

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jonathan hauled a comatose Eleanor through the passages below Ukaresh. After only a few steps he scooped her up into his arms as he dodged confused creatures and snarls of tree limbs winding through open spaces. The warren of tunnels was in no danger of collapsing, for the city was made of older and sterner stuff even than the Black Garden, but the bloodthirsty plants had introduced more than a modicum of chaos.

The normal edge of traveling through Ukaresh had taken on a different flavor, as those who might have preyed upon an unwary passerby were themselves hunted by the shifting and rustling branches of trees. It was a preoccupation that would not last long, but Jonathan took advantage of it to rush headlong, cane hooked over one arm as he carried Eleanor. When he emerged from the warrens he found the streets had been transformed into a dense forest, dark green leaves glittering and drinking in any light they could find.

The city trembled as Ukari stirred in her distant palace, the tremors of She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied taking an interest. Jonathan knew that the overgrowth was of little moment; it could be cleared with a wave of her hand if she wanted, though it was more likely she would let it do as it wished. Challenges such as these kept Ukaresh honest. Yet he hadn't merely introduced a new and living decoration to the city, and it was her reaction to the Garden's new nature that worried him.

He sprinted along cluttered streets, jumping over or circling around stalled conveyances – wheeled, legged, and otherwise – ducking tree branches that moved with a distinct malevolent animus. Buildings and inhabitants alike fought back, peripatetic shops and monstrous creatures crushing and tearing. Jonathan dodged a falling trunk that groaned and snarled the whole way down, twigs lashing like knives, and vaulted up an angled storefront to get above street level.

It wasn't quite possible to traverse by rooftop, as the buildings of Ukaresh were an eclectic collection with domes, pyramids, slopes, and entirely open ceilings, but it still gave him enough height to take shortcuts. As he leapt across streets and slithered down the sides of domes or steep-sloped roofs, he could see that in some places the outburst of overgrowth had already been cleared. Around the big bulk of the palace, the trunks and branches were being actively twisted into something else, though he didn't know how long Ukari would be distracted by the emergency.

Crispin's came into view at last and he burst through the door, ducking a branch that had grown through a window and bolting up the stairs. Finally he made it out onto the pavilion where the *Endeavor* was tethered, finding three crew hacking at encroaching twigs before they could get too close to the lines. Jonathan simply jumped onto the descent line, holding Eleanor with one hand and steadying himself with the other.

"Loose them and come up," Jonathan snapped at them, preferring to leave as soon as possible. One of the men stopped chopping at wood and unclipped the tethers, the other two piling on after him as the people watching above started hauling in the lines. The *Endeavor* bobbed upward, leaving them swaying as they were rolled in, but Jonathan's grip was firm and he jumped off onto the deck the moment the line cleared the hatch.

"What did you *do*?" Antomine stood waiting with his Lux Guard and the maids, outraged and incensed.

“Helped Eleanor,” Jonathan said shortly, passing off the unconscious woman to her attendants. “The new knowledge was too much for her, but I didn’t anticipate this reaction.” He turned to the nearest airman. “Tell the captain to get us going as fast and as high as possible,” he said, and the man bolted for the speaking-tube.

“This latest debacle does not exactly inspire trust,” Antomine bit out. “You were supposed to be merely performing an errand.”

“The errand went fine,” Jonathan said, turning to look out at Ukaresh as the ship’s engines sent them lurching forward. “However, I needed to stop Eleanor from hurting herself. Sunlight has many effects, but it seems that mere exposure to it changed the nature of the Black Garden. It has learned something.”

Antomine’s lips twisted. He didn’t know what the Black Garden was, that much was clear, but it was easy enough to guess. The devouring forest was being beaten back, but the disposition of Ukaresh had been permanently altered.

“I won’t pretend I care about the chaos you’ve sown in this particular foreign port, but you are proof of why the Inquisition is so careful,” Antomine said. “All you have done is leave destruction in your wake.” Jonathan waved it away, unconcerned with that particular opinion.

“My worry is more the opinion of the mistress of Ukaresh,” Jonathan said. “Surely she will realize the origin of this particular issue.”

“Can we survive her displeasure?” Antomine asked after a moment, more concerned with pragmatic reality than further castigating Jonathan for his actions.

“I certainly hope so,” Jonathan said, pausing briefly to consider his resources. “I have nothing that would truly halt her wrath, but if you can blunt her first reaction, perhaps I can use words.”

“Me?” Antomine asked, raising his eyebrows. “I’m fairly certain I have nothing that can stand up to *that*.”

“No challenge to her primacy would work,” Jonathan agreed. “I know not what your secrets are, but if you can offer an *invitation* instead, that may give her pause.”

“I see,” Antomine said, brows furrowed as he thought, his white-pupiled eyes fixed on Jonathan though not really seeing him.

“**Jonathan!**” Ukari’s voice flayed the air, the howl coming from all the way back in the palace, which was receding visibly as Montgomery pushed the engines to their limits. Glass crazed and cracked from the sound, as Ukari suddenly towered over the city. She looked the same as before, impossibly perfect and illuminated by her own glory, but writ so large that she could have seized the *Endeavor* with one hand.

She reached for them, gargantuan claws poised to grip and rend, as Antomine stepped out onto the railed walkway that encircled the cargo deck. Jonathan joined him, unable to perceive what mysteries Antomine was invoking as his white eyes glowed, and the reaching hand paused for a moment. Jonathan took the opportunity to bow before looking far, far up at the golden eyes high above.

“My Lady Ukari,” he said, completely unworried about being heard. “I apologize for the unintended effects of my attempts to address Eleanor’s behavior. Certainly I never intended to disrupt Ukaresh, let alone the Black Garden.”

“You wish to call it an accident?” Ukari sneered, the voice of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed hitting with nearly physical force. It wasn’t volume, despite her titanic size, but the hammer blow of each primordial word backed by righteous fury. “You come to My city, abuse My hospitality, and strike at one of My pillars?”

“I fully admit that my visit was not what I wished,” Jonathan said, picking his words carefully. As he had told Antomine, challenging Ukari was always doomed to fail, so diverting her with something unexpected was the best approach. “I certainly thought that Eleanor’s introduction to the Black Garden would only be helpful. Never did I imagine that the Black Garden itself would be affected.”

“Yet it was!” Ukari leaned down, baring pointed teeth from a mouth large enough to eat the *Endeavor* in a single bite. “The Black Garden is gone and you are responsible.”

“If I may point out, Lady Ukari,” Jonathan said respectfully. “The Black Garden is not exactly gone. It has changed — and it has changed due to sunlight. Whatever its new form is, whatever new insights it has discovered, it is perhaps the only thing this side of the Arch of Khokorron that holds those secrets.” Aside from himself, of course, but he was not amenable to staying.

“Do you think that is enough to offset what you’ve done?” Ukari growled, but she was clearly less incensed now that he had pointed out how potentially valuable the change was. He had no idea what the end result would be, but it would be valuable.

“No, and I can only beg your forgiveness,” Jonathan said, not too proud to grovel at least a little. Being too obsequious would end as poorly as being too defiant, so he kept his tone strictly polite. “I would prevail upon what remains of our relationship that you focus on what you have gained rather than what insult has been done to you.”

“Our relationship.” Ukari laughed, a low throaty growl, and she pointed a massive finger at the airship. “You were always shameless, Jonathan. I liked that about you.”

Jonathan inclined his head, judging it best not to speak. She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed stood there, a titan, looking down at them with eyes of molten gold and an enigmatic twist to her lips.

“In recognition of what we once shared, you may live,” she said at last. “But you will not go unpunished.” Ukari lifted her hands, spreading them wide. “I *cast you out*, Jonathan Heights. You and yours are no longer welcome here. Ukaresh is **forbidden** to you, from now until the end of time.”

There was a great rush of wind, a roar like the crack of thunder, and Ukaresh was gone. The ship’s spotlights shone down on cracked stone and tangled briars. Lumpen mushrooms pushed up through buried shapes that might hint a city had once been there, though that might just have been the play of shadows on the corrugated landscape. Jonathan let out a long breath, very much aware of how lightly he’d gotten off — mostly because he had merely transmuted the Garden, rather than destroyed it. Beyond which, Ukari had clearly enjoyed the chaos the

destruction of the Pits had wrought, and if she had been in a truly foul state of mind no words or force would have stopped her.

“Is the city simply gone?” Antomine asked, looking out on the dark desolation.

“It is for us,” Jonathan confirmed, turning away from what that he had once marked as the center of the true east, a port without which any significant exploration was impossible. “I do not know the extent of the mysteries that Ukari is familiar with, but if she says we are forbidden, we will not find it. Others may, but not us.”

“Likely for the best,” Antomine said, matching pace with him as they headed for the stairs. “I will have to consider very closely the future of this expedition, Mister Heights. We were lucky, and just because you managed to deflect that thing’s wrath you are not absolved of rousing it to begin with.”

“That is simply the nature of venturing so far out,” Jonathan said impatiently. “Anywhere you go, anything you do — everything in the east other than raw wilderness is steeped in powers and secrets. Every landmark has a protector or ruler, and mere wariness or caution is insufficient to contend with them. If you are so worried about stirring the demons out here, then you should not have come, for that is inevitable in a journey such as ours.”

“Perhaps, but you seem uncommonly careless,” Antomine said. “Or uncommonly destructive. You are not merely risking yourself, but all of us, and in ways beyond mere injury or death.” He stopped at the stair well, reaching out for Jonathan for a moment before stopping himself. Jonathan’s simmering presence clearly warned the inquisitor away from laying hands on him. “I will attend to Eleanor,” he said instead. “I suspect Captain Montgomery will need a new course.”

Jonathan’s hand tightened on his cane as Antomine strode off, but he wasn’t so childish as to reject the suggestion; he had intended to visit the captain regardless. He took a moment to regain command of himself and then ascended to the bridge, cane tapping brisk warning as he strode along the halls. He still halted at the entry to the bridge to be granted access, and judging by Montgomery’s sour look he was no more pleased than Antomine. The captain was, however, far more conversant with the hazards of exploring the dark and didn’t bother to castigate Jonathan for what had happened.

“Since we don’t have a city to steer by, it puts a right hole in our navigation,” he said instead, nearly chewing on his pipe as he directed Jonathan over to the maps. “We’ve got to get our bearings again.”

“Certainly,” Jonathan acknowledged, looking over the map where Ukaresh had been. Even its symbol had been erased, as if it had never existed, but fortunately he was more familiar with the immediate surroundings than other places in the far east. Markings showing danger were scattered over the entire area, but some of those dangers could be useful.

“I believe the best way to move forward would be to allow ourselves to be pushed backward.” He slid his finger to one of the symbols below their location on the map. “Trying to cross the river south will put us in a trap, leading to a sargasso of sorts. We can burn our way out of it with fire dust, and we will be somewhat further away but we will know precisely where.” He tapped a point on a ridgeline to the south and west.

“Can’t follow it east, huh?” Montgomery eyed the map, where a vague line of a river traveled toward their destination for a few dozen miles before terminating.

“The river itself leads nowhere. Crossing it, no matter what direction you go, will put you in the sargasso,” Jonathan said, turning away from the map. “In fact, it will look like an ocean. A powerful enough light will show the other side until you cross, at which point it recedes in every direction. Once we arrive at the sargasso the mists can be burned away — otherwise it is not unlike the way that corpse trapped us before. Perhaps they are in some way related, but that is not why we are here.”

“Right,” Montgomery said, frowning at the map and then turning to give orders. Jonathan left him to it and returned to the passenger’s deck. He stopped before his cabin, hand on the latch, and then turned to knock on the door to Eleanor’s room. Antomine answered, eyeing Jonathan with disfavor.

“I gave her some meditations to do,” he said, in response to Jonathan’s unasked question. “She’s struggling with a great deal of confusion.”

“I’m not confused!” Eleanor’s waspish voice came from behind Antomine, free of either hysteria or bloodthirst. “Let him in.” Antomine glanced back, then stepped out of the way. It was the first time in the entire voyage that he’d even been in Eleanor’s cabin, and she’d decorated it with wall hangings and pieces of art that clearly had come from the places they’d stopped along the way.

Rather than lying in bed like an invalid, Eleanor was closeted in an overstuffed armchair bolted to the deck — he wasn’t even sure when that had been brought on board. Her hair was undone and a stack of classical religious texts lay on the table at her elbow. Judging by the worn covers, they had been donated by Antomine.

“Well?” She demanded, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes at him.

“I merely wanted to see how you were doing,” Jonathan said, tapping his fingers on his cane.

“Pretty terrible,” she said bluntly. She didn’t look too put out, but he well knew what it was like to grapple with a sudden and profound insight. Knowledge couldn’t be unlearned, new perceptions could never be removed, so all that could be done was wrestle with whatever harsh truths had been revealed.

“I would like to apologize,” Jonathan said. It was at least two-thirds genuine; he would not have deviated from that course regardless, but he hadn’t thought it would affect her so much. Or that there would be such a connection between the Garden’s secrets and those of sunlight. “I knew only a little about the Garden, but I had expected it would lie along your path to begin with.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” Eleanor said bluntly. “It was horrible. And you left me alone with *her*. Do you know what she’s *like*?”

“I do,” Jonathan said imperturbably. “I would have thought you would find her fine company in other circumstances.”

“Maybe, but you know what? I think she was *disappointed* in me,” Eleanor said bitterly. “That’s the worst thing. I’m just...” She trailed off and then snapped at him. “Just go! Both of you! Out!” Jonathan inclined his head for a moment and retreated, followed by Antomine.

“Did you at least get what you needed out of that mess?” Antomine asked sourly.

“I did, in fact,” Jonathan said, touching his coat where the fruit still beat slowly in his pocket. “For which I am thankful. The way forward is complicated slightly by the lack of a city for reference, but we should be back on course in a few days.”

“The Arch of Khokorrón,” Antomine said, matching Jonathan’s stride. “What should I know in advance?”

“We’re still some days away,” Jonathan cautioned. “More than a week, perhaps. The Arch itself merely serves to allow passage to deeper reaches, traveling it properly requires certain provisions. Nothing too esoteric for you; it is simply a matter of traveling through it. I am the only one at risk.”

“I will hold you to that,” Antomine said darkly, and stalked off to his cabin. Jonathan returned to his own and wrapped the heart-fruit in paper, which he then stashed in the secure compartment of his safe. It was mere prudence, and besides which he didn’t quite trust that Eleanor would be satisfied with paltry words. Not the ones she’d said, and not the ones she had yet to say. He judged it well within her character to try and repossess the fruit of the Garden.

So far, the twisted perspective necessary to open the hidden compartment had kept it safe, and while nothing was certain given Eleanor’s own secrets, it was the best option he had available. Best to remove that temptation, or else be forced to remove Eleanor entirely. He would prefer not to be driven to that extremity.

He found himself in the observation room once again as the ship headed south for the next few hours, its searchlights revealing very little but a thorny waste below them. In the distance there were flashes of varicolored lightning from the east’s peculiar weather, and pools of luminous vapor were dotted here and there on the ground, but nothing of real note revealed itself. Eleanor walked in, sneered in his direction, and took herself to the other side of the small room. She stared fixedly out the window, but her reflection in the glass revealed wild and reddened eyes.

Earlier in his life, in another time, he might have attempted to comfort her, or to make amends, but he was at a loss now. The future became more sharply curtailed the closer they drew to the goal; the consequences of the present less relevant. The demands and niceties of ordinary human interaction seemed unimportant, yet he knew they could not be — both for the pragmatic goal of reaching sunlight, and the transcendent one of being worthy of it.

“Eleanor,” he said, and paused. He couldn’t assure her it would pass — it never did. What she faced was truth, and truth was not transitory. Nor could he say it got easier as time went on, for many burdens only got heavier with age.

“In my experience, it is best to find a goal to drive toward,” he said instead, as she looked toward him with sullen resentment. “Something where you can subordinate and use what you know. A secret hanging over you is far different than one you can harness for a task.”

“Great,” Eleanor said biting. “That is fascinating and helpful.” Jonathan didn’t reply. He knew better than to try and interrupt a good mad. She would remember and possibly use his advice sometime in the future, but only if he didn’t push. Such an understanding was almost a secret in

its own right; he knew with a few carefully calculated words he could ruin her future, turn her onto a path of self-destruction.

Jonathan blinked and let the sunlight in his soul chase away the shadows of such dark thoughts. He could not fully atone for what he had done to Eleanor, but he could set her on a proper course instead. That required a certain degree of delicacy and judgement, and he would have to pay close attention to her in the future — but for the moment, he could only leave her be.

Instead of attempting any more conversation, he selected one of his notebook and began extracting what he had written of the Arch of Khokorron and its environs. Unlike much of the east, which teemed with strange life and odd phenomena, the area around the Arch — starting just before it and stretching far into the distance — was a waste, barren and crumbled. The creatures there were small, harsh, and venomous, but with luck they wouldn't need to spend much time on the ground.

On the sargasso that was their next destination he knew very little, only having been forced there once, when he was far younger and less observant. He was certain about being able to burn away the mists that entrapped the area, but of what inhabited it he had little idea. It was not very fearsome in his memory, but he had been quite young.

Antomine joined them in the observation room some hours later, the three of them taking a meal together in strained silence. The state of the supplies was obvious by the gaminess of the meat, the mismatched flavorings that attempted to cover it and failed, and the watered-down ship's ale. They weren't out of food or drink, but there was a clear strain, given the recourse to less preferable victuals.

The only words Eleanor spoke were to ask Jonathan to pass over the pot of mixed seasonings he had prepared for himself, which he did with equanimity. The maids ate together at a different desk, using it as their table, with no pretense of attending Eleanor. That seemed an odd note, but he had no idea what she had said or done under the influence of the Garden's secrets.

"This detour you've sent us on," Antomine said abruptly. "You did say that you would keep us abreast of such developments. I am aware that I have little context for what we might find out here, and what importance it might have, but there is no reason to keep me in the dark. Or the rest of us."

"So far as I am aware there is nothing exceptional about the sargasso save its penchant for trapping the unwary." Jonathan said, mindful that he had, in fact, failed to inform either of his fellow travelers about their next stop. It was an unnecessary lapse and he took himself firmly to task for it. "The intention is to use fire dust to burn off the edges and simply leave along the south shore, and thus follow the ridgeline to the Dead Battle and thence to the Arch. Without Ukaresh I am uncertain as to the disposition of the more northerly route."

"This is not a place to be uncertain in," Antomine observed.

"Indeed," Jonathan agreed. "I am not aware of any landmarks of note between the river and the Arch — and we should not have to resupply again until after we pass through. From my knowledge, I would say two weeks to crossing the Arch."

"Two weeks," Eleanor said, biting off each word, measuring the time by the state of their supplies. "Then we have to actually reach the destination. And at least three more months

back.” He’d seen the phenomenon before on other expeditions, where someone’s world narrowed to how much longer they’d be away from home. Admittedly, Eleanor had better reason than most.

“Returning should be easier,” Jonathan assured them. “Men are creatures of the west, and going home does not draw so much trouble as leaving it. Montgomery needs only the one instrument to find a course that way. Half the reason we have found so many obstacles is that we are not *meant* to be in the east.” Jonathan took a sip of ale, patting his lips with his handkerchief. “We are as alien here as any of the creatures we’ve seen would be in Beacon, and our presence drags and catches at the nature of the world. Returning west would be running before the wind, if you like, rather than into a storm.”

“And thus the reason why it is so important to ensure we *stay* human, and not succumb to strange knowledge that might twist us and the place we live,” Antomine said pointing his fork at Jonathan.

“Yet operating entirely in ignorance of the world outside is just as much a risk,” Jonathan rebutted. “Though I’ll grant you, exploration is a uniquely hazardous occupation.” In the end, every explorer would reach a limit. Either they would find themselves unable to voyage out into the darkness without twisting themselves beyond the bounds of humanity, or they would find something out there so alluring they vanished into the greater world. The members of the Exploration Society were the former, which was likely why they were so infuriated by his success. Simple impotent envy.

“The Illuminated King himself authorized this expedition, did he not?” Antomine speared another forkful of braised and sauced meat, the ingredients and spices entirely sourced from the east. “Yet the explorers are a small group of fringe individuals. And so they should remain. Humanity does benefit from a handful of rare outliers, but too many and they pull us all apart.” He chewed and swallowed. “Thus why it is not something anyone should advocate for.”

“It seems rather moot, out here beyond civilization,” Jonathan said, finishing the last bite on his own plate. While a certain amount of expertise with the culinary arts had kept eating from being a chore, it was certainly not something to relish. Especially as each passing day and league brought him closer to his destination. “We are all the outliers here, one way or another.”

“But we don’t *stay* out here.” Antomine sipped wine, rather than ale, though it was equally watered down. “Eventually, captain and crew and passengers return home. We transmit our experiences and knowledge, and how we treat both of those tints what filters out into the core. Not to mention that it’s better that we don’t come back monsters, let loose on the homeland.”

Eleanor scowled at the last, throwing down her fork and vanishing back to her cabin, leaving a portion of her meal uneaten. The two maids shared a glance and, by some silent mutual agreement, Sarah rose and took both her plate and Eleanor’s with her as she went after her nominative mistress. Antomine looked both surprised and slightly embarrassed, lifting a hand to rub at the back of his neck in the manner of the youth he looked and only infrequently acted like.

Jonathan expected that particular barb was, if not merely a passing commentary on the perspective of the Inquisition, actually directed at him. It wasn’t one he was even particularly concerned with refuting, since he well knew that what drove him was no longer any ordinary human desire. He would have called it better, for the quality of sunlight was far above any of

the ephemeral concerns of the mundane world, but after all his experience he knew the folly of trying to convince anyone of such a thing.

"I hope that you will have helped Eleanor regain control of herself before she returns to Beacon," Jonathan said instead.

"Why, Mister Heights, is that an actual speck of human compassion?" Antomine raised his eyebrows, his tone only partly mocking. Jonathan refused to rise to the bait.

"I imagine that most of your fellow inquisitors are perceived as less than friendly," he remarked instead, laying his fork neatly crosswise on his empty plate. "The behavior of all men should be appropriate to the time and the place. I am out here for a purpose, and much of our success rests on me. My knowledge of the east is unique; some of it cannot be written down, much of it is better left without records where more impressionable minds may find them."

"You do have a point," Antomine said, standing and taking his plate. "But I am not quite convinced that you are merely serious-minded, Mister Heights." It was not exactly a devastating blow, but that was the parting shot he chose to leave on, returning to the galley with his dishes. Surprisingly, the inquisitor was a deft hand both at cooking and cleaning up, a skill necessary for long shipboard stays, and performed his share of the chores without complaint.

Jonathan watched him go, feeling as if he had failed to grasp some vital point, missed some subtext in the conversation, despite Antomine being fairly blunt. Then he cleaned up his own place and followed, leaving Marie alone in the observation room. Eleanor didn't emerge, just Sarah with the dishware.

She still hadn't shown herself by the time the river appeared nearly a day later, its waters dark and troubled in the *Endeavor's* lights. Someone, clearly remembering Jonathan's description, focused the most powerful beams off into the distance, where they played on the far bank a mile or so distant. Yet as the ship moved out over the water, that shore seemed to founder and crumble away, an ever-growing expanse of water stretching out around them.

The vibration of the engines became strangely muted, and mist plumed upward from the waters. It shrouded the landscape and wrapped itself around dark shapes in the water as they passed deeper within, as if it were a heavy blanket over the world. Slowly it became clear that the shapes were craft; ships wooden and iron, rotted and rusted in shallow water. Other shadows emerged higher up, of airships still floating despite the depredations of time and tide, wrought in strange and puzzling designs.

They had entered the sargasso.