

Chapter Eight

The bridge of the ship was crowded as Jonathan spread one of his maps over the far wall. Captain, crew, and passengers all looked at the large roll of paper, some portions of which seemed to be disconnected from the rest, and others had notations that seemed to twist and writhe under scrutiny, yet were merely ink. Other notations made no sense, mountain ranges and rivers and ruins jumbled haphazardly and in opposition to their labels.

“The ultimate goal for this leg of the journey is the Crimson Caldera,” Jonathan told his audience, tapping one of the disconnected portions of the map. “That is the gateway to the truly deep East, as every other path is either guarded or simply impassable. But to even reach there requires a specific path from somewhat changeable landmarks, and things will be made far easier if we scavenge certain materials along the way.”

“We couldn’t just bring these things?” Montgomery said, a trifle disgruntled. “We had the time to find them, that’s for sure.”

“Unfortunately, the things I have in mind only exist out there,” Jonathan admitted. “I had picked up more than needed the last expedition, but I was forced to return on foot.”

“And we’re not running the risks of all getting killed, like your last expedition?” Eleanor asked archly, and Jonathan turned a hard gaze to her. She matched it for a moment, then slowly wilted.

“I certainly have learned what not to do,” Jonathan admitted at length. “The crew of the *Discovery* woke something they should not have. The ship itself is still out there, bar whatever depredations that time and weather may have visited upon it.”

“That is a risk, out here,” Montgomery noted. “More so to the south or east, but anywhere that’s not zint-lit, you might have problems.” He didn’t ask for the lurid details. Eleanor clearly wanted to, but Jonathan moved on before she could. There were certain things he had no wish to reveal, and while he wasn’t above untruth, he preferred to eschew an outright lie.

“As soon as we leave, we’ll be following the Khorus River south and east. How is it looking, Captain?”

“We’re still short a few crew,” Montgomery said, disgruntled. “Even with your money, a lot of people just aren’t interested in going east.”

“I can always requisition someone from the Inquisition office,” Antomine said, and Montgomery winced.

“I need experienced airmen,” he said. “Not just warm bodies, begging your pardon Mister Antomine. There’s ships coming and going here with all kinds of fortunes, so it shouldn’t be impossible to find someone willing to sign on.”

“Indeed,” Jonathan said. “We will be encountering all sorts of weather and we’ll have to acquire food and supplies as we go. Better we take those who understand that reality.” The lack of interested crew irked him, as he’d never really had issues with that resource. He had a suspicion that the Society of Explorers had managed to poison people against him, but unless

he could find the source there was little he could do about it, so he disbanded the meeting soon after.

What he could do was check the cargo, to make sure there had been no tampering since Antomine had brought it to the Inquisition's attention. The materials Eleanor had stolen for him were mostly up in his room, but there was an enormous amount of equipment being loaded. A portable luminiferous terrestrite distillation apparatus, lifting gas separator, water siphons and filters, portable searchlights and crew-served zint guns. Even more food and water, spare parts, raw materials. Clothing, bedding, supplies of soap and toiletries. Loading it at Danby's was far cheaper than trying to store it all in Beacon, and made getting to Danby's in the first place much quicker.

With all the weight, the *Endeavor* would be significantly less agile and the engines would use more zint to get them where they were going. It would be far longer than a few days between stops going forward, and those stops wouldn't be cities where the sailors could get out and enjoy themselves, where there was news and food and drink. Not everyone who dwelled in the cities could handle it, which was why Antomine's suggestion was untenable.

Some of the cases had shown clear signs of being opened, mostly those with fire dust and unflame, and there was some minor pilfering here and there. It was mostly unmolested however, and while Jonathan considered mentioning the issue to Antomine he eventually decided against it — he didn't want any possible investigation that might delay their departure. He had been uncommonly patient before, forced to endure a litany of trifling delays and petty distractions as he waited for the *Endeavor* to be ready. Now at last they were on their way, and so Jonathan was unwilling to suffer any further obstacles on his path to sunlight. It waited in the east, casting everything else into irrelevant shadows.

With departure so close, he could not countenance unwanted attention. He still didn't know what rank and role Antomine held in the Inquisition, but he knew the organization was no more immune to factionalism and corruption than any other. So far from Beacon, it was difficult to know how much authority Antomine truly held, and that was the sort of bureaucratic wrangling that could go on for days or even weeks.

Jonathan prowled the decks as the clock wound through one day, and then another, frustrated by the delays. He was not tempted to try and force Montgomery's hand and leave, nor to try and scour the streets for candidates himself, but a restless energy drove him to pace the airship. Cramped confines usually bothered him little, but for once he felt hemmed in by the walls of the ship. He kept returning to the observation room, looking to the east where sunlight lay.

Finally, Montgomery secured the last few crew and the departure whistle sounded. The *Endeavor* drifted away from the mooring towers and the engines lit, driving it along the side of the plateau and away from the lights of civilization. Soon enough it was only the *Endeavor's* powerful spotlights that showed anything at all.

"That's dark," Eleanor said, looking out the big glass windows of the observation room and puffing a cigarette through a long-handled holder. The windows might well have been black walls, but for the faint circles where the *Endeavor's* illumination showed the turgid green waters of Khorus River. There weren't even any sheltershrooms to dot the landscape.

“That is the nature of the world,” Antomine observed. “It is only the light of civilization that renders it habitable. The rest is dark savagery, and things better left untouched.”

“The Inquisition is so dramatic,” Eleanor said. “It just doesn’t have light. You’ve been out there,” she said, pointing her cigarette holder at Jonathan. “So, the fractured were creepy and all, but is it all like that?”

“To some extent or another,” Jonathan said, shaking his head at her. “There are some lone islands of wonder, but most of it is not fit for man. My maps are not just for going from here to there and without some places to anchor and resupply we would have a very limited range.”

“Then how’d you make it back on foot?” Eleanor asked, gesturing at the void beyond the window. “If it’s that hard by airship, it ought to be impossible by yourself.”

“Carefully,” Jonathan replied dryly. “I would not advise it. Mostly, I earned my keep at some of the trading caravans out there — ones that *aren’t* human, and it was only thanks to my long experience that I was able to remain in their good graces.” He had spent long stretches on edge, choosing every word with care, and rendering it into a tongue that was painful for the human throat.

“I guess I’m surprised there aren’t any humans out there,” Eleanor said, smoke wisping from her cigarette as she waved it in emphasis.

“There used to be, but with the trains and airships for travel all those little out-of-the-way places are harder to sustain,” Jonathan waved it aside. “You wouldn’t want to try camping in the wilderness anyway, not when you have a cabin with light and heat and a proper kitchen. Believe me, it is uncomfortable.”

“It might be an enjoyable diversion for a day or so,” Antomine said, half-disagreeing. “But for months? I prefer the airship.”

“Bah,” Eleanor said, taking a puff of her cigarette and looking away from the dark windows. “Oh well. Anyone for a game of cards?”

Jonathan found little interest in the games Eleanor and Antomine put on, indulging them only occasionally and finding himself compulsively drawn back to his notes. He’d spent hours of time committing his travels to memory, drawing connections between hints and writings and fragments of stories from lost ruins. Yet he still found himself chewing over some of the more esoteric fragments, the records that defied understanding.

That restlessness was banished when finally, after a full week of following the water, the sharp corners and rounded domes of Tor Ilek loomed suddenly in the *Endeavor’s* lights. The ancient, crumbling ruin squatted over the Khorus River, the green waters passing under innumerable rotted bridges and around tumbled arches. The deathly city pulled something vital from the river, leeching color with every mile until it came out pale and ghostly white at the other end. Rust streaked the dark stone where metal skeletons of long-demolished towers and spires curled ghoulishly up from the ruined city.

“Pardon me,” Jonathan said, excusing himself from the observation room where his fellow travelers looked down at the city’s corpse through the great glass windows. “I need to show Montgomery where to tether.”

“We’re going down there?” Eleanor said, raising her eyebrows. “It looks incredible, don’t get me wrong, but what could be intact?”

“Yes, we’re going down there,” Jonathan told her, and looked from her to Antomine. “Bring your guns. It’s dangerous, but you should probably come along.”

“I wouldn’t miss it!” Eleanor said, hopping to her feet.

“It does sound interesting,” Antomine agreed, laying his cards down on the table.

Jonathan left them and descended to the bridge, waiting to be invited in and walking to the front. Spotlights played as one of the bridge crew adjusted them, sending the circles of illumination left and right. Occasionally shapes moved under the light, darting this way and that back into the darkness, but Jonathan focused on the landmarks of Tor Ileek, lips pressed tight as he waited to see some familiar shape.

“There!” He pointed to one particular knurled dome, where broken iron buttresses protruded like twisted and rotted teeth. “Tether to the southern spikes, we have a way in there.”

“Got it,” Montgomery said, and gave the orders. The ship shook and swayed as the engines brought it around, pushing against the wind and inertia to move onto a new heading. The city rose up to meet them as the envelope compressed and the ship dropped. Jonathan braced himself with his cane, the airmen keeping their feet with the ease of long experience while they drew near a hook-like metal remnant protruding from the twisted and corrupted stone of the dome.

The spotlights focused on the hook, two airmen in flight suits emerging into view carrying the initial tethers as they dropped down to the metal projection. They quickly lashed the chains into place and then returned to the ship for the sturdier, but more unwieldy sets to keep the ship anchored in anything other than a gentle breeze. Jonathan had eyes for more than just the anchor chain, and suddenly pointed at some movement in the shadows at the edge of the spotlights.

“Captain, the guns there if you would.”

“Aye, I see it,” Montgomery said in a hard voice, and snapped a few more orders. A moment later, the forward zint-cannons fired, flares of deadly light that sent uncertain forms scattering and fleeing away from the metal spine. The stone itself shrugged off the artillery, no more affected by zint than it would have been by water or air. Even if it looked to be on the verge of falling apart, the city might well outlast Beacon.

“We will need seven or eight men with sword and guns, just to be safe,” Jonathan said as the tethers took the slack and airmen started fixing the descent lines in place. “Most things here won’t venture into the light, but I suggest keeping someone on the cannon just to be certain nothing cuts our tethers.”

“Be something rather large to cut through six inches of steel chain, but I take your point,” Montgomery said. “How long do you expect this excursion to take?”

“Several hours, but no more than that,” Jonathan replied, turning toward the door. “There’s no people here, just things. All we need do is reach a particular chamber and return.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Montgomery said, and Jonathan departed to make his own preparations. He needed weapons of a different kind than a zint gun to deal with what was inside, but in truth his fellow passengers would fill in for a number of methods he had used in the past. Still, he needed to pack several items into a case — a hooded lantern, several lengths of heavy gauge wire, and pliers and clamps to work the latter.

Not wishing to be an actual fool, he made sure to arm himself appropriately, cane-sword cleaned and polished and a zint-rifle over one shoulder. He met the rest of the excursion on the bottom deck, where the descent line had been rigged. Eleanor had both of her maids, Marie having recovered sufficiently thanks to certain medications retrieved in Autochthon Reach, and Antomine’s guards stood at his back. The airmen that Montgomery had assigned to guard him all had rifles and belt lanterns, all of them coarse and brawny and showing the weight of many years in the air.

Down they went, one by one, taking the descent line as it hummed through the pulleys. Jonathan gripped onto one of the rings with one hand, his foot wedged in another, watching the metal and dark stone when it was his turn and stepping off onto the uneven surface of the dome. He adjusted his suit as he waited for the rest of the party, glad for the heavy coat in the cold air coming off the river, and turned his eye toward the railing only faintly visible outside the circle of the *Endeavor*’s spotlights.

“John and James can lead the way,” Antomine said, volunteering his guards, and Jonathan pointed the way with his cane.

“There’s a railing over there; we’re going to follow it to the right until we reach stairs. Once we’re down into the dome itself, be alert for anything that might be living there.” Jonathan surveyed the party with narrowed eyes. “The light should scare most of it off, but don’t be afraid to use your weapons.” He waved his cane, and the armored guards made their way forward. Everyone followed after, cautious of their footing on the sloped dome.

The stairs were not proportioned for human feet, oddly long and slanted, worn with parallel grooves of such a shape as to imply ages of strange traffic. The narrow stairwell led downward to a door so seamlessly flush with its surroundings as to appear to be one piece, with only a bent protruding handle to indicate its existence. John — or perhaps it was James — reached out to take the handle and pulled.

Without a sound, a segment of weathered and pitted stone emerged from the equally weathered and pitted surroundings, sliding out and then to the side on clever hidden mechanisms. Jonathan had left the door open at the end of his last visit, and either another mechanism or, more disturbing, some person had closed it. Belt-lanterns and head-lamps showed more staircase, winding down the interior wall of the ancient dome.

They descended in silence, the only sound that of boots on stone, apertures cut into the stairwell momentarily allowing illumination into long-deserted halls and rooms. There was no gleam of forgotten treasure, for it had been picked over by many explorers before them — by the time Jonathan had first encountered Tor Ilek, it had been practically empty. At least, those places that could be easily found by earlier explorers.

A skittering sound came from ahead, and James — or perhaps it was John — aimed and fired his zint rifle. The skittering turned into a disturbingly human-like scream, and the party came to a

stop as lights played over the corpse of some long-limbed and long-jawed thing, a large-eyed creature half the size of a man. It smelled like rust, a metallic stink that made some people cover their noses as they all sidled past the holed and bleeding body in the stairwell.

“The hell is that?” Eleanor muttered, aiming her question anywhere and everywhere.

“There are innumerable types of creatures that dwell in the dark,” Antomine answered. “Particularly in places like this. Why do you think all our cities have walls?”

“Yeah, I get it,” Eleanor said, stepping wide to avoid the pooling blood. Jonathan followed suit, keeping his eyes and ears alert for any more things that might be stalking them, from any direction. Below the bare stone and ancient metal there were enormous caverns where the Khorus River pooled and gave rise to a thousand forms of hostile life, any of which might be prowling the city.

They reached the base of the stairs without further incident, lights revealing a great empty expanse. Jonathan reached into his satchel for his own lantern, igniting the gas cannister inside and moving to the front of the party. The light spilled out, lost in the brighter glare of zint — save for one area.

In a particularly eye-twisting phenomenon, the lamp illuminated a section of floor that lay within the circle cast by their ordinary lights but was somehow extra. Anyone looking could trace a whole and perfect circle at the perimeter of their vision, yet at the same time there was something more there, squeezed into that whole. The sight drew shouts and muttered comments from the airmen.

“How?” Antomine demanded.

“The builders of Tor Ilek measured with a circle with more than three hundred sixty degrees,” Jonathan explained. “Any ordinary light, even zint-light, can only illuminate an ordinary sphere. It takes a specific construction to reveal what lies in the extra space.” He waved in the direction that hadn’t seemed to exist before. “We go this way.”

Some of the airmen might have balked if Jonathan hadn’t gone first, cane tapping against the stone, a touchstone of familiar sound. Everyone hurried after so they could keep close to the light. There was nothing special about the space, despite it being impossible by human reckoning, but it made for a strange and isolated journey as the small lantern failed to reach the far wall.

A sudden scream interrupted them, and everyone turned to see one of the airmen being dragged backward out of the light by something enormous. Antomine was the fastest to react, his pistol thrumming as rapid-fire zint shots peppered the dark silhouette of the long-clawed beast, followed shortly by a fusillade from everyone else. Jonathan winced, considering it a miracle if any of the hastily aimed shots missed the poor airman they were trying to save, but unlimbered his own rifle to aim at the gormless eyes of the amorphous shadow that had wrapped itself around the man’s ankles.

By some stroke of fate, the barrage of zint drove the thing off, the creature taking its uncertain self off back into the darkness and leaving the airman merely with torn and bleeding shins. Jonathan waited for their escort to retrieve the man, moving cautiously in the extra space revealed by the lantern. The airman stood up, limping but relatively unharmed, and Antomine

motioned for one of his guards to take the rear. Creatures could come at them from any direction — especially the ones they were still uncertain of, those extra degrees of a circle that no man could have created.

Though they were not attacked again, the sounds of something large scraping against the stone and unsettling animal whines and whimpers from unlit corners of the room kept them on edge during the trek across several hundred feet of bare stone. Whatever furnishings or decorations the dome had once housed were long gone, and it was only once the door came into sight that there was any embellishment whatsoever. A series of intricate carvings crawled over an archway that led deeper into the city, characters in a language so long dead nobody had ever been able to translate them.

“What’s that sound?” Someone asked, as a slow, steady rumble became audible, almost more felt than heard.

“One of the mechanisms that still works,” Jonathan replied, shuttering the lantern as they passed through the archway, to the relief of everyone’s eyes. “Don’t touch anything you see moving. It’s not any more dangerous than normal industrial machinery, but I assure you that is dangerous enough.”

Soon, moving gears and reciprocating rods of unknown purpose became visible through rotted gratings in the sides of a series of small chambers. They didn’t move smoothly, jerking and shuddering, but were surprisingly quiet for all that. Jonathan ignored it all, having satisfied his curiosity long ago, and strode on through.

Small things skittered out of the encroaching light as they passed into the final chamber, where Jonathan stopped and gestured at a large door. A series of metal circles were embedded in the stone there, each one emblazoned with a series of symbols. They weren’t moving at the moment, but they *did* move, he knew, and several of those symbols were hidden inside the extra degrees the builders used. Some arcane calculus drove the mechanism, the resulting geometry creating an ever-shifting lock. Normally it took days or weeks of guesswork, puzzling over half-translated symbols to understand whatever alien logic was at play, to open it.

“If you could, Eleanor,” he said. “It opens from the inside easily enough.”

“Oh, I see why you brought me now,” she said with a laugh, and walked forward, fading out of sight as she approached the door. Everyone else crowded in, Antomine’s guards facing outward toward where they’d been to fend off any roaming monsters. Yet while they waited for Eleanor, nothing came from the ancient passages but the steady rumble of machinery and the occasional scuff of claws on stone, somewhere out of sight. For several long minutes nothing happened, then the door slid out of its socket in the wall, shifting noiselessly to the side to reveal Eleanor on the other side, blinking in the zint-light that showed the passage beyond.

“Thank you,” Jonathan said, not remarking on whatever strange secrets she knew in order to walk through a locked door. “We’re nearly there, ladies and gentlemen. Just one more stretch and we’ll have something interesting to look at.”

“This isn’t interesting to you?” Antomine asked mildly, looking around at weathered stone of the ancient city.

“It is not,” Jonathan said. The city’s only purpose was to serve as a waypoint to his true goal, and everything else was mere distraction. The others had less pointed interests however, and so he dredged up older memories of the place to explain his thoughts from then. “Frustrating, perhaps — we have yet to understand exactly why and how this was made, as we don’t really know what’s on the other end. We will be taking a detour from where this leads, to a place whose proper access has long since vanished.” He waved it away, gesturing with his cane as they made their way through the corridor. “There is no telling, save for what we can use it for now.”

“I’m wondering *how* this ancient ruin is supposed to tell you something you don’t already know, considering you’ve been here before,” Eleanor said, after Sarah prodded her with an elbow.

“Sadly, I lost a number of notes and devices on my way back to civilization,” Jonathan replied, voice echoing from the flat stone walls. “Some things just can’t be reconstructed from memory, and what I can gain here will be necessary to secure a safe harbor later on. Just one special lantern is not enough to guide an entire ship.

“There are also still relics there that have not yet been pilfered,” he added, after looking around at the airmen who were accompanying them and seeing most of them were not transported with joy over the idea of needing Jonathan’s esoteric navigational tools. That certainly made them more interested, which was all to the good as he did not want to deal with a rebellious crew. He was already paying them, but the incentive of more always distracted people from their worries.

“Ones I will make sure are safe, of course,” Antomine said, tamping down some of the excitement. Jonathan didn’t mind, for it transferred the crew’s displeasure from him to Antomine. He wouldn’t lose any sleep over that.

The straight, flat passage was abruptly severed partway along, as if some massive hand had scooped out a section of the earth, leaving sheared walls and broken ceiling. Jonathan held up his hand to call a halt as they reached the broken section, their lamps revealing a deep pit with mangled shards of stone. The sound and smell of the river came to them from the ruptured walls, and Jonathan pointed toward the breach.

“Be very wary from here on. Beasts tend to come from the river,” he informed them, and then led them to one side, where the damage had gouged a narrow ravine and connected pieces of underground architecture. He knew the path now, but his father’s notes had spoken of months of harrowing exploration just to plumb the limits of what could be found in the ruins — and other doors that couldn’t be opened, no matter what methods were used.

They had made it perhaps thirty feet past the broken intersection before the patter of many feet came from behind. A rush of small, rodent-like forms issued forth from the cracks and crevices behind them, and men shouted in surprise and alarm as they met the horde. Zint weapons sounded, but the things were so small that, as many shots landed from the rifles, still more missed. Jonathan unsheathed his sword and lunged forward, spitting one of the dark-furred, many-legged pests and flicking it back toward the mass. Nonetheless, a good many swarmed up uniforms or sank their teeth into boots.

Eleanor and her maids made the most difference, effortlessly spitting the things on their pointed daggers, even when the pests in question had latched onto fabric or flesh. Yells and screams filled the air as needle-sharp teeth found limbs, and Jonathan found himself exerting real effort

to impale or bisect the things before they gained a purchase on his own suit. Antomine and his guards made a good showing of themselves, batons pulverizing bodies as Antomine picked targets with his pistol. The pests shied away from actually touching Antomine, providing a clear circle of safety as the young man moved to protect the airmen.

As soon as it started, it was over, the remnants of the swarm fleeing back into the cracks and leaving behind a score or so of bodies as well as a number of puncture wounds and torn uniforms. Jonathan didn't see anyone in dire need of medical attention, but such wounds could easily accumulate — and they still had to return to the surface. He pressed his lips together and motioned them onward.

“Once we reach our destination we will have some time to rest and recover,” he said, keeping his cane-sword unsheathed as he advanced along the defile. Remnant protrusions of rotted stone loomed suddenly from overhead, corpse-brittle fingers that threatened to descend on them with the slightest provocation. The plaintive sigh of the river grew louder, a continuous exhalation of cold breath squeezing through innumerable fissures in the walls of the ravine.

When they broke out into a new chamber it was with a stark suddenness, a guillotine sharp edge where it punctured the ruined chamber. Lights revealed that to one side was a crumbled expanse, leading down to the faint phosphorescent glints of the river far below, while to the other was a still-intact monolith standing proud despite the dust and rubble that surrounded it. Jonathan broke the close huddle of their party to stride over to the monolith, the odd angles of its construction coffin-like and imposing.

“We can set up a defense here,” Jonathan said, bringing out his lantern again. The extra degrees of the monolith unfolded, revealing a passageway in a direction no mortal architecture would dare take. They all hurried through, still discomfited by the effect, and emerged into a long hall with a too-high ceiling and too-slanted walls. Rooms slanted off at intervals, the doorways gaping and hollow. At Antomine's direction, James and John took station at the entrance to defend against any creatures who could navigate the extra space and were hostile enough to assault them.

“Be wary, there might be things nesting here,” Jonathan warned. “It was empty the last time I came, but there is no sense in taking risks. However, many of these rooms still have fragments of the past in them — now is the only time you may have to take what can be carried. This shouldn't take more than an hour or so.”

“Stay in pairs,” one of the airmen said, and the crew filtered out, accompanied by Eleanor and her maids, while Jonathan strode along the hall to the far end. In its own alcove was a pedestal upon which was a mechanism with a series of interlocking rings, some of which bore symbols like those which appeared on Jonathan's map. He set his lantern down there, exposing the circles in their full, inhuman fashion, and brought out the lengths of wire to begin his work.

It was nothing more complex than using the mechanism as a guide to wrap his wire, creating the alien and excess circles for himself, each wire going into an armature to slowly but surely assemble a sort of compass. The strange and profane geometries between the rings and their symbols revealed, in their proper place, things that even the Lens of Fools could not. Jonathan had no idea how his father had discovered that — or if he had, and wasn't just conveying the work of older, even more storied explorers.

Despite merely copying the work of ages past, it took time and focus, his hands not wanting to take the angles and distances that were required. Each completed ring went into a slidable armature, one locking into another, often in ways that defied human comprehension. Before, he had managed it only with long rests and brute effort; now, he had the sunlight burning inside him to drive his fingers and his mind.

Around him, people went in and out of the doors. Some of them didn't open, and Eleanor was called upon to try and breach the stubborn defenses, while Antomine simply stood and watched Jonathan work. He had no interest in the trinkets people brought back — statues of grotesque, inhuman figures, or cunningly worked rings and spirals of dark gems and tarnished gold. His previous expedition had taken much of it, but the large sprawl of what seemed to have been living quarters or offices had so much that even a dozen greedy men couldn't transport all of it.

It was a small fortune to the right market, and while Jonathan suspected nothing was truly dangerous, everyone duly paraded their finds past Antomine for inspection. Despite his doubts, Jonathan respected the danger, and it would be a severe inconvenience for some malevolent artifact to disable or destroy the *Endeavor* before he had reached his destination. The lucre was packaged into cloth sacks that had no doubt been brought along for that very purpose, and by the time Jonathan finished constructing his device, those sacks made a fairly sizeable pile.

With the completion of the mechanism, with its rings and armatures, the surroundings seemed to stretch and relax both at once. He had no understanding of the true secrets of the circles or the device he copied, save that it carried some of the impossible geometry with it and pointed in certain directions. Its influence in the ruins was far more vague, and there seemed to be new doorways visible in the long hall, appearing from corners that hadn't previously existed. That only gave the airmen more to pilfer, and several parties went back down the hallway to retrieve what they could.

Jonathan waited impatiently, ready to leave but understanding that some consideration had to be given to the crew's cupidity. Eleanor and Antomine argued over some detail of the loot, but were interrupted by one of the airman dashing back at speed and towing his companion, who was babbling incomprehensibly. Somewhere not too far away a long, low noise came, vibrating through the decrepit stone underfoot and making metal treasure clink. A hot breeze washed over them, overpowering the constant sigh of the river. Everyone looked to Jonathan, but he only had one thing to tell them.

“Flee.”