

## Chapter Sixteen

Jonathan's cane clicked on the massive bright blue tile clicked underfoot as he stepped off the descent tether and onto the dome. Eleanor dropped down next to him, followed by Sarah, the short and dark maid. Marie seemed to be remaining aboard, and Jonathan approved. If there were another Society agent aboard, best to have someone willing to apply appropriate force to them.

"Where does this heat *come* from?" Eleanor asked, fanning herself as she squinted around, though there was nothing to see beyond the *Endeavor's* lights. "I saw a river; shouldn't it be cool here?"

"I couldn't tell you," Jonathan said absently, turning about to find where the nearest descent might be. "It's better inside, though." The remaining airmen of the detachment landed with thumping and scuffing of boots, all of them armed and wary. Their weapons probably wouldn't be necessary, but there was no such thing as being too cautious.

He pointed with his cane, indicating a ramp set into the edge of the dome, and they made their way cautiously across the slanted surface. Antomine was the last to arrive, also bringing only one guard. Jonathan wasn't sure whether that was due to some parity with Eleanor, or if he too worried about troubles on the ship while they were gone. Regardless of the reason, the party clustered at the door, which bore the same seamless design as Tor Ilek, and the dark interior hit them with a hammer of cold air and the growl of distant machinery.

The descent was mostly silent, people listening to the subtle noises of still-functional engines and pistons humming within the walls and under the floor. The dried and shrunken stone had torn in places to become windows into the hidden world of the ancient mechanisms, small apertures where metal gleamed in the zint-light. Sometimes the gears and axles moved with desultory slowness, other times they were so fast any details were blurred to nothing.

When they emerged from the base of the ramp, onto the floor of the dome, a sudden outpouring of light from the dome ceiling sent them blinking in frozen shock — another detail Jonathan had forgotten. The fixtures made Jonathan's lamp redundant, as they revealed the hidden degrees that the ancient race had so casually used, and the white glow cast strangely green-hued shadows upon the walls.

"Do not touch the machinery," Jonathan warned, as he led them across the parched and cracked stone of the floor. Some of the rents opened into depths so great that they appeared black despite the light, while others simply exposed mindlessly working gears and pistons. There was a terrible power there, even in those that seemed to move slowly. A careless brush with some moving component could be enough to crush and mangle a limb or body entire.

The street-level door was wedged open, metal bars hammered into the seamless track, and there were prints in a drifting of dust just inside. Jonathan pointed them out before anyone could take alarm.

"This is from the last expedition. We stayed here three weeks, though I do not believe it will take so much time on this occasion." Seeing no questions, he stepped out again into the feverish heat that inundated the city, consulting his notebook as he walked briskly forward. More

lights woke of their own accord, embedded into walls in a pattern that both drew and confused the eye, hinting at arcane symbology just beyond his grasp.

A glance back showed that at least one airman had been ensnared by the sight, but Antomine was there to keep them moving along. Jonathan had to be equally cautious on the tiled roads as he had on the floors, for pipes and channels ran beneath each shrunken causeway, some of which leaked strangely colored fluids or dense and oily vapor. In places they were forced to detour solely to avoid contact with the pollution, which Jonathan knew was deadly or worse.

“What the hell?” The utterance came from one of the airmen, as he shone a lantern past the bounds of the city’s illuminated streets and onto a column of iridescent smoke, sheened like oil over water. At the edge of the column was what seemed to be a statue of a man, headless but contorted in great agony. Jonathan paused to address the question.

“That is what happens when someone *does not listen*. On our last expedition, several members of the crew decided to go treasure hunting by themselves. That is one of them.” Jonathan had little sympathy for the man, though it was headless by way of a mercy, just in case there had still been a mind in the distorted statue the poison had created. “So long as you do not go where you shouldn’t, or touch what you shouldn’t, there should be no danger.”

Suitably chastened, they continued through the streets, Jonathan frequently consulting the hand-drawn map in his notebook. Here and there symbols were imprinted over doors, or at crossroads, and while some could be translated, others were too dangerous to render into comprehensible language. He very firmly refused to consider what the words might imply, what larger pattern they may create, for that way lay madness.

It had taken many doses of laudanum for Professor Loren to become articulate after his work on the translations, and even that hadn’t saved him. The man had seemed coherent enough but had vanished without warning one day from inside his airship cabin, along with all his research materials. Only his shadow, head tilted to look upward, papers and books bundled under his arm, had remained, etched permanently into the hull. Jonathan had no wish to meet the same fate, but as nobody else was capable of understanding the symbology, he felt no need to relate this particular tale. The headless statue was warning enough.

He carefully navigated several blocks, until reaching an area where the damage was not so severe and the city lights were brighter. One particular dome seemed to be more metal than stone, enormous brassy panels covering the front and each of them labeled with ominous symbols. Jonathan knew from the translations that their meaning was intended to be inoffensive, but the buildings of Angkor Leng had knowledge entirely orthogonal to human experience. The most mundane of their concepts – especially the most mundane concepts – were dangerous to understand.

Jonathan depressed a small, near-invisible square in the front of one of the panels, the entire block of brass sliding silently to one side despite its size. The revealed interior was in slightly better repair than most of the city, simply because it was mostly metal rather than stone, the strange lights winking on one by one. The floor was composed of steel circles connected by bronze walkways, with stone only filling the portions between. When Jonathan stepped into the cool interior, the sound of machinery grew louder, the platforms vibrating subtly. He heard gasps behind him, but not for the size of the room or the complex controls visible on the far side. It was for the gold.

The upper half of the dome was dominated by massive branches of solid gold, extending from brass casings set at intervals high up on the walls. Each of them divided, then divided again, forming a sort of tangled rootlike structure that corresponded to no understanding of mechanisms that Jonathan was familiar with. Yet mechanisms they were, shifting and rotating and sliding, connecting and disconnecting from each other as if the entire apparatus were liquid.

“How does that even work?” Antomine stopped inside the doorway, looking upward and studying the golden spectacle.

“I’m not certain, and it might be best not to understand too much,” Jonathan said, looking around the room to ensure everything was as he remembered it. “It surely doesn’t use any human principles of design.” Antomine grunted, and Jonathan strode across to the controls. They were, for the most part, familiar enough — buttons, levers, and wheels, but the arrangement was not built for human anatomy or perception and operating them put a subtle strain on the body.

The extent of the console’s abilities was a mystery, as most of what they knew came from translated scraps of actual instructions, found in a bound metallic book. The few attempts to try other things had generated very little result, aside from making the intricate gold mechanism shift and change. There had been some brief experimentation, but one ill-considered series of inputs had resulted in a terrible shaking and rumbling from beneath, and after that none had wished to test further.

“I guess we can’t take any of *this* gold,” Eleanor said, looking up at the fortune with avaricious eyes.

“Indeed not. It would be a poor idea.” Jonathan opened the appropriate notebook, carefully reviewing the series of inputs he needed. “That is not the only instance of such a mechanism, however. There are others, already damaged, that might be scavenged.”

“So why didn’t you strip them when you were here last time?” Eleanor asked suspiciously, eyeing the console as she crossed over to where he stood.

“Gold is heavy,” Jonathan replied. “There was a plan to return here on our way back.”

“Ah,” Eleanor said, understanding. “Good problem to have. Only having to worry about having enough *cargo space* to hold your loot.”

“I thought you would like it,” Jonathan said with some amusement, and turned his attention to the careful business of operating the controls. With each pressed button, each pulled lever, and each turn of the brass wheels, the branching gold device above them shifted and changed. It went from looking like tangled tree roots to a shifting mandala wheel, to innumerable connected spheres that hurt the eye to regard. At the end of the sequence it returned to its original form, but the massive doors of the nearby dock ground open

“This seems suspiciously peaceful compared to our previous excursions,” Antomine remarked. “I find it hard to believe that if the city is alive, nothing has come to inhabit it.”

“Nothing in the here and now,” Jonathan replied absently, stepping away from the controls and turning to the far wall, where another of the great brass plates was moving. “There is evidence of some prior habitation, and as before — the underground is off-limits.”

“What’s down there?” Eleanor asked curiously.

“I’m not fully certain, but at a guess? Now that I’ve seen that strange light from Tor Ilek, something akin to that.” Jonathan strode toward the newly-revealed chamber, which was more than large enough to hold the *Endeavor* and open to the sky. Floodlights flickered on, set unevenly around the walls but more than enough to saturate every corner and wash out every shadow. There were other devices shaped like man-sized gas lanterns, the ancient and heavy glass enclosures fogged enough to obscure the interiors, that hung from the ceiling in rows on either side of the opening — the source of the radiance that they needed.

“Someone needs to inform Montgomery to bring the *Endeavor* here,” Jonathan said, turning to look at the airman and pointing his cane back at the massive bay. “I am not certain what preparations will be necessary to bring the ship down inside, but it will need to tether here for a day or more.”

“Sure, but how do we get back?” Someone asked, but Jonathan was already scribbling directions and a matching diagram down in a spare page of his notebook. He tore it off and handed it off to whoever was reaching for it, letting them decide the details of their own accord.

“John, go with Bronson and Carl,” Antomine said, taking charge of the detachment, and his silent guard led the pair of men — one brawny and one wiry — back out into the heat. Jonathan planted his cane on the floor, hands atop it, waiting patiently for the ship to return. It was a necessary delay so it didn’t bother him, but some of the airmen were starting to huddle into themselves from the chill in the air, and Eleanor became frustrated within a minute.

“It’s going to take hours to get the *Endeavor* in here and battened down,” she said, slouching against the wall with her hands tucked into her greatcoat. “Why don’t you show us where we can *actually* get gold? It’s not fair that I have to stand here watching that mess.” She removed a hand from a pocket long enough to point at the softly clicking spectacle in the ceiling.

“Very well,” Jonathan said after a moment, weighing the risks of Eleanor going off on her own if he denied her. An ordinary airman likely would only be risking themselves, but he needed Eleanor still — and she was both intelligent and reckless enough to cause real trouble. If there was treasure about, he wasn’t likely to be able to restrain her. He hardly blamed her for wanting to buy her way out from under the Reflected Council, even if it wasn’t likely to work. “Someone should stay here, however,” he added, and let the rest of the detachment figure out among themselves who got to go treasure-hunting.

The only real surprise was that Antomine decided to tag along, rather than wait. Jonathan knew the inquisitor wasn’t moved by material wealth, so Jonathan had to guess that Antomine’s motive was surveillance instead. He didn’t trust Jonathan, as well he might not, though in this case Jonathan had no reason to subject anyone to the secrets of Angkor Leng.

His maps beyond the part of the city containing the hangar were patchy and his recollection patchier still, yet he knew enough of the patterns and symbols to infer what was missing. In the dry oven heat he led them past roads with broken pipes or down alleys with cracked and faded friezes that depicted nothing comprehensible. Some sections of the city were in better repair than others, and while the worst sections were the most dangerous they also were the most likely to have the golden machinery that could be salvaged without any further degradation.

Jonathan stopped at a building that was neither dome nor spire, but rather a square block with low cupolas connected at each face. The stone was so dried and withered that great man-sized rents had opened up into the interior, and zint-lights directed through the cracks returned a metallic gleam. Eleanor slipped inside before Jonathan could even say anything, ghosting through the crack as if she were genuinely ethereal.

“Yep, it’s gold!” She called back happily, and everyone else squeezed through one by one. Jonathan was tempted to find a proper door, but instead proceeded through the entrance last, behind Antomine, sliding sideways to ensure his suit didn’t get scuffed. The building’s own lights did not function, so damaged were the mechanisms, and the steady vibration of the city’s mechanical heartbeat had fallen away nearly to nothing. Somehow the interior was still just as cold as the others, even with the damage.

By the time he was inside, even before he could light his own special lantern to ensure they could see all that was within the room, Eleanor had scaled up the pockmarked wall and pulled out a small pick hammer. The frozen gold mechanism was some bizarre sculpture of intricate knotwork hanging from the ceiling, and it yielded like the solid gold it was under the repeated blows from Eleanor’s hammer. The fine articulations that let the delicate connections work deformed and vanished as an entire segment pulled away and fell to the floor.

“Don’t—” Antomine began as one of the airmen reflexively reached out to catch it, only to wince as the man screamed when several hundred pounds of plummeting metal impacted his arm. The gold hit the floor with a tremendous racket, drowning out the shouting and cursing of someone who had probably managed to break the limb in question.

“Gold is heavy, Mister Fredrickson,” Antomine said severely to the injured airman, who had the seedy look of one of the hires from Danby’s. “Do not let your greed overtake your good sense.” He beckoned the man over and began examining the arm in question while Eleanor prodded the fallen branches with a foot, only for it to not shift at all.

“This is more than I thought,” she admitted. “I don’t suppose I could convince you to carry it?” She asked, raising her brows at Jonathan. He frowned at her and then nodded slowly.

“Trim it and divvy it up between the men. If none else can, I will carry the main trunk.” Though he was not interested in the gold himself, he did have to keep in mind that bringing back such a find would improve the crew’s attitude both toward him and in general. He found such maintenance rather tiresome but, as it was necessary, simply carrying an item was no great imposition. After all, he had done it once before and for a far greater distance.

“We’re going to be rich, boys,” Eleanor said, as happy as he’d ever seen her, and began taking chunks off the mass of gold with a metal chisel she produced from her greatcoat. She’d clearly taken him at his word when he had mentioned the availability of gold. That she’d packed such tools to begin with demonstrated that she had possessed either great foresight or great optimism.

Some of the other airmen had brought tools from the ship somewhat less suited for the task – crowbars, pliers, and engineer’s hammers – but they went to it with a will. The golden apparatus was dissected and disassembled, showing a few flashes of silver here and there, though what purpose any of it served was impossible to tell. Men shoved the pieces in their pockets, coats suddenly stretched from the weight of it all.

“You don’t want any for yourself?” Antomine asked Jonathan, though he didn’t show any inclination to try and seize any of it either.

“Perhaps on the way back,” Jonathan demurred. “Though gold seems a fairly tawdry reward next to the more transcendental gains to be made.”

“I wouldn’t have taken you for a religious man,” Antomine said, with just enough of a barb to his voice to imply that he still didn’t, and well knew Jonathan was fixated on something else.

“I would not dare deny the existence – and importance – of the divine,” Jonathan replied, finding himself uncharacteristically voluble. Perhaps because he had finally reached one of his major landmarks, and it was only a short distance to the Crimson Caldera and the true east.

“Make certain you reflect upon your words, Mister Heights,” Antomine told him. “I find myself in agreement with you about the value of less earthly pursuits, but there are demons as well as angels in that realm.”

Jonathan just chuckled. Part of him would prefer to drop all the troublesome dancing about, and just hear Antomine say that he didn’t trust Jonathan as anything more than an obsessed occultist. Yet if it was spoken it would, like all knowledge, alter the world — and not in a way Jonathan was ready to contend with.

“Right, just this left then,” Eleanor said, kicking at the main branch of gold, which refused to move even with half its weight taken off of it. Jonathan stepped over and stooped down, picking it up with one hand. The metal dimpled just slightly under his grip as he pulled it up and rested it on his shoulder. It would make a very effective club, albeit a heart-stoppingly valuable one.

They all squeezed back out the crack in the wall, as even from the interior it wasn’t obvious where the doors were and – considering the dilapidated stone – it was possible the doors didn’t work at all. Jonathan tugged on his suit by reflex as he finished the necessary contortions, though it was immaculate as always, and planted his cane as he waited for everyone else to emerge.

The blue of zint light flickered in the distance; evidence of the *Endeavor* and her powerful spotlights moving closer, heading for the hangar and its attendant mechanisms. What was neither expected nor welcome was another source of light in the opposite direction, something dark purple-grey and painful to the eye. It wasn’t bright, yet it carried the same eye-watering sting as staring into lightning. Someone else had joined them in Angkor Leng.

While Jonathan was the first to notice, Eleanor knew him well enough to follow his look and squint in that direction. She sucked in a breath and rubbed her eyes, muttering imprecations under her breath. Yet it was Antomine who recognized it.

“That is not supposed to be here,” he said, though Jonathan found that an unusually inane statement for the inquisitor.

“What might it be?” He asked impatiently, as despite his knowledge and experience he was far from knowing everything. The annals of the Inquisition were especially off limits, dealing with histories best kept far from the public consciousness.

“The Umbraught — they consume luminiferous terrestrite,” Antomine said, scowling in the direction of the painful dark light. “The Illuminated King destroyed or drove them out hundreds

of years ago. The zint light must have attracted attention.” Jonathan grunted; the last time he had been in Angkor Leng, their own zint illumination had been far weaker than the *Endeavor’s* powerful spotlight. It was possible that the *Endeavor* had lured such a beast, but Jonathan expected Antomine’s presence was a more likely explanation.

“Is it something we must fight?” Jonathan said. Not that he shrank from combat when necessary, but he would rather not deal with anything potentially dangerous until *after* the *Endeavor* was properly treated. If the mechanisms were damaged it would close the most promising gateway to the true east.

“They are best exterminated on sight,” Antomine said, his voice hard.

“But *must* we?” Jonathan pressed, tapping his cane on the ground for emphasis. “There is absolutely no reason to risk something we do not need to.”

“No matter what, we’d better get to the ship and tell them to turn the lights off,” Eleanor said, shifting from foot to foot and ready to move. “Unless it’s already too late.” Antomine looked between them and heaved a sigh.

“If they do not find us, I suppose it is not a battle we are required to fight,” Antomine said, and Eleanor nodded, vanishing as she took off. Antomine frowned after her, and Jonathan stepped past him as he began to lead the way back at more reasonable pace.

The biting illumination flickered behind them, though it was impossible to tell whether it was getting closer or not. The buildings broke any sight lines and the city’s own lights often drowned it out, but now and again some reflection from metal or stone stabbed at his eyes. The blue glow of the *Endeavor’s* spotlights vanished before they were halfway back, but that did little to clarify the matter.

Antomine was tense the entire way back, yet despite that there was no ambush nor sound of anything nearby. There was only the scuff of boot on stone, the hum and hiss and gurgle of machinery, both functioning and not, and the occasional muttered grumbling from men who were finding that carrying many pounds of gold without the proper tools was an awkward and exhausting process. Not that any of them even held a thought about leaving their prize behind.

By the time the hanger was once again in sight, the strange city light spilling out from an open door, they were all on edge. Most of the men were rubbing at their eyes, sore from exposure to the Umbraught light, and some of them were twitchy — no doubt imagining what might be stalking the group through Angkor Leng. Antomine hadn’t elaborated on what the Umbraught were or could do, but nobody wanted to deal with something from the time of the Kingdom’s founding.

The *Endeavor* was in the process of being hauled into the hangar, the building’s light reflecting off the ship’s underside and multiple tether lines descending from its body. Stepping inside, the sound of winches cut through the mechanical background of the city, as men cranked pulleys with lines tied to various protrusions. It would have been a terrible idea to compress the envelope to the extent of actually landing, especially as it seemed they might need to make a hasty exit.

“I need some men for a defensive perimeter,” Antomine said, the moment they reached the group that was winding the *Endeavor* down. “No zint, just cold steel. Everyone has to get off the ship anyway, correct?” He aimed the question at Jonathan, who nodded.

“In fact, none should be inside the chamber while the process is running,” he added. “It is survivable but unpleasant.” The men on guard at the time had glowed for several days afterward, though there had been no more lingering effects anyone had seen. At least, not before the entire expedition had come to grief.

“I still dislike relying on some poorly understood machine wrought by ancient nonhumans,” Antomine said, eyeing the hangar with distaste. “This is *truly* necessary?”

“Unless you want to be torn into pieces as we go further east, it is,” Jonathan said firmly. He wouldn’t care to gamble on avoiding what was, for the places they had to go, normal weather, and it was entirely necessary for the Caldera. Antomine frowned but dropped the subject, instead setting his Lux Guard – who had returned before them – to stand at the outside door. The guard drew his baton, a length of metal which was probably more effective than most swords, and went to guard the entrance.

It took several more minutes to finally pull the *Endeavor* into position, the ratchet pulleys locked into place and extra chains wrapped around handy pipes or threaded through cracks in the walls. Montgomery finally emerged from the ship as men dropped the cargo tethers and began passing down supplies. To live outside the *Endeavor* for even a short time required a lot of equipment that hadn’t even been opened before, tents and cooking kit still colorful and shining as it was hauled out to the control room. The other Lux Guard and maid were among the last to leave, ensuring there were no crew left behind.

Jonathan paid only marginal attention to the process, his eyes and ears focused on the sounds of Angkor Leng. Whether the Umbraught found them or sabotaged something that would disrupt the machinery in the hangar, they were irritatingly vulnerable. There were no other places Jonathan knew of that would provide the protection of the lost technologies found inside the city, and he would prefer not to dare the East without it.

“We’re ready to get started, Mister Heights.” Montgomery’s voice interrupted his musing. “Wait — is that *all* gold?”

“It is,” Jonathan said, looking upward and then glancing at the club that he’d almost forgotten he was holding. “We can’t afford to take anything that’s still functional, but there are areas of the city that are already destroyed.”

“That’s a lot,” Montgomery said, shifting his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, half reaching out for the length of metal Jonathan was holding and then thinking better of it. He clearly recognized exactly how heavy it was. “Have to make it home with that first, though,” Montgomery concluded.

“Yes, indeed. That is what I hope to assure here,” Jonathan said, stretching the truth only slightly as he strode toward the controls. He lowered the club to the ground and retrieved his notebook, checking and doublechecking the sequence he needed to engage the hangar’s true purpose. The rumbling took on a different tone, the strange gold confection above them shifting and vibrating, flashing as it adopted a strikingly simple and straight line.



The strange lanterns in the hangar began to glow, but it was not exactly light. It was as if the honey glow of molten gold had been rendered into a weightless liquid, something insubstantial yet ponderous, clinging to every exposed surface as it spilled forth to fill the hangar room and thread through cracks in the wall. Some of the airmen made crude exclamations, but nobody wanted to step beyond the brass plate, merely watching as the radiance soaked into the *Endeavor*.

"This will take some time," Jonathan said to Montgomery, the man having followed to watch the operation. "It stops of its own accord." He didn't know what would result if they tried to remove the *Endeavor* before that time was up, nor did he know how to stop the operation himself. There was no physical obstacle to flying free, but a partial treatment by the strange radiance might be worse than none at all.

"Then I guess we're camping." Montgomery took a draw of his pipe and exhaled smoke through his nose. "Do you know what's out there? Mister Antomine was not very forthcoming."

"The Umbraught? No, I only gather they are something the Inquisition thought long taken care of." Jonathan shook his head, not surprised by Antomine's reticence. Often enough, ignorance was as much a defense as knowledge.

"So long as we can answer them with steel," Montgomery said. "It's not like we can hide with that going on." He hooked a thumb at the hangar, which spilled light into the sky as the slow and resinous radiance suffused the *Endeavor*.

"I suspect that, if anything, it is Antomine's presence that draws them," Jonathan replied, looking over to where the inquisitor was discussing something with Eleanor. "He shares in the Illuminated King's secrets, and that must be a clarion call for those who know how to listen."

"Of course," Montgomery said, more resigned than disgusted. "These are the risks of carrying occultists, even if they're the King's. No offense intended."

"No, I quite agree," Jonathan said. "We are dangerous."

"Hah." Montgomery snorted, then took his pipe in one hand and scrubbed at his eyes with the other. "What the devil?"

Jonathan sighed as his eyes began to sting, and reached down to pick up the golden club. It seemed they were not going to get a respite.