any landmarks of interest before the Arch," Eleanor accused with a frown.

"You mentioned the Dead Battle, but I did not think it was this," Antomine said, by way of agreement.

"It may look fearsome, but there is nothing here we need stop for, nor is there anything that will attack us. Unless things have greatly changed since my last visit this is, in truth, a safer course than the alternatives." Jonathan tapped his cane impatiently against the deck, a dull thump in the carpeted observation room. "After all the places we have been, this should not give you pause."

"You know as well as I do that not all dangers are physical," Antomine growled. "There is something here that touch upon secrets of the Illuminated King. You may not be able to see it, but to me it shines in the dark."

"Really?" Eleanor suddenly looked interested. "All the way out here? Inquiring minds would like to know what exactly the Illuminated King was doing so far from Beacon."

"That is *certainly* not your business," Antomine said, and turned away. "I will see how much the captain is willing to push the engines." Jonathan knew that was hardly necessary, but he wouldn't object to Antomine's desire for haste so long as it didn't imperil the ship.

"Must be serious if he's so ruffled," Eleanor said, taking a long draw on her cigarette. "I'm almost tempted to take a look."

Jonathan glanced at her, wondering if he should reiterate how poor an idea it would be to try and seek out additional insights, but he saw the bitterness in her eyes. She was talking more about spiting Antomine than finding something for herself, and Jonathan couldn't say whether that was due to the ongoing struggle with her new perspective or just her usual contrariness. Under the circumstances he thought it best to not to answer directly lest he provoke her into action in any direction — but it made him doubly glad that he'd hidden the fruit he needed. In her current state of mind she was perfectly capable of destroying it.

“I’m not certainly he’s actually correct — or telling the truth.” Jonathan settled on saying something more reserved. “There are clearly forces at play, but he may simply be uncomfortable with them thanks to whom he serves. Neither of us are devotees of the Illuminated King.”

“I suppose,” Eleanor said, without enthusiasm. “Feels like something this eerie should have some real bite. Actual *meaning*.”

“There surely is something,” Jonathan agreed. “One day people will delve its secrets. But so far, none have — not that have survived to share their findings, at least.”

“That’s not ominous at all,” Eleanor muttered.

“One of the more important virtues is knowing when to practice discretion,” Jonathan said mildly. Eleanor simply glared.

Jonathan expected that would be the end of it. The sight of the two forces locked in poses of desperate combat was impressive, the ferocity intimidating, but it was ultimately mere spectacle. The *Endeavor* flew above it all, and nothing below seemed to notice. It was only slowly and by degrees, a full day later, that he realized something was different on this particular visit to the Dead Battle.

The observation room seemed to have slowly expanded, the windows growing larger, the carpet flowing out like water to cover the receding borders. The tableau of the Dead Battle had become more visible, despite the only illumination being the *Endeavor*’s spotlights, almost as if it had grown smaller. In the distance two immense figures loomed, titanic mountains in the shape of people.

They had been there all along, but it was only in that moment that he realized what he was looking at. With that understanding came change, as the mere presence of the knowledge catalyzed a shift in perspective — and all the strangeness resolved itself into an approach.

It was a transfixing sight, taking place in a strange stretch of timeless time. Each second seemed to stretch longer, as if each had more in it than the last. The result was an enforced sort of lassitude as Jonathan glanced over at Antomine and Eleanor. It was a brief motion of the head, but it seemed slow and lazy as the surrounding stretched and warped.

The two figures grew closer, and smaller — and yet, stayed the same. They transcended simple space and distance, sizes and positions a constant whether they were distant colossi or nearer giants. The Battle was struck by the same effect, its size and scale unmoored from the lands it occupied.

In the ages it took for him to rise to his feet, it seemed like the *Endeavor* had raced across the miles, even if it had barely moved. The distant figures came into focus, with the Dead Battle between them. Neither of the two was distinct, both cloaked in shadow and obscurity, and yet naggingly familiar. Then he realized that the forms were indescribable and indecipherable in the way that the Illuminated King’s true body was impossible to perceive; their size transcendent in the same manner as Ukari.

These were beings who had grasped the oldest and most primal secrets that could be wrested from the depths of the world. Had meditated upon mysteries undreamt by mortal man, and so returned with understanding enough to shake the firmament. They dwelt here, in the east,

where the understandings of men held no sway — or perhaps such things held no sway because they dwelt in the east.

Jonathan felt it was no great revelation to understand this, gazing upon forms whose scope and nature he did not and had no wish to comprehend. In those expanded seconds he had ample time to contemplate what he saw, two Players directing a Game on an observation deck grown fat on the residue of their presence. It was enough to explain the raw presence of the Dead Battle, and why its particulars changed each time, but that they chose to make themselves known on this journey, with not a single hint on any prior expedition, put wariness into his heart.

Then he was on his feet, and the long idyll of short seconds ended. Antomine and Eleanor jumped up as well, the latter glancing at the entrance to the observation room as if to assure herself it was still there. Penelope uncurled from where she was laying underneath a chair, stretched, and sauntered toward the two figures with unhurried grace. Some thought it was superstition, but Jonathan knew better than to question a ship's cat in matters such as these. Trusting the cat's judgement, he let the sunlight within him rise up to buoy his mind and soul and, thus fortified, he walked briskly toward the Game and the Players attending it.

"Mister Jonathan Heights," one of them said. The voice was not the compelling thunder of either Ukari or the Illuminated King; it was soft, ordinary, uninteresting, and all the more deceptive thereby. It even used the tongue of Beacon, lacking any accent.

"I am," Jonathan acknowledged, as Antomine and Eleanor arranged themselves behind him. Penelope sat at the board, eyeing it with interest, her tail swishing slowly. "I do not believe I know you," he continued, though he wasn't certain who he was even talking to. There was the definite impression that only one of the two was speaking, but cloaked as they were in their vestments of esoteric knowledge he couldn't discern more than that.

"We are acquainted, you and I," the being said again, and Jonathan felt a shock of near-recognition. "Once met, never strangers."

"Ah," Jonathan said, as those four words were not possible to forget. "I was not expecting to see you again."

"Properly speaking, the one you saw was my master," the being demurred. "Things such as I are lost within his presence — but I was there. Not many things draw attention so rarefied as his, so it behooves me to grant such things — or people — their proper due."

"Not that we could have missed you," the other being spoke. The voice was jagged and torn, ripped from some greater whole and hurled into reality with little care. "Three children of man, dragging and clawing their way east. Drawing great furrows from the weight of their secrets."

"Just three?" Eleanor said, speaking up out of what sounded like sheer pique. "What about the rest of the crew?"

"Ephemeral things," the raw voice dismissed them. "Barely tracing the surface of the skein. Still children of men, still not of the east, but barely worth consideration."

"You, though," the first voice said. "Lightless Life; Illuminated Order, and then — you, Mister Heights. Even we are not familiar with the hooks you've sunk into our world."

“Are you not guarding the Arch of Khokorrion?” Jonathan asked. “What I seek is just beyond it — for I have seen sunlight.”

“We guard it, yes, but not for that which might travel from here. Beyond the Arch — through paths long closed, long forbidden, and long dead — lie wild lands. A true east, from whence no salutary thing can come.”

“I thought we were already in the true east,” Antomine said skeptically.

“There is always a further east,” the ragged voice intoned.

“I certainly appreciate the respect,” Jonathan broke in, not having patience for endless cryptic meanderings after having his fill of that much earlier in life. “Yet I feel there must be a deeper purpose for your welcome.” He also had no idea what this strange liminal expansion of the observation room was doing to the ship. Whether the entire ship was being stretched and contorted, and whether it would stay that way — and how that would impact the last stretch of flight.

“Impatience is not a virtue,” the bland voice replied. “Yet, to the point then. Do you want to play a round?”

Jonathan glanced down at the game board, the vast spread of the Dead Battle below them that was at the same time on the observation deck of the *Endeavor*. With eyes that had once seen sunlight he looked past the simple conflict, the outward form of which was just the barest glimpse and wholly misleading.

Their Game, for it needed no name other than that, spread over time and distance, touching on that which must always and would never be. It was no petty thing, to rule over peoples and pryncedoms, but a long slow dream-drift into mysteries and histories; the kindling of secret fires and the fruits of forbidden trees. The Game was the grandmaster’s execution of the Explorer Society’s infantile fumbling, contending with forces vast and ancient. Each strategy reaching deep into the past and far into the future, each move made with intentions rendered esoteric and incomprehensible by the knowledge they required.

His mind conjured a future from that alone; how, rendered imperishable by the sunlight in his soul, he could reach further into the world and wrest ever more fundamental secrets from forces and depths both physical and other. How he could shed dependence on the unenlightened, take whatever paths he wanted, when he wanted.

All of it was a trap. It was not meant ill, but it was far too much. The greater the insight, the clearer the perspective, the fewer the choices. To take that knowledge, to immerse himself in those depths and swim those waters to be reborn anew with the terrible clarity of truth, would be to surrender himself to the power of knowing too much. All his actions would be rote, all his personal goals made irrelevant, and perhaps he would even find his pursuit of sunlight no longer worthwhile. Thus it could not be.

“I respectfully decline,” Jonathan said, despite the bleak temptations of a potent future unwinding before him. “This is not meant for me.” At his elbow, Antomine let out a relieved sigh, faint but unmistakable. Clearly the inquisitor had some prior knowledge of the Players, perhaps even of their Game, and the potential Jonathan had seen was one the Illuminated King feared.

“Unusual,” the raw voice said. “Most that come here, most that play a round, have already secured their own stakes – your Illuminated King, or your She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed – and so have a considered approach to it. You have not.”

“She’s not my Ukari,” Eleanor muttered, but quietly. Both Jonathan and the Players ignored it.

“I have my own interests, and while I respect what is being offered, those interests take me elsewhere. Beyond the Arch of Khokorrion.” Jonathan spoke firmly, not quite fearing any sort of retribution from the Players, no matter what secrets they had behind them. Whatever motives they had were entirely orthogonal to either power or pique, and so had nothing to do with him.

“I’d like to play,” Eleanor spoke up, hunger in her voice. “I’ll take his round.” She took a step forward past him, watching as Penelope reached out with a tentative paw and touched one of the pieces. Despite that step, she didn’t seem to move any closer, as if the distance were not physical.

“You do not yet qualify,” the bland voice said. “You are not yet yourself.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Eleanor asked, aggrieved, then watched in disbelief as Penelope very deliberately nudged one of the massive statues that were, at the same time, small figurines. There was a tiny shift that echoed down through interlocking perspectives and pieces of knowledge, a small realignment of what was known and what was thought. Jonathan blinked and looked away lest he understand too much and be trapped by it.

Then Penelope sauntered away with the smugness only a cat could manage, leaping onto Antomine’s chair to curl up where he had been sitting. Eleanor’s face reddened from sheer force of pique, and she pointed at the cat.

“You won’t give me a shot but *she* can go do God only knows what to your game?”

“Cats are cats,” the ragged voice said, as if it explained everything. Perhaps it did.

“Let it go, Eleanor,” Antomine said. “You don’t want this anyway.”

“You don’t tell me what I want,” Eleanor snapped at him. “I see the way you’re looking at all this anyway. The Illuminated King doesn’t *want* anyone getting this power.”

“There is no power to be had here,” Antomine said, unconvincingly.

“Eleanor,” Jonathan said, stirred to intervene before she exploded or, worse, tried to advance upon the Players by way of her own mysteries. “I do not believe that you would accept the chains such things put upon you.”

“And why should I believe you?” She gave him a scornful look. “You’re only in it for yourself.”

“If nothing else, consider that I refused to take it. As you say, I’m in this for myself, and while the offer is tempting, the price is too high.” Expressing the vast abyss of time and potential their Game represented was dangerous to even contemplate; simply by speaking it too well risked understanding more than he wished.

“Huh.” Eleanor scowled at him, stared at the two figures – which were no clearer than before – and then whirled about and stalked toward the exit. She passed Penelope with a muttered oath, but let the cat lie.

“This is not an offer that will be given again,” the bland voice observed. “Rejecting my master’s favor means that you will have to arrive here the hard way.”

“I understand,” Jonathan said. Antomine kept silent, grasping the inquisitor’s medallion hanging about his neck. With no further words, either of admonishment or warning, the perspective broke. The Dead Battle remained below, the observation deck was no larger than it had been, and Jonathan and Antomine merely stood on the carpet looking outward.

“What did the Illuminated King tell you about them?” Jonathan asked, before Antomine could turn away. The nature of the pair was obvious, as was their role and purpose, simply from the offer they had made and how they had made it. Rejecting their temptation had ended the matter, yet he was not fully satisfied that they would remain uninvolved.

“That none who played their Game could be allowed into human lands,” Antomine said, completely ignoring the hypocrisy. “They are a signpost at the line that divides that which is human and that which is not. Not the only one, of course, but the Illuminated King judged you were likely to draw their interest.”

That gave Jonathan pause, if only briefly. He had never been comfortable with the attention he’d been given by the Illuminated King, and to think that this encounter had been predicted – had been something Antomine was waiting for – disconcerted him. Admittedly it took no great foresight, knowing that Jonathan’s path took him to the Arch of Khokorron and that was where the Players dwelt, but he would have preferred to know.

“Then it is fortunate I have no interest in their Game,” he said at length.

“What *does* interest you, Mister Heights? You turned down exactly what every explorer wants, and you don’t strike me as someone who prefers to do things the hard way when he doesn’t have to.” Antomine eyed him, though surely the question was rhetorical.

“Sunlight, and sunlight alone,” Jonathan said flatly. “Without that, what temptation could there possibly be?”

“One wonders what you intend to *do* when we find it,” Antomine remarked.

“It is far too late to be asking that,” Jonathan said, and turned away. So late into the expedition, he didn’t feel like dissembling or answering, let alone the vulgarity of an outright lie.

The entire interlude had gone quite unnoticed by the crew and even by the maids, as unbelievable as that seemed. For those not attuned to esoteric phenomena the world was a much simpler place, though after even the smallest glimpse of the Players and their Game Jonathan knew he was barely more aware than the meanest airman aboard the *Endeavor*.

He let Antomine relay the details, so the inquisitor could redact whatever particulars he wished. The knowledge of the Players and the Game was, more than most, dangerous to the uninitiated mind. Partly because it might allow the unready to see connections they should not, but also because they might draw the wrong conclusions. Men who thought their entire lives were controlled by enigmatic forces might become wildly erratic, even dangerous.

“So just to be certain,” Montgomery said, pipe stem in his mouth even if he had nothing left to smoke. “These things aren’t going to cause any more trouble?”

“I very much doubt it,” Antomine assured the captain. “Not that there was much we could do if they were.” Jonathan doubted the latter statement. Mastery of certain mysteries could render a man immune to much, but not all. Never all.

Considering the entire matter was moot, he didn’t weigh in, merely looking over the maps while Antomine discussed the incident with Montgomery. The Dead Battle’s shifting nature and the way it trampled down other landmarks rendered navigation somewhat uncertain, though it was its own sort of guide. He didn’t fear going astray, but he did wish to be as direct as possible.

His mind was eased when, only a few days later, the last statue of the Battle fell behind and the dull red burning-lights of the Arch of Khokorron – massive red glass bulbs filled with a sourceless fire – showed themselves ahead. It was not a mere hoop of metal, which one needed only pass under, but a monument wrought by forces not seen in the west. Jonathan wasn’t entirely certain what obstacles it bypassed, but the desolate waste stretched far enough beyond it than none had taken another path.

“That’s big,” Eleanor said, squinting out at what was visible through the observation window. It was mostly illuminated by its own mechanisms, great red slabs of fire behind glass, casting dim light over an agglomeration of metal. The Arch itself was miles tall and miles wide, and deeper than anyone had yet measured, with great pistons and gears churning and thumping their stentorian dignity. Metal doors that weighed more than cities stood, strong and proud.

Within the Arch was a vast sea of writhing gears and burning-lamps, intermeshed metal and light, constantly shifting and changing in confounding convolutions. Within that chaos, patterns seemed to emerge, like froth on waves, symbols and patterns that implied one destination or another, but they vanished like the ephemera they were. It was unthinkable to enter that opening, as such a configuration would unmake the *Endeavor* entirely, but the passage could be temporarily tamed.

“That is an understatement,” Antomine said dryly. “How are we to interact with such a thing at all?”

“There are quite a few points by which the Arch might be controlled,” Jonathan said. “Though I hesitate to use the word. Instructed, perhaps. They will need me on the bridge.” He turned to leave, ignoring that the other passengers trailed after him curiously, even the maids. It was fair they would want to know what was planned.

Montgomery greeted him with a grunt, arms folded, looking out at the mountain-sized structure. Even as distant as they were the rattle and thump of machinery sounded, faint thunder more felt than heard. Jonathan retrieved a notebook from inside his suit pocket and flipped through until he found the appropriate page, putting it down on the navigator’s console.

“These drawings should guide you to the tether dock,” Jonathan said, as the man flipped through several pages of sketches. “The machinery there is not in terribly good repair, so the party will have to be equipped with broomsticks or iron rods with the flowers I brought from Ukaresh attached. It makes traversing the area far safer — if your flower freezes, simply turn around and go another way.”

“There is a control mechanism there?” Antomine asked, stepping forward to peer over the navigator’s shoulder.

“There is,” Jonathan confirmed. “One of many, but I have only seen diagrams of the others. I see no reason to attempt anything other than what worked last time.”

“Aye,” Montgomery agreed, frowning at the notebook, and then began issuing orders. They were still miles away, but the *Endeavor* corrected her heading, aiming for the left wall of the Arch. Even though the scale was obvious, it was driven further home as the *Endeavor* drew closer, the arch became larger, and still the forward spotlights didn’t even glint off the metal. The navigator and the pilot consulted frequently as they drew nearer, examining the red-lit mass of machinery for the waypoints outlined in Jonathan’s sketches.

Finally the tether point became obvious, a long spar under a bulb of red glass long shattered, the fires within dead. The spotlights finally found something of substance, illuminating vast stretches of bare steel punctuated by contortions of spindle and wire, cog and gear. Some moved, and some did not, but it was not clear what had caused the damage in the first place — or if it was simply age.

Regardless of cause, it was only a miniscule portion of a vast design, and provided an avenue for interlopers such as themselves to access the Arch’s workings. Airmen went out to tie the *Endeavor* to the spar, which was wider than the ship and had many convenient protrusions of stalled machinery to which tethers could be affixed. Descending from the ship, they were struck by the smell of oil and a subtle heat which made several faces flush with fever, as the lingering effects of Angkor Leng made themselves known.

That necessitated some minor shuffling of which crew went along, those most able to withstand the unnatural sickness that dwelt within. Jonathan waited while the crew discussed it, his lantern shining over an expanse of textured metal. Underfoot the spar vibrated with the motion of a vast piston only dimly visible in an intact burning-light below, one the size of Beacon’s central tower and taking a full ten minutes to accomplish its reciprocation.

“Everyone have their poles and earplugs?” Jonathan held his own pole up by demonstration, just a rod of finger-thick steel with a flower tied to one end. There was a chorus of assent from those who had elected to come along — which included Montgomery for the first time. The captain had clearly let his curiosity overrule his common sense as he had put himself on the detail, leaving the bos’n in charge. The brawny and wiry fellows — whom Jonathan had become accustomed to seeing on such outings — flanked the captain on either side, holding pistols in addition to their flower-rods.

With the party ready, Jonathan stepped out along the spar, which was closer to a broad causeway despite the interruptions in the level surface from protruding equipment, little to none of which still functioned. Their lamps shone over metal both bright and dark, and occasional jagged pockets of broken glass, the edges still sharp. It was not a place fit for living beings, yet somehow vermin still managed to dwell within. Jonathan suspected they ate metal itself, perhaps drinking the oil that collected here and there in pools from broken pipes and conduits.

Nothing accosted them on their trek across the spar, the length of a full city block, but Jonathan paused when he reached the point where it joined the Arch proper. A door proportioned for something thrice the size of a man stood both ajar and askew, bent and wedged permanently open. From within faint rustlings could be heard, as of many small forms in restless movement, and Jonathan held up his hand for a halt.



“Everyone stand aside and be ready,” Jonathan told them. “There are some flying pests within, and while I doubt they will be particularly aggressive, they can be an issue for the unwary.” Seeing that the group was prepared, he thumped the door with his cane, the metal ringing like a distorted bell.

With a sudden screeching and scratching, dark winged shapes issued forth from the dark opening. Most of them poured upward into the blackness of the sky, but some few – either confused or maddened by the detachment’s presence – shot at the group. Blades flashed, and a pistol discharged with the characteristic *zint*. The corpses landed on the metal, winged rodent-things as long as a man’s arm, but bearing certain disconcerting features.

“Are those *gears*?” Eleanor asked, bringing her lamp nearer to shine on a lumpen mass protruding from the side of one of the vermin.

“It seems so,” Jonathan said. “I had seen some evidence last time but this is a more advanced infestation.” It was difficult to say whether the metal had grown from or into the creature, the small set of intermeshing cogs wrapped in sinew and twitching with the creature’s final spasms.

“Good reason not to linger,” Antomine said, straightening from his own inspection.

“Indeed. Everyone keep your poles out, move slowly, and be alert. The interior is a bit of a maze, so don’t get separated.” Jonathan doubted anyone would be so foolhardy, but he certainly wouldn’t go looking for someone who lost themselves in the warren.

He stepped through the door and hung a spare lantern high up on the wall, hooking it to some protruding coils to mark the exit, then moved aside for the rest to enter. Their destination was visible in the distance above them as an organ-like assemblage of pipes and pedals lit by another burning-light. Between them and their destination was a latticework shadow of catwalks and gantries, passages of grated metal threaded through frozen gears and seized pistons. The sound of working machinery still echoed through the cavernous space, but it was faint and far away.

Jonathan extended his flower pole as he started forward. He had no real map for the space, as the dizzying mandala of suspended passages was far too complex to try and record — as well as being so interconnected that the greater worry was avoiding hazard, rather than navigation. The suspended metal trembled from the impact of many boots, a black abyss below them from which came the occasional gust of warm or chilled air, smelling of salt and stone. Those at the front and sides of their formation brandished the flower-bearing poles, mindful of invisible hazards and whatever other creatures might be lurking within the industrial galleries of the Arch.

Their lanterns created a small pool of light around their feet, only occasionally throwing massive and distorted shadows on walls or mechanisms close enough to see. Jonathan followed the nearest expedient route, leading the party up a grated metal ramp in the direction of their destination. Their course paralleled a great rent in the crossing arcades, seemingly torn by something massive falling from above, circling around the damage to follow the intact pathways. He split his attention between the flower and his footing, with equal wishes not to walk into the invisible unflame and not to plummet through an unexpected hole in the catwalks.

The first person to raise a shout was actually at the side of the party, and they all came to a ragged halt, seeing the crewman’s flower turn to ice and begin to splinter. One of them splashed some bright paint well short of the edge of the effect, and the party took a wide berth

around it. The second encounter came some time later as Antomine's flower crackled and froze, blocking off the entire walk and forcing them to backtrack. The man with the paint daubed it at every intersection, but Jonathan wasn't certain they'd even return the same way.

Another two levels passed by without anything untoward, the party tromping up oversized stairs and clambering across patches of inoperable equipment. At the base of a ramp to the next level a low growl came from the darkness which was not the product of any mechanism. One of the crewman turned a more powerful lamp that way, revealing the gleam of myriad close-set eyes, blinking in irregular and mesmerizing sequences. So powerful was the hypnotic effect that fully half the airmen began to walk toward it.

Jonathan, Antomine, and Montgomery leapt to restrain them, while the remaining Lux Guard, along with the brawny and wiry pair of airmen, opened fire on the eyes. There was a truly horrific screech as something with metallic spines and myriad legs was revealed in the flashes of zint, and then it was gone, scuttling into the murk. The intervention was slightly too late for one of the airmen, who was pulled back, screaming, as his nose crystallized into bloody ice.

"You'll be alright, Molson," Montgomery soothed him, one hand on his shoulder as another airman performed a brutally effective amputation of the affected appendage, to keep the slowly spreading ice from reaching the rest of the man's face. "We'll get you an ivory one when we get back home." He lowered his voice, leaning in closer. "Or with all the gold we've got, you can go to the Invidus Croft and get a new one." That was clearly not meant for Antomine's ears, and if the inquisitor heard he gave no sign.

Their climb resumed with more care after that, a half-dozen more flowers being sacrificed to the cause as they ascended the levels. Even as they neared the burning-light, the illumination never became anything more than gloomy. True darkness was almost preferable to the long, lingering shadows stretching out on every side. The creature never reappeared, but sounds of things moving out of sight and clambering among the machinery echoed to them, barely audible beneath the steady hiss and thump of the Arch's workings.

Finally they reached the platform where the controls resided — though Jonathan imagined they had hardly been intended as such. It was, perhaps, a sort of relay, or maybe something even less grandiose, but had been repurposed in some distant past by explorers and the knowledge passed down through rumor and record. Montgomery directed his men to secure the platform under the sweltering glow of the burning-light, ensuring it was free of both pests and unseen hazards.

"Everyone might wish to get their earplugs ready," Jonathan said, withdrawing a notebook from inside his suit and flipping it open to the proper page. He stepped up to the controls, a set of wheels and levers and pedals meant for a far larger frame than his. "This will be loud."