Tea with the Dead

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Tea with the Dead

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Summary

A disastrous hangover is the least of Cassandra Blythe’s problems.
When a routine assignment from Gringotts sends the sharp-witted, occasionally reckless curse-breaker to Cairo, she expects ancient magic, troublesome paperwork, and perhaps a little adventure. What she finds is far more complicated: a resurrected Egyptian lord, a remarkably opinionated cat, secrets buried beneath centuries of sand, and a curse that refuses to remain buried.

As old powers awaken and the boundary between the living and the dead begins to blur, Cassandra must discover that some mysteries are not meant to be solved by simply breaking the curse. Sometimes, the greatest danger lies in what happens after the seal is broken.

Chapter 1: The Curse-Breaker's Hangover

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The Curse-Breaker’s Hangover

Cassandra Blythe woke to the smell of ink and burnt sugar and the steady, tutting scrape of a self-wetting quill correcting her handwriting.

She was face-down on a report. The parchment had the texture of a stale scone pressed to her cheek, and when she peeled herself off it a crisp reverse of her freckles stayed behind in sepia. A ledger hovered at the edge of the desk like an offended relative, its gilt spine glimmering in the weak winter sun that slanted through the hex-cleaned window. Every time the ledger turned a page it did so with a sigh.

“Good morning to you as well,” Cassandra croaked. The sound came out as sandpaper dragged over a violin string. She swallowed. The taste in her mouth suggested she’d drunk something with the personality of varnish.

She sat up too fast. The room took the opportunity to pivot ninety degrees then back again; somewhere to her left, a cabinet of cursed oddments rattled in sympathy. Her head rang with a steady, dignified throb - as though a small but determined choir had taken up residence behind her eyes and was practicing a dirge.

She lifted her hand. Her fingers were ink-blotted and faintly sparking. That would be the hangover charm. She’d tried it at two in the morning, peering owlishly at her reflection in a teacup and muttering, “Just a minor charm to take the edge off, Blythe.” Now every time she inhaled too sharply, a blue pinprick fizzed from the cuticle of her ring finger and drifted off like a lazy firefly. Her wand lay across the report like an accusation.

The upper floors of Gringotts’ Curse Division were awakening around her. She could feel the building shrug itself into sentience the way one felt a train lean into a curve: enchantments tightened, brass conduits hummed, seals whispered open as night wards slipped back. Outside, London’s fog pressed its face to the glass like a curious ghost. Inside, the great hall beyond her cubicle stretched in polished marble and murmuring scrollwork, all the columns carved with goblin script that moved when no one watched it, telling numbers to behave.

“Miss Blythe,” said a quill, sternly. It hovered below the ceiling, attached to a board by a ribbon of red charmlight, and it had the schoolmistress voice of an artifact that knew exactly how important its minutes would look in the archive. “You are forty-three minutes late to the morning’s timelog.”

“Put down ‘temporal discrepancy due to experimental charmwork,’” Cassandra said. She tried to smile. Her lips felt like an uncooperative envelope.

“Dishonesty noted,” the quill replied, and returned to scribbling.

She looked down at the report that had served as her pillow. Title, in her own tidy hand: AFTER-ACTION NOTES, BANK HALL FIVE, MR VORST'S CURSED GOBLET. Below that, a paragraph that began promisingly with "The goblet appears to dislike compliments," and degenerated into a line of ink where her pen had wandered as sleep took her. A faint crescent of drool gleamed in the margin. She blotted it with professional indifference.

Someone had left a cup of water on her desk - no, not water; it glittered in the light with a stubborn opacity that meant anti-hex infusion. She sniffed it: rosemary, fennel, a reprimand. The Curse Division's apothecary was merciless and thoughtful. Cassandra drank. The liquid was bitter enough to rewrite her childhood. Her stomach complained. She set the cup down and breathed carefully.

"Don't vomit on the seal," she told herself. The seal - an inset of old bronze embossed with the goblin crest - was directly beneath her chair. Vomiting on it would be a career decision.

Her desk looked as though a mermaid had tried to build a nest in it. Trinkets from assignments - broken curse snares, a fossilized beetle with runes etched into its shell, a tiny glass hourglass filled with smoke - clustered in a sleepy little shrine to poor impulse control. A framed parchment on the wall read RAVENCLAW - ALUMNA OF DISTINCTION and then, smaller, someone had penciled in: of dubious distinction; please return library books.

A memo envelope fluttered down onto her head like a very soft, very officious moth. She plucked it free. It had Araminta Voss's scent on it: perfume and well-managed dread. Cassandra set it aside without opening it. Not yet. Not while her skull had the structural integrity of a puff pastry.

She stood, carefully, and the room stood with her. She smoothed her robes. The hem had a scorch mark shaped like a map of Wales. She tugged the lapels straight, attempted a bun with the loose copper coils of her hair, failed, and accepted that the curls would do what curls did: reject authority.

Beyond her cubicle's waist-high partitions, the department's life was in full, irritated swing. Quills clacked. Ledgers negotiated with one another in low, offended murmurs. An apprentice was attempting to convince a hexed kettle to produce anything other than steam that smelled of regret. In the glass-fronted laboratory, two curse-breakers in thick leather gloves were arguing with a wardrobe that refused to stop being full of winter.

Cassandra shuffled out into the main aisle, past a row of desks where senior curse-breakers had learned to domesticate chaos with labels. At Mr. Pritchard's station, a set of silver shears snipped hair from the air and arranged it in melancholy patterns. "New trend," he told her without looking up. "Invisible wigs. Don't ask."

"Never would," Cassandra said. A blue spark popped from her fingertip. Mr. Pritchard's shears flinched.

She angled toward the break nook. Calling it a break room would have suggested mercy. This was a nook - the size of a broom closet, because it used to be a broom closet - and held a crooked kettle, a jar of tea that smelled convincingly like tea, and a tin of goblin biscuits that

broke the spirits of lesser mortals. The wall clock above it ran on Ministry time, which meant it was always a few minutes late and morally superior about it.

“Please,” Cassandra told the kettle. “For once in your life.” She filled it from the charm-fed tap - water rang like a small bell as it poured - and set it on its stand. The kettle juddered, wheezed, and began to boil with a noise like polite applause. Tea would do what charms could not: file the edges off the world until it fit in her hands again.

A familiar giggle sounded at her elbow. The Division’s least beloved mascot, a paper imp made of shredded memos, climbed onto the counter and tried to scale the biscuit tin. It gave her a conspiratorial look with its ink-blot eyes.

“Traitor,” Cassandra told it. “I know you spy for Accounts.”

The imp showed her a paragraph about annual leave and lost its footing. It crumpled to the floor, then sprang back up, by nature incapable of maiming itself for more than a sentence.

The kettle clicked. Cassandra poured. The smell of black tea rose and walked gentle fingers up the back of her neck. She closed her eyes for a moment and let her heartbeat learn the rhythm of warmth. She could almost pretend she’d meant to sleep here, that the heap of reports was a very responsible pillow, that she was a consummate professional who occasionally did unwise things with cursed goblets for the sake of research.

A tiny crackle sounded. She opened her eyes. On the surface of the tea a rune was forming - nothing dramatic, only a hair-thin shimmer, an arrangement of lines like a thought that hadn’t decided to be a thought yet. It flickered. Cassandra frowned, leaned in, and the rune erased itself into a ring of steam.

“Right,” she said softly. “We’re doing foreshadowing now, are we?”

She carried the cup back to her desk and set it down very carefully, as if it were an expensive egg. She prodded the memo envelope with one cautious finger. It did not explode, unravel, or quote policy at her. She slit it open with the edge of a brass letter opener shaped like a sleeping dragon and drew out a single sheet.

MISS BLYTHE, it read in a hand so precise it might have been engraved on snow. KINDLY PRESENT YOURSELF IN MY OFFICE AT ONCE. - A.V.

There was no “please.” Araminta never used “please” when a command would do.

Cassandra turned the envelope over. A faint perfume rose - white lilies over something like steel. The paper itself had been charmed to resist sweating; that was pure Araminta. No human lapse allowed to stain the record.

She glanced at the clock. The clock glanced back, disapprovingly. She took a breath. A sprinkle of blue sparks fizzed from her fingertips, drifted up like curious fireflies, and died when they touched the cold marble air above her head. She thought briefly of last night, of Mr Vorst’s party in the chandeliered vault, of the goblin client whose gold had tried to liquefy their compliments. She remembered (oh God) telling him that his goblet had the aesthetic

sense of a boiled potato. The laughter, her laughter, had been too loud. Araminta's face had been its usual arrangement of ice and assessment.

"Educational," she'd said to Tamsin on the way out, her arm hooked in her colleague's. "We've learned that goblets can be vain and I can be an idiot."

"You already knew the second part," Tamsin had said, and kissed her on the cheek and vanished into a swarm of memos.

She took another sip of tea. It continued to behave like tea and not like destiny. She rubbed at the ink shadow her cheek had left on the report; it smeared into an unfortunate bruise of evidence. She dipped her quill, added a line to the document - The goblet also dislikes the suggestion it might be an urn - and signed her initials with a flourish that was only slightly shaky.

"Blythe," said a voice like a polished bell. "Charming of you to be awake."

Cassandra didn't startle. She permitted herself only a small, internal flinch - like a curtsey performed for the sake of survival - then turned.

Araminta Voss stood at the entrance to Cassandra's cubicle as if the walls had been designed to frame her. She wore a suit the color of storm glass and gloves so immaculate they looked theoretical. A silver pince-nez perched on her nose, unnecessary and devastating. Her hair had been persuaded into an updo that could have served, in wartime, as fortification.

"Director," Cassandra said, and set her teacup down. She folded her hands on the desk, a picture of competence. A blue spark betrayed her with a festive pop between her knuckles.

Araminta's gaze dipped to the spark, then back up to Cassandra's face, without changing expression. "Walk with me," she said. "Bring your… report."

Cassandra slid the parchment into a folder, took up her wand, which hummed in her palm like an impatient bee, and followed. As she stepped out, the ledger at the corner of her desk turned a page and sighed again, quieter this time, as if resigned to the comedy of it.

The hall beyond stretched away in a cool river of marble, columns rising like petrified trees. The air smelled faintly of copper and old ink. Ghosts of numbers drifted near the ceiling, arranging themselves into satisfied sums. Somewhere a hexed typewriter hit a tantrum and had to be shushed. Cassandra's boots clicked, a neat metronome to the accelerating conversation inside her head.

Egypt, she thought, for no reason she could name. The thought arrived like a postcard thrown through a window. Heat, dust, a horizon with too much sky. She shook it off.

Araminta didn't look back. She spoke as they walked, each word placed just so, as though she were laying down stepping stones over a river. "I have an assignment for you," she said. "It will be… clarifying."

Cassandra kept her eyes on the Director’s shoulders, straight as a blade. The hangover choir inside her struck a new chord, anticipatory and solemn. She took one last swallow from her cup, letting the tea’s warmth root her to herself. The steam rose in a brief, curling script - nonsense, nothing - then vanished.

“At once, Director,” she said.

They passed beneath an arch where goblin script spilled in slow, patient loops. The words rearranged themselves as Cassandra went under them, just enough for a whisper no one else heard.

The dead have opinions.

She blinked. When she looked up again the letters were arithmetic.

Cassandra smiled, very slightly, as one might smile at a private joke or a prophecy. She tucked the smile away, along with her throbbing head and her jangling curiosity, and walked into Araminta’s office.

Araminta Voss’s office had been designed to prove that glass could be sharper than steel.

Cassandra stepped over the threshold and felt the hush fold around her like a bell jar. The ambient din of the Curse Division - shouting kettles, tantruming ledgers, colleagues negotiating with animate stationery - cut off at the door. Inside, sound behaved. The room was long and high, a pale box of morning light and frost-cool order. Three walls were panes of charmed glass veined with silvery runes; the fourth was floor-to-ceiling shelves of immaculate files, their spines aligned with a zeal that bordered on spiritual practice. Every file had a ribbon - silver, charcoal, bone-white - and each ribbon lay at exactly the same angle, as though an invisible protractor enforced compliance.

Araminta’s desk was a monolith of black stone polished to the point of self-regard. A thin vase of lilies sat at the far corner - white, unscented, the kind that suggested funerals and favorable verdicts. A clock made of nested rings ticked in slow, luxurious increments; the smallest ring took a minute to complete, the largest took a year, and all of them whispered the same message: patience is power.

Araminta herself stood at the window with her back to Cassandra, gazing out over London as if considering whether to forgive it. Fog lifted from the slate rooftops, the dome of St Paul’s was a muted pearl, and the curve of the river was a slash of pewter. In the glass Cassandra could see the Director’s reflection: spine straight as a spear, hair wound into a perfect torque, the precise fall of her storm-glass jacket. A silver pince-nez caught a glint of daylight and forged it into judgment.

“Close the door,” Araminta said. She did not raise her voice. She never needed to.

Cassandra did as instructed. The door clicked shut with a subdued, expensive finality. She resisted the urge to smooth her curls again, to check her ink-smeared cheek in a mirror that wasn’t there. Her hangover had retreated in the presence of such disciplined chill; even the choir behind her eyes had taken one look at the lilies and hushed.

“Director,” she said, and managed something almost like a bow without falling over.

Araminta half-turned, enough to let Cassandra know that eyes of a pale, polished gray had taken her measure in a glance and found her made of ink blots and improvisation. “Miss Blythe.” The syllables were crisp enough to cut fondant. “Sit.”

The chair opposite the desk had arms so narrow you felt unqualified to rest against them. Cassandra settled, folder balanced on her knees, teacup cradled in both hands like a talisman. The stone desktop reflected her face in a shallow, accusing way. She set the cup down - no rings, please, not here - and folded her fingers together. A blue spark danced once between her knuckles and died with a guilty pop.

Araminta returned to her desk and stood rather than sat, palms laid lightly on the stone. A sheaf of parchment awaited within reach, its edges squared, its seal unbroken. The air smelled faintly of paper that had never known human warmth.

“I would ask how you are,” Araminta said, “but the answer is written on you.” Her gaze paused at the corner of Cassandra’s mouth, where a betraying shadow of ink lingered. “Last night’s… festivities. Educational?”

“A robust exchange of ideas between goblet and guests,” Cassandra said. “We learned about dignity and the dangers of flattery.”

“Flattery,” Araminta repeated, as if sampling a foreign confection. “That would be the moment, I believe, when you informed Mr Vorst that his ancestral heirloom had ‘the aesthetic sense of a boiled potato.’”

“Context is everything,” Cassandra said lightly. “The goblet had just tried to drink the compliments being paid to it. Which is rude, even by goblin standards.”

“And yet,” Araminta murmured, “the goblin in question signs our cheques.”

“Only the unflattering ones.”

Araminta’s mouth did not move, but somehow the room registered disapproval. The nested rings in the clock made a sound like an eye blink. “I do not object to your wit, Miss Blythe, provided it does not cost the Bank money. And I do not object to your skill, provided it is accompanied by… discretion.”

Cassandra thought of the rune that had briefly combed her tea into a secret, of the letters that had whispered to her in the archway. “I can be discreet,” she said. “I’m discreet all the time. I’m doing it now.”

“You are incapable of doing anything silently,” Araminta said. “Even your thoughts rustle.” She lifted the top parchment between careful fingers. The seal was goblin-wrought - an embossed crest with a thin vein of red light running through it like a live wire. “Nevertheless, your name has appeared where it might be of use.”

Cassandra’s heart, which had been trying to be a polite guest in her chest, stood up. “Use, Director?”

“A routine offsite advisement,” Araminta said. “The Cairo branch has requested assistance with a clearance in the Valley of Kings - mundane from the Bank’s perspective, but complicated by the… sensitivities of local law.”

Cassandra kept her face unhelpfully attached to her skull. Inside, her imagination threw open a window and let in heat. Cairo. A horizon with too much sky. The word settled into her blood the way tea settled into a cup. “A clearance.”

“Yes,” Araminta said, and with her that one syllable could mean anything from a harmless broom cupboard to a cavern full of snakes. “A sealed site that requires decanting of residual protections before inventory. You will liaise with our goblin associates on site. There will be forms.”

“Forms,” Cassandra said, as neutrally as she could manage.

“You will fill them,” Araminta said, as if awarding a medal. “You will endorse the inventory as conducted. You will not improvise.”

Cassandra pinched a smile into being. “I never improvise. I inflect.”

“The last time you ‘inflected’ in fieldwork,” Araminta said, “we received a crate of angry moths that ate only adjectives.”

“That was a translation issue,” Cassandra said. “They were… editorially inclined.”

“Mm.” Araminta placed the sealed parchment atop the desk, precisely equidistant from the vase and the edge. “This assignment will be an opportunity for you to demonstrate that you can work within a structure larger than yourself.”

“How large are we talking?” Cassandra asked. “Pyramid? Ministry? Cosmos?”

“Do not be flippant; it wastes everyone’s time.” The Director’s gaze was patient, which was never a good sign. “I am aware of your… appetites.”

Cassandra fought the urge to laugh. It would come out too high and turn at once into an apology. “For tea?”

“For knowledge.” Araminta allowed the faintest tilt of her head, a gesture that in other people would have been a shrug. “For puzzles. For the thrill of finding what others have left hidden. Curiosity in a curse-breaker is inevitable. It is also combustible.”

“I’ve made a note,” Cassandra said. “No open flames.”

“Your note-taking is not in question,” Araminta said. “Your judgment is. You are intelligent, Miss Blythe, sometimes to the point of inconvenience. Intelligence invites attention; attention invites… complications.”

A cool, alkaline awareness ghosted down Cassandra’s spine. There was something in the Director’s diction - an extra polish on the word attention - that made it sound like a trap being oiled. She chose care. “So the Cairo assignment is a test.”

“It is an assignment,” Araminta said. “What you make of it is none of my concern until it is.”

“I do enjoy clarity,” Cassandra murmured. “Almost as much as ambiguity.”

Araminta’s mouth suggested, very nearly, a line that might once have been amused. “You will present at the International Port Authority in four hours. Your passage has been arranged on a Ministry-certified carpet ferry. You will carry this - ” she nudged the sealed file with a gloved fingertip “ - and nothing else pertaining to the site. Do not make copies. Do not write additional commentary. Do not, Miss Blythe, annotate.”

“On my honor and in defiance of habit,” Cassandra said. “May I… glance?”

Araminta’s eyebrow lifted. “You may read the overview under my supervision.”

Cassandra leaned toward the desk. Up close, the seal was not a single emblem but hundreds of microscopic runes rising and falling like disciplined minnows. She felt their hum in her teeth. Araminta tapped the crest; the red vein brightened, relaxed, and the seal unstitched itself in a sigh.

Inside was a slim brief: LOCATION - REDACTED (to be disclosed on arrival); LOCAL CONTACT - TAREK EL-FAROUK (accredited scholar, independent); BANK LIAISON - GRIPHOOK AL-AZHARI (Director, Cairo); OPERATIONAL PURPOSE - PRELIMINARY UNSEALING; NOTE - Ambient protections atypical. A second page contained a matrix of authorizations and a column titled SENSITIVITY which unhelpfully read: HIGH.

“Ambient protections atypical,” Cassandra read aloud. “Is that like ‘weather uncertain’ or ‘pack another life’?”

“It is like ‘do not be yourself,’” Araminta said. “The site is… lively. We prefer someone with a preventive respect for lively sites.”

“Preventive respect,” Cassandra said. “That’s a new category.”

“We are evolving,” Araminta said. “I find pain a reliable motivator. For others.”

Cassandra kept her eyes on the brief, absorbing the spareness of it, its careful avoidance of poetry. The lines that should have said what tomb, whose wardings, how deep, why now - those lines had been braided into silence. The silence was the point. She slid the pages back together and felt the charm reseat them in her hands. The brief did not weigh much; it felt heavy.

“You said local law complicates things,” she said. “I assume I will not be charged with sedition for opening a door.”

“You will read what you sign,” Araminta said. “You will also keep in mind that our version of history is not the only one.”

Cassandra looked up. Araminta's eyes had softened a fraction - gossamer thinning, not enough to touch. "Director?"

"Do try," Araminta said, "not to be British about it."

"I can be cosmopolitan," Cassandra said promptly. "I once apologized in five languages to a chimney."

"Truly the United Nations of etiquette," Araminta murmured. "You will be assigned a translator notwithstanding your fluency in hubris."

Cassandra's smile was involuntary and at her own expense. "Understood."

"Furthermore" - Araminta drew a small case from a drawer and set it on the desk - "your per diem, vouchers, and a letter of introduction. The letter says nothing of substance, which is precisely its substance. The vouchers are to be used sensibly. Sensible means not acquiring artifacts for your personal… nest."

Cassandra glanced at the case. It was leather that aspired to be a moral. "I would never," she said. "Acquire is such a strong word. I prefer rescue."

"Rescue your professional standing, then," Araminta said. "One more public spectacle and I will find you a permanent post in the Subterranean Archives."

"Is that the one with the melancholy damp and the book that sighs?"

"There are many books that sigh," Araminta said. "It would be educational."

Cassandra's neck prickled. She looked again at the window, which looked again at the city. On some street that was not yet a street she knew, a person who was not yet Tarek el-Farouk might be late to meet her and resent it. In some warehouse that called itself a branch, a goblin might be arranging a sheaf of documents that would make her life interesting. In some sealed chamber, dust lay over a name like a blanket.

"Why me," she said, and surprised herself by asking it aloud, breaking her own rule about never revealing you didn't think you deserved a thing.

Araminta paused. She did not feign surprise. She was, Cassandra suspected, incapable of feigning anything so untidy. "Because you are very good," she said. "And because you do not yet know how to be dangerous about it."

Cassandra met the Director's gaze and, for a breath, saw something like a mirror - herself in ten years, immaculate and cold, having sanded down all the inconvenient edges that made her human. The thought was worse than the hangover.

"I will be careful," she said.

"I do not require careful," Araminta said. "I require obedient."

“That one is trickier,” Cassandra said before discretion could catch the words and lock them in a drawer. She winced. “Sorry.”

“Do not apologize for accuracy,” Araminta said. “It wastes authenticity.”

For the first time, a hairline crack appeared in the ice of the office. Cassandra could not tell if it was on the floor, the glass, or herself. She picked up the case, the brief, the future, and balanced them with care. The weight arranged her posture for her. The lilies on the desk were very white.

Araminta stepped around the desk and came to stand an arm’s-length away. She was not a tall woman, but she had the dimension of inevitability. Up close, Cassandra noticed that the gloves were not leather but something finer, charmed to repel every human trace - no prints, no smudges, no warmth. Araminta adjusted the ribbon on Cassandra’s folder by a millimeter. “There is one more thing.”

“Of course there is,” Cassandra said. “It would be poor storytelling if there weren’t.”

Araminta ignored that. “You will encounter, as you have before, those who confuse caution with cowardice and reverence with regression. You will also encounter those who weaponize the past under the banner of preservation. The Bank has interests. So does the world. Find the seam between them and do not fall in.”

Cassandra nodded, the kind of nod that promised more than it knew how to deliver. “Yes, Director.”

“And, Miss Blythe?” Araminta’s gaze tilted, almost gentle. “Mind what you say to the dead.”

Cassandra’s throat went dry. The memory of the archway’s whisper - the dead have opinions - passed through her like the breath before a sneeze. “I’ll try to keep my commentary to myself.”

“Do,” Araminta said. She stepped back, and the moment closed like a book. “You will leave by noon. The desert is… dry.” A microsecond of cool wit lit her eyes. “Full of opportunities to atone for your candor.”

It was as generous as approval would ever sound in that mouth. Cassandra felt her own smile hitch into place, small and real. “I do like opportunities.”

“Then take this one,” Araminta said. “And take a hat.”

Cassandra rose. The chair exhaled displeasure at being relieved of her. She tucked the brief inside the leather case, felt the seal murmur against her palm as it reknit itself, and gathered what was left of her composure. At the door she stopped, because of course she did, because her worst impulse and her best one wore the same shoes.

“Director,” she said. “Thank you.”

Araminta inclined her head the exact number of degrees allotted to both gratitude received and pawns advanced. Cassandra turned the handle. Cool air reached from the corridor to take

her hand. She stepped into it and felt the rush of the Division’s messy weather wash over the glass-scrubbed silence: clattering quills, argumentative tea, living work.

Behind her, Araminta’s voice, level as a blade laid flat, followed her to the threshold: “Miss Blythe - ”

Cassandra glanced back.

“Do try,” Araminta said, “to let the desert teach you the value of silence.”

The door clicked shut. The office reclaimed its hush.

Cassandra stood in the aisle, leather case warm against her palm, heart doing a fair impression of a bird learning to fly in a room too small for it. She looked down. A blue spark traveled from one knuckle to the next like a secret, then winked out.

Four hours. A ferry of carpets, a skyline she had never known, a file that hummed like a warning. She could go to the break nook and make another tea, perform a ritual of comfort against the enormity of the unknown. She could make a list, because lists suggested containment. She could write in her field journal, because words were how she built rooms to think in.

Instead she walked, because her feet had already chosen, because the Bank moved around her like a creature that suspected it was losing her and did not know whether to mourn or be relieved. She passed beneath the arch again. The goblin script did not whisper this time. Perhaps it had decided it had said enough.

“Silence,” Cassandra said under her breath, and tasted the word. It tasted like dust and the inside of ancient stone and a kind of respect that did not come naturally to her.

“Fine,” she told the air. “I can try anything once.”

The ledger at the corner of her desk turned a page as if in disbelief. The clock above the break nook shed another minute with aristocratic restraint. In the glass of the corridor’s long window, London blurred into a watercolor. Somewhere beyond the blur, a city full of heat and history waited with its hands on its hips.

Cassandra picked up her wand, her hat, and the case that contained permission and constraint in equal measure. She squared her shoulders and headed for the Port Authority, feeling the shape of the desert already thrum, like a far drum, in the bones of the building and in her own.

Cassandra’s flat had the air of a place that had learned to brace.

It was on the fourth floor of a narrow building in Bloomsbury where the stairwell smelled of dust and overambitious plants. The corridor was lined with doors that had learned the power of a good sulk, and hers had the most practice: the paint was a dignified green trimmed with brass; a small brass cat - tarnished, unimpressed - served as a knocker. When she touched the

knob the lock considered her merits, then relented with a sigh that sounded like an aunt accepting a poor decision.

Inside was a modest riot tamed by ritual. A rug faded to the memory of flowers; a bookshelf bowing under reference tomes and the odd sentimental novel; a dining table that had never recovered from an alchemical mishap and insisted on sloping slightly west; a mantelpiece crowded with trophies from the quiet war of work - rune-etched stones, a bottle of sand that refused to count as a liquid for spells, a jar labeled SPECIMEN: DO NOT OPEN (which, to its credit, had not opened).

The first thing she did was address the kettle. “You are my only hope,” she told it, flicking her wand at the stove. A puff of flame, a satisfying whoomph, and then the calm, promising build of a boil. She set a teapot to warm and opened the window.

London’s afternoon leaned in. Coal smoke made a cordial with damp; the sound of wheels and voices rose in complicated harmony. A pair of witch couriers in cobalt coats zipped past on broomsticks at window level, arguing about thermals; somewhere a bus wheezed a complaint; a church bell cleared its throat.

Cassandra shrugged her coat off and hung it on the rack that looked - correctly - overwhelmed. The leather case from Araminta sat on the table like a guest who always arrived two minutes early and already judged the wine. She set her wand beside it. The wand hummed - approval, relief, or the habitual greeting of a tool that knew it would be put to use.

“Clothes,” she told herself, because the only way to approach chaos was to narrate it until it made sense.

Clothes lived in a wardrobe along the bedroom wall that cooperated only under duress. When she opened the doors, it exhaled the smell of cedar and rain. Dresses, shirts, field robes, and the occasional ill-advised purchase from a vintage shop (that hat with the veil; why) rustled their disapproval. She began to pull together her desert uniform: linen shirts; a trio of long skirts with slits that allowed respectable speed; a pair of trousers that had been fashionable before the conservatism of Ministry office halls nudged them to the back; a scarf the color of good honey; a battered leather belt whose buckle had the gall to squeak as if it were the one being mistreated.

On the bed - a narrow affair with an iron frame and a quilt pieced by a grandmother’s meticulous love - she laid out her selections. The bed accepted them with a prim, creaking complaint. Nearby, a trunk waited. It was scarred, walnut-dark, lined in faded blue, and spelled to look pathetic to customs agents. She opened it and the hinges groaned with history.

The kettle began its delicate agitation. Cassandra returned to the kitchen, poured water over tea leaves, and felt the world reconcile around scent: tannin and comfort, astringent and forgiving. While the tea thought through its purpose, she fished a slice of lemon from a jar, squeezed, stirred. Steam rose and wrote nothing; she suspected it was out of respect for her nerves.

Her flat’s only mirror leaned against the mantel, an oval with a blackened silver frame. The glass didn’t show the future, only the truth with a little extra cruelty. She caught her reflection

in it now: the hair rebelling in coils; the nose with its impertinent angle; the ink smudge at the cheekbone that even kitchen soap refused. She dipped a cloth in the tea saucer and scrubbed. It lightened, then reasserted itself. “Fine,” she said to the smudge. “You can come to Egypt as my chaperone.”

On the mantel, the jar marked SPECIMEN: DO NOT OPEN rattled. It was a polite rattle, the sort of sound a hinge made when it wanted oil. Cassandra looked at it, looked away, and placed the teapot between it and her peripheral vision. She had rules. She followed some of them.

Packing her tools felt like a conversation with prior versions of herself. She had built this kit over a decade - pocket by pocket, charm by charm. She opened the black roll of leather that contained her favorite implements and smoothed them with the tenderness of superstition: copper stylus for inscribing temporary sigils; charmed chalk that refused to smudge even when insulted; a skein of red thread woven with memory, used to map the nerve-paths of old wards; a glass lens whose facets saw what she wouldn’t; a ring that remembered where it had been.

As she lifted the ring, it pinged, an audible note that resonated in the bones of the room. Once, twice, then a hum - a small animal waking. Cassandra held it between finger and thumb. The ring was plain bronze with a band of hieratic script around the inner rim, a condolence gift from a widow whose curse she had untied without unmaking the love in it. The script warmed. She felt the suggestion of a direction in her hand, as if the ring were a compass and her heart was north.

“Don’t start,” she told it. “We’re not there yet.”

The hum persisted, softened, settled into something like purring. She slid the ring onto a chain and dropped it into the side pocket meant for suspect loyalties.

Letters lived in a drawer she avoided when she could, usually by piling other drawers on top of it in spiritually satisfying ways. Duty prevailed. She opened it.

The top envelope wore Tamsin’s round, impatient handwriting: Blythe Blythe Blythe, stop stealing my good quills. Inside was a note:

- Bring back sun and scandal. Don’t die; I’m using your tea canister. P.S. You were very funny last night. P.P.S. “Boiled potato” is already office canon. T.

Cassandra grinned despite herself and set the letter in the trunk, sliding it under a stack of linen as if it required protection from the desert.

Other notes: a postcard from her brother in Manchester, text obscured by a postage hex that rendered the ink as practical advice regardless of original content (“Remember to hydrate, floss, and undermine the patriarchy”). A thin, serious letter from Professor Swithin in Ancient Runes wishing her “prudence that does not smother curiosity.” A thick envelope on expensive paper from a museum she had once consulted for, still offering her the same position she had declined because the job description had included “an appreciation for permanent loan.”

Beneath the letters lay a small collection of photographs - wizards did not pose so much as negotiate with image - but one showed six girls on a Hogwarts lawn, ties askew, a control of adolescence held together by laughter. Cassandra touched it lightly. The girls in the picture waved in a practiced, bashful way; one ate a biscuit. Somewhere far away they might still exist, middle names and first romances and all, but the exact group in the photograph had become an artifact. She replaced them gently. Nostalgia was a curry that improved with restraint.

Tea fortified her hands. She drank and wrote because the ritual calmed the weather inside her. Field Journal: Trip: Cairo. Assignment: Preliminary unsealing. Sensitivity: High (as if magic were a society hostess). Personal: Do not annotate in front of Araminta. Do annotate in private where possible. Tone: dry and full of opportunities to atone. Tools: pack all. Intentions: be careful, or failing that, entertaining.

The mirror cleared its throat. Mirrors did not actually clear throats; the sound was the settling of old glass. Still, the effect was convincing. Cassandra glanced up.

Her reflection raised an eyebrow a second before she did. “Oh, we’re nervous,” the mirror murmured, its voice pitched halfway between her and her mother’s. “How novel.”

“I’m not nervous,” Cassandra said. “I’m… anticipatory.”

“Your verbs are always braver than your bones,” the mirror observed. “Turn left.”

Cassandra, suspicious and obedient, turned. A stack of books - Wards: A Polite History, The Ethics of Extraction, and a volume of Sappho with annotations in three hands - was listing toward a catastrophe. She steadied it, then glared at the mirror. “Don’t get smug.”

“Wouldn’t dream,” the mirror said, smugly. “Hat?”

“Hat,” she conceded. She crossed to the wardrobe and retrieved the sensible felt with the wide brim and the enchantment against sunstroke. It had a ribbon whose bow refused to sit straight, which she respected. She tucked a hatpin through it and stabbed the pin into its cushion with a sentence about the patriarchy’s tendon structure.

Her toolbox gave a little chime. It was the chime she had taught it years ago: I am missing a thing we always bring. Cassandra frowned and did a quick inventory, hands ghosting pockets, counting the ghosts. “Chalk, stylus, lens, thread, salts, mirror shard, binding key… aha.” She crouched and reached under the sofa where only monsters, dust, and the occasional honesty lived. Her fingers found the cold, scalloped edge of the **severing charm clamp** - a delicately toothed tool that held a curse by the scruff while she stroked its temper. She extracted it and kissed it like a penitent.

The jar on the mantel rattled again - three quiet taps, as if someone inside had discovered the concept of rhythm. Cassandra stood very still. The label read SPECIMEN: DO NOT OPEN. The paper had not yellowed, because she had charmed it not to; temptation aged you faster.

“Absolutely not,” she told it, and tucked the clamp into the roll where it belonged. The jar subsided to sulk.

By the window, the potted rosemary folded itself into a pose of martyrdom. She watered it. “We’re going somewhere warm,” she informed it. “We will both refrain from dying of drama.” The rosemary, being a plant, forgave her everything.

The leather case from Araminta glowered, insofar as stationery could. Cassandra opened it and ran her finger down the edges of the brief just to feel the seal resist. It did, then yielded, like a polite door being held for the wrong person. She did not reread; there was nothing more to be read. But the page hummed faintly, that same under-tooth music as in the Director’s office, as if the assignment had a pitch only her head ached to. The hum made the ring on the chain stir again.

She closed the case. The air shifted. It was not a draft. It was the peculiar change that rooms made when they recognized that something essential was being taken away.

A knock. Cassandra looked up. The brass cat on the door trembled in empathy.

“Coming,” she called, and crossed the rug. When she opened the door, the hall was empty. Only the smell of damp wool and coal dust lingered. On the mat lay a brown-paper parcel tied with ordinary string.

It was neither time nor place for surprises. She cursed, very politely, and carried it to the table. There was no return address. The handwriting on the paper was blocky and functional. She cut the string and peeled back the paper without tearing it (you never knew when you’d need a proper neutral wrapper).

Inside: a tin of biscuits. Not just any tin - the pewter kind embossed with a compass rose and a sloop in full, absurd sail. She recognized it because she had lusted after it in a shop window and then not bought it because she was a Responsible Person who did not need a tin to tell her where north was. Tucked under the lid, a card: Consider this a down payment on not dying. - Tarek el-Farouk.

She blinked. The name should have been only ink to her, but his reputation came with the dossier: scholar, independent, sharp; a moral stance like a spine; patience for history, less for banks. How had he reached her flat? She turned the card over; the back held three words: Welcome to Cairo. The ink was dry. The card smelled faintly of clove smoke and oiled wood.

“You’re efficient,” she told the empty room, because someone somewhere had earned the compliment. She opened the tin. Inside lay a layer of sesame biscuits glazed to a low, handsome sheen. She ate one. It tasted like the memory of a market: sweet, toasty, unreasonably persuasive.

She put two more in a paper packet and slid them into the outer pocket of her trunk with the care of a truce. She added the tin to the trunk as well, wedged beside the hat. “Bribery accepted,” she said, loud enough to be rude to any eavesdropping enchantments.

Her alarm clock - a squat brass mushroom with a cynical bell - clinked two o’clock. The Port Authority paperwork wanted her at the docks by half past three. Time, like Araminta’s gloves, left no prints.

She did one last, practiced sweep of the flat: windows latched, charms on low simmer; hearth embers banked; the plant admonished to try; the jar admonished to fail; the mirror inclined on its bracket to catch thieves in their worst light. The trunk shut with a clap that sounded like a pact. She sealed it and murmured the ward: “You will smell like laundry and tax forms.” The trunk obliged, emitting an aura of such bureaucratic despair that even thieves with low standards would move on.

On the mantel, amid the clutter, lay a small pewter teaspoon with a nick in the handle. Cassandra picked it up, turned it over. On its back was an engraving of a star and the beginnings of someone’s initials, as if the maker had been interrupted. She remembered its provenance: the Field Tea Spoon, the tool that had stirred tea over pits of ruin and on the back of carts and while sitting on stone steps with dirt under her nails. She slipped it into her pocket, because superstition was another word for experience.

The mirror caught her again, hat in hand. “Well,” it said, and it almost sounded fond, the way old grudges did when they realized they were outlived, “do try not to be entirely yourself.”

“I’ll bring back a story,” Cassandra said.

The mirror tilted, which was as near as it got to smiling. “Bring back a better question.”

There was a weight to that, the kind Araminta would call instructive and Cassandra would call rude. She nodded anyway. She lifted the trunk by its handle; its weight performed its usual deception, lighter than it looked thanks to spells, heavier than it looked thanks to consequences. She slung the satchel with the tools across her body, set the hat on her head, fixed the pin.

At the door she hesitated, because departures are when rooms reveal their true allegiance. Her books regarded her with mild betrayal. The rug sulked. The kettle crooned to itself; tea leaves were drying for later scrying. The jar did not rattle. The air held the ghost of steam and lemon.

She locked the door, then pressed her fingers to it and whispered a charm that tasted like rosemary and iron. The bolt thickened; the wood remembered who it belonged to. The brass cat warmed under her touch as if it remembered some ancestral hearth.

In the stairwell, she met Mrs. Penbury from the second floor, who carried a basket of laundry and the serene authority of a woman who had never allowed a poltergeist to finish a sentence. “Afternoon, Miss Blythe,” Mrs. Penbury said, eyeing the trunk. “Off to liberate more treasures from their perfectly content slumbers?”

“Technically,” Cassandra said, making room for her on the landing, “I am going to persuade them to nap elsewhere.”

“Bring back your bones in the same order you left with,” Mrs. Penbury advised. “And don’t let a man explain sand to you.”

“I’ll put it in my journal,” Cassandra said.

She reached the street. The day had polished itself. Cabs jostled; a newspaper seller sang a headline about a Ministry blunder with the gusto of a man who had never met responsibility. The sky was a pale, honest blue that made promises about tomorrow it had no authority to keep.

A wind from the river flared her scarf. For a flicker, a pattern looked back at her in the weave - lines, angles, a suggestion of letters - or perhaps her nerves had grown fingers. She steadied the scarf with a laugh that did not belong to bravery and set off toward the Port Authority, the trunk trundling behind her with a self-important wobble.

At the corner, a black cat watched from a low wall, its eyes the precise rude yellow of warning signs. It yawned, showing pink and fang, then deliberately turned its back and presented her with a tail that implied indifference. She saluted it with the rim of her hat.

“Egypt, then,” Cassandra said to the street, to the wind, to herself. The word fit in her mouth like a stone warmed by a palm. Not smooth; not sharp. Held.

She walked, and the city presented itself in a sequence of proper nouns: Russell, Southampton, Victoria Embankment; in the spaces between, the river bruised itself against its banks and remembered types of sunlight London had never deserved. Her heartbeat negotiated a treaty with excitement. The leather case rasped its moral order against her hip. The mirror’s last counsel hung in the air behind her like a ribbon: bring back a better question.

The Port Authority would smell of salt and bureaucracy. The carpet ferry would lilt like a lullaby sung by a librarian. In Cairo, a stranger with clove on his breath had already sent biscuits; a goblin director had already read the file without blinking; a sealed door had already decided whether it would speak to her. Somewhere, stone had learned to keep its counsel and would consider her petition.

Cassandra Blythe, a woman who built rooms out of words and then left them, pinned her hat a little tighter and picked up her pace. The day stepped aside. The future arranged its papers. And if the ring at her throat hummed again, a note like a cat’s purr caught in bronze, she pretended she did not feel it and saved the shiver for her journal - ink’s proper ration of fear before the desert.

The International Port Authority sat on the Thames like a very serious hat.

Its façade was all sandstone and government, columns marching in a confidence that might have been freestanding if not for charms. Flags snapped on poles, their colors wizard-bright even in London’s honest light; sigils of Ministry departments and allied guilds shimmered in and out as if taking turns to be important. A bronze statue of a witch in travel robes stood on the steps, one hand raised, a carpet rolled under the other arm, chin lifted to a horizon only she could see. Someone had once hung a scarf about her neck in winter and no one had dared remove it; in October the scarf was folded back neatly over her shoulders, as if even bronze had a mother.

Inside, the Port Authority was weatherproofed against all weathers and yet still somehow smelled of salt. The air had the prickle of spells applied in layers: security charms that grew

like paint, guidance glyphs inlaid underfoot, minor illusions to make the starkness feel like order rather than thrift. The hall arced high overhead; the ceiling drifted like clouded glass through which daylight oozed. Beyond a cordon of braided rope that was more metaphor than barrier, an enormous bay door opened directly onto thin air. Through it, Cassandra could see the river turn from pewter to slate as currents worried the surface; further out, the stacked lines of air lanes shimmered like pale rungs up the sky.

“Ticketing, permits, customs,” said a heralding banner that rewrote itself into whatever script the reader wanted. It chose English for Cassandra and added a prim little underline under customs that suggested too many people had tried to forget it.

She wrestled her trunk into the queue for Ticketing and was absorbed into a slow, charmed shuffling of travelers. Robes and coats in every sensible fabric; carpet rolls tucked under arms; a pram fitted ingeniously with antigrav charms (the baby inside blinked up at the ceiling with newborn suspicion); a retired wizard clutching a portkey umbrella that grumbled to itself like an old terrier (“We were on the Continent during the War, you know,” it muttered; the wizard patted its handle absentmindedly). Two goblin clerks stamped vellum with exacting pleasure. The stamps bit down with tiny jaws: permits chewed, visas kissed, declarations nibbled. A clock posted above the desk ticked in three faces: London Time, Aerial Lane Time, and Ministry Time. Ministry Time, of course, was late and smug.

“Purpose of travel?” said the clerk when it was Cassandra’s turn, peering at her over gold spectacles that had never been off-duty.

“Work,” Cassandra said. “Advisement.” She resisted the urge to apologize to the word; even honest terms sounded guilty in official buildings.

“Destination?”

“Cairo.”

“Bring your case here,” the clerk said, and Cassandra pushed the leather case from Araminta onto the counter as if it were a sacred text and a mild explosive. The clerk touched the seal with a rune-tipped stylus. The red vein in the crest hummed and brightened, then softened again. “Gringotts clearance,” the clerk said with a respect so small it could have been a threat. “You’ll be on the four-ten eastbound ferry. Gate Three. Window or aisle?”

“Window,” Cassandra said automatically. “Unless there’s a category called ‘unobstructed sky.’”

The clerk did not have the decency to smirk. “You’ll see plenty of sky,” they said, and slammed three stamps in harmonious succession: TICKETED, CHARMED, YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN ADVENTURE (a recent, cheery addition from the Department of International Magical Cooperation). A strip of paper extruded from a slot like a tongue; the clerk tore it off, charmed it into a rigid boarding card, and slid it across. “Customs.”

Customs resembled confession with paperwork. A line of wizards and witches shuffled toward a series of floating brass hoops that sang faintly when anything illegal was nearby.

Signs tastefully depicted contraband: cursed beetles, illegal portkeys disguised as belt buckles, a jar of weather labeled “NO STORMS OVER FOREIGN CAPITALS,” a stack of hexed books with their teeth showing. Cassandra’s trunk radiated the honest despair of laundry and tax forms thanks to her spellwork; the brass hoops sniffed at it and sighed, disinterested. Her satchel, however, earned her a friendly interception.

“Tools?” asked a customs witch with a thick rope of hair and a voice like a broom handle tapping the floor.

“Curse-breaking,” Cassandra said, opening the roll. “No hexes. The only thing with a temper is the clamp and it’s - ”

The clamp wagged its delicately toothed head as if to say I am above temper. The customs witch peered, nodded. “Any live specimens?”

“Absolutely not,” Cassandra said with the fervor of a liar whose untruth lay safely in her sitting room under a kettle’s vigilance. “The only thing alive in there is a plant, and it didn’t want to come.”

The witch’s mouth twitched. “Weather?”

“Only a sigh’s worth,” Cassandra said, tapping the Field Spoon. “For tea on the go.”

The witch waved her through. “Gate Three. Stay in your lane.”

Cassandra stepped out into the embarkation hall and the breath went out of her on a good-humored gasp.

The gates were mouths opening into the sky.

Three massive doors hung open, terrace-wide, edged in runic metal that pushed weather back like a polite shoulder. Beyond them, the air lanes sloped up and away in translucent bands, each shimmering with its own speed. Carpets queued nose-to-tail along the closest band, their tassels tidied into respectful points, pilots in fitted jackets and flying goggles checking manifests and tucking wands into quick-draw loops. The ferry carpets were broad - their edges stiffened by invisible ribs, their centers cushioned by enchantment. Rows of low-backed seats were bolted to their surfaces and secured with charm-belts that looked like silk sashes until you pulled them, when they revealed themselves as arguments with gravity.

A loudspeaker cleared its throat directly into Cassandra’s inner ear: “Now boarding the four-ten eastbound ferry along Aerial Lane Beta, with stops at Calais (brief hover), Basel (no disembarkation), Venice High (no disembarkation), and direct transit to Cairo. All passengers please present your boarding cards at Gate Three. No conjured weather beyond a light personal breeze. Please feed your familiars before boarding.”

Gate Three’s steward was a goblin in a razor-creased navy uniform whose buttons shone with the conscience of someone who had personally polished them and would fight anyone who thought to dull them. He took Cassandra’s card, glanced at the Gringotts seal, and his left ear

made a minute adjustment that registered as both respect and disdain. “Miss Blythe. Row Six, seat B. Window.”

“Thank you,” Cassandra said, and tugged her trunk after her.

“Bags to be stowed on the aft charm,” the goblin said. “It’s the one that complains in Ancient Greek. If it starts to recite Homer, step away.”

Cassandra found Row Six on the second carpet of the ferry, which was layered like a wedding cake: three broad, slightly overlapping carpets connected by discreet corded tethers, with a steward stationed at each junction, boots magicked to the weave. She stowed her trunk on the complaining charm (which told her something about ships and fate and she shushed it kindly) and took her seat.

Seat B came with a view and an education. The frequency wards that laced the embarkation hall vibrated at a pitch just below sensation, and yet Cassandra could feel it: a thrumming under her skin, the bodily understanding that something complicated and trustworthy was about to lift you into a very thin place and deliver you somewhere else. The chair molded itself to her with a sigh that suggested it had seen worse.

Her neighbors included, to her right in Seat C, a tourist witch with a hat shaped like an enthusiastic pie. She had the round, pleased cheeks of a person who wrote to her relations often and signed with at least three exclamation points. In her lap sat a glass jar that contained a small, cranky storm cloud. It rumbled at Cassandra and smacked the side of the jar with a spit of lightning.

“Ignore him,” the witch said, with the air of someone introducing a difficult nephew. “He’s peaky when he hasn’t eaten. Little lamb, have a raindrop.” She unscrewed the lid a crack, tipped in a drop of bottled river. The cloud slurped and settled, producing a single, obliging rainbow that draped itself across the glass like a cat. “First time?” the witch asked, eyeing Cassandra’s grip on the armrest.

“On a ferry this size, yes,” Cassandra said. “I’ve flown carpets. Smaller. Closer to the ground. Frequently without ambitions.”

“Oh, you’ll love it,” the witch said. “It’s like a picnic in a gale but safer. Doris Everdew,” she added, patting her chest. “Postmistress of Piddletrenthide and part-time rainwright.”

“Cassandra Blythe,” Cassandra said. “Curse-breaker. Part-time kettle whisperer.”

“How thrilling,” Doris said, with a sincerity that warmed Cassandra toward the world. “Are you going somewhere dangerous?”

“Egypt,” Cassandra said.

“Same thing,” Doris said cheerfully, and reached into her basket.

The steward’s voice came crisp and companionable. “Strap belts. Wands away. Familiars secured. If you feel faint, you are either under-charmed or inadequate; report to a steward.”

Cassandra pulled the silk-looking sash and felt it cinch across her lap with a pleasant determination. The carpet shivered, came awake. A second steward - witch, hair braided tight, eyes scanning - walked the center aisle. “Any conjured objects liable to escape? Any enchanted plants likely to become political? Any weather above a drizzle?”

Doris raised her hand. “Just a snack cloud, dear.”

“Containment charm on?” the steward said.

“Buttoned up,” Doris said, and the cloud burped lightning in agreement.

Cassandra felt herself smiling. It was involuntary and expensive and she let it happen.

The goblin at Gate Three lifted a small brass horn. “Flight Beta-Three, eastbound. Off we go then.”

The ferry eased forward with the delicacy of moving a sleeping cat. The first carpet slid through the gate; the second followed, Cassandra’s seat cresting the lip between inside and sky. The temperature changed - a fine crispness taking her by the nose - and the smell changed: the inner saltiness of the building thinned into honest river, into London, into wind.

For a moment they hovered, the ferry aligning itself into the lane. Cassandra looked down. The Thames lay like a smoked ribbon twined with bridges. The embankment was busy with ants that were people and beetles that were cars. The statue of the Port Authority witch watched them go, head tipped; a trick of light made her scarf lift in blessing.

Then the ferry leaned, and the world became a page turning.

They rose into the first lane. The carpet stitched itself to air, and air accepted. The wards hummed a tempo her blood learned at once. London folded away beneath them, sun on windows flashing farewell; the river kinked and unspooled. The ferry joined a stream of eastbound traffic: carpets stacked at civilized intervals, a cluster of Ministry brooms darting like gnats (ministries had never met a swarm they didn’t envy), a stately flying barge carrying something that looked like an unfortunate statue pretending not to be a dragon.

Doris sighed as one sighs at sunsets and new kettles. “Isn’t that better than Apparition?” she said. “You can feel the in-between.”

“That’s what frightens most people,” Cassandra said, but she knew what Doris meant. Apparition was efficient terror, a needle’s eye of heat and the smug shock of arrival. This was the thing itself: the rush and the lay, the way the city became idea and the island became a held breath and then - water, sky, a sheet of hammered silver kicked to brightness where the sun elbowed the clouds.

They tracked out over the Channel and the carpet’s gait changed. From city-lilt to sea-hum; from confidence to a species of tenderness. A steward walked by with a tray of peppermint pastilles and safety cards. Cassandra took a card. On the front, diagrams of seating and sashes; on the back, in very small writing, a series of charms one could perform if the carpet decided to remember that it was only carpet.

“Would you like a pastille?” Doris said. “They settle the stomach and the wrong sort of thoughts.”

“I’d take one for the latter,” Cassandra said, and did.

The Channel was already narrowing into the idea of France. In the far right-hand lane, a ferry bound for Dublin was frolicking immodestly above its regulations. A steward scolded it via intercom; the other ferry returned a rude wobble and behaved.

Cassandra’s reflection in the charm-warded glass of the windscreen looked precise and very slightly other. The light over the water made a mirror of the underside of her hat brim; the brim offered back a woman who was pretending very well to be unafraid. She adjusted the hatpin and watched the tilt of herself correct in the glass.

On the air, conversation rose and fell like tide lines. Two seats back a pair of young wizards argued about a Quidditch match that had already been played and whose result could not be improved by revisiting ethics. A family across the aisle negotiated the terms of siblinghood with caramel taffies as hostages. A witch in the front row knitted a very long scarf and made eye contact with no one, as though letting the stitches handle it.

Cassandra’s field journal lay in her lap, the elastic band around it slightly slack from overuse. She slid the band down and opened to a fresh page. The paper warmed under her hand, as if relieved to be chosen. She wrote: Ferries: civilized defiance of gravity. Ascent as syntax. The way the city folds into a shorthand. Smell: tin, river, the vowel of wind. Doris Everdew, rainwright, has adopted a stormlet; it is as ungovernable as a thought. Customs: asked about plants; I lied. (Apologies to truth, which will forgive me later.)

She paused. The wind on her cheek tasted like pennies and laughter. The journal waited.

A shadow passed over her page. She looked up. A lanky Ministry pilot on a broom slid along the ferry’s flank, checked the alignment of their lane, saluted lazily, and peeled off. His goggles reflected her for a blink: small, hat, pencil poised over a private world.

The Channel gave way to the more complicated blue of the Bay of Biscay, which insisted on telling the wind its opinions. The ferry tilted obligingly and found a higher lane, one that felt like a shelf pulled out just so. Clouds massed to the south in convivial heaps. One of them looked briefly like a hieroglyph - a bird leaning into flight, lines clean as cut reed. Cassandra blinked and it fuzzed back into cloud. She touched her ring through her blouse. It lay quiet, behaving itself. She breathed, counted, made a note: See things; don’t assign meanings until the third repetition.

Doris produced a paper bag that crinkled with generosity. “Biscuit?” she said. “Sesame.”

Cassandra startled, laughed. “I’ve been bribed by sesame once today already,” she said. “Very well. Let me be compromised twice.”

They shared biscuits like a conspiracy. The storm-in-a-jar, mollified by crumbs of weather and attention, settled into an attitude of decorative menace. It struck a small pose and draped itself across the top of Doris’s basket like an exotic muff.

The sun slid its coins under the clouds as they skimmed the coast of Spain. Land appeared and disappeared like a word learned and misremembered. The steward came through with a samovar that smelled of mint and patience, pouring tea into paper cups that held heat like promises. Cassandra wrapped her fingers around hers and let the warmth rewrite a few small anxieties.

On the horizon, the haze sharpened. The Mediterranean lay ahead like a polished shield. Its blue was not the Channel's reluctant pewter or Biscay's argumentative slate; it was a statement. The ferry's carpets adjusted as a flock adjusts, their tassels pricking, their edges curving - a warm-bellied glide. Somewhere below, a shoal braided itself into a muscle and slid on. Sun took the sea in both hands and smoothed its hair.

"Calais hover," the loudspeaker murmured. A brief, humoring pause as the ferry ticked off some administrative box called a stop. A murmur of languages rose and settled again like doves startled and resettled. "Basel high. Venice high. Do not disembark your sense of humor."

Cassandra's pen ticked along the page. She wrote what she always wrote when the world lined up with a myth her childhood had kept in a biscuit tin: The world is bigger than the room where I fear it. The words looked earnest on the paper; she let them be.

A shift in light made her glance left. Down the aisle, a boy of about twelve held a toy carpet in both hands, its tassels charmed to twitch; he flew it yawningly up and over the armrest as if doing so bored him. Cassandra put her hand out with two fingers raised, and the boy, to his credit, smiled in immediate collusion and made the toy loop her fingers, then corrected to fly straight and true as if embarrassed to have shown off.

"Attention, passengers," said the steward nearest the bow, as the ferry sliced cleanly into the air over the Italian coast. "We will be ascending to Lane Delta for a weather evasion and to avoid unlicensed gondolas. Please relax all muscles not required for breathing and trust the carpet."

Trust, Cassandra thought, and tasted the word. She looked down at the past of countries, the way borders meant nothing to sky but everything to people. Trust, but not blindly; trust, and bring your own keys.

They rose again. The air thinned and brightened. The ferry flew with the quiet that only well-engineered magic manages: the hush of a library where no one minds the joy. Cassandra's ears popped; a gentle charm reset them with a finger's pressure she hadn't given. Her eyes stung. She wasn't crying. The wind was.

Doris nudged her with the bag again. "One for luck when we land."

"I'll save it," Cassandra said, and slipped the biscuit into her pocket. It warmed quickly, as though anticipating a desert.

The day stretched. The world made scale apparent, then bruised it with light. The tessellation of fields, the braid of rivers, the mirrors of lakes, the cities like spilled alphabets. And then, as if the continent had slipped a shoulder from a dress and let it fall, there was only sea. The

ferry leveled, settled into its long stride. People loosened; someone snored apologetically; the knitting witch measured the scarf against the suggestion of her own loneliness and approved it.

Cassandra closed her journal and let her fingers sit on the leather, feeling the spine. The wind leaned into her ear with a thousand old stories and none. It smelled faintly now of heat, as if ahead the sun had made a door and propped it open with a jar of honey.

She knew, in a way that would have embarrassed her if she'd tried to explain, that this was the last easy part. Air and movement and the kind of journey where all problems are held in abeyance by altitude. She let her shoulders drop. Her mouth remembered a smile that did not need witnesses.

Somewhere far below, a ship cut a scalpel line of white into the polished blue. For a heartbeat it was a sarcophagus lid sliding, a clean seam, a promise, a warning. But only for a heartbeat. The mind makes hieroglyphs of clouds when it wants a story too soon.

"Next announcement in two hours," the steward said. "Stretch in place. Breathe deliberately. Do not attempt to pilot the carpet; it holds grudges."

Cassandra rested her head against the back of the seat and watched the sky thicken toward the gold that meant Egypt was a thought and then a plan and then a place. She pressed her palm flat to the charm-warded glass. It was cool now; later, it would be warm. In the faint fog of her breath, a line appeared and crossed and carried on - a stroke like a reed pen's first decision. She lifted her hand and the fog vanished; the glass gave back only her face, and behind it, a slice of brightening, and beyond that, the blue waiting to become desert.

"At least mummies don't send memos," she murmured, and the wind - ancient gossip that it was - carried the joke ahead to see if anyone would laugh.

Cairo rose out of the afternoon like a spell remembered by the air.

From the carpet ferry's last descent, Cassandra saw minarets drawn like quills, rooftops shrugged into light, and alleys stitched in shadow. The city was a bouquet of heat and stone and the glittery obstinacy of life, and all of it wore an enchantment one shade paler than visible. When the ferry flared - tassels precise, ribs flexing - she felt the heat take her by the cheekbones and say: well then.

"Cairo," said Doris Everdew beside her, with the satisfaction of a woman watching a soufflé hold. "And not a drop of rain wasted." She tapped the storm-in-a-jar, which purred a very small thunder of approval. "Don't go falling into the Nile," she added to Cassandra, "unless you mean it."

"I try not to do anything accidentally," Cassandra said, which was a lie most days and an aspiration today.

The ferry kissed the Gate gently; the belts released with a sigh of reconciliation. There was a kind smattering of applause from a few passengers who still believed in thanking magic out loud. Cassandra rose into heat that did not so much press as present itself. The air tasted of

sun-warmed stone, cumin, dust the texture of silk, and something sweet, like burned sugar hiding in a pocket.

“Welcome to Cairo,” came the steward’s unruffled voice. “Collect your luggage at the aft charm. Please remain dignified.”

Cassandra retrieved her trunk from the complaining charm (which recited a verse about Odysseus letting things go, unhelpfully) and slung her satchel. Her hat braved the heat bravely; her hair accepted it at once and began attempting new architecture.

A broad set of steps led from the embarkation platform down into the Cairo Port Authority - its grand hall a cousin to London’s and cousin only in the austere sense. The ceiling here was deeper, bluer; the glass in the windows caught sunlight and flung it back as if returning a joke. Signs re-lettered themselves with a flourish of hospitality. A bank of ceiling fans turned with the languid zeal of saints. Spells shaped the air into a cooler ribbon that slid past collars and sipped at foreheads. Somewhere, a charm coaxed the scent of mint to rise like a rumor.

At the base of the steps, a sign in five languages announced: CAIRO WIZARDING PORT AUTHORITY - FOLLOW THE BLUE LINE TO OUTBOUND, THE GREEN LINE TO BAZAARS, THE GOLD LINE TO GRINGOTTS. The lines themselves were literal, painted spells that glowed softly underfoot and rearranged when you thought about a different destination. Cassandra glanced at the gold line and it brightened, pleased to be chosen.

“Miss Blythe?”

The voice had the grain of someone who read late into the night and the dryness of someone who used their wit sparingly but accurately. Cassandra turned.

Tarek el-Farouk was not tall in the way of statues. He was tall in the way of doorframes: functional, unobtrusive, exactly as much as the space required. His skin held a sun-warmth that London never granted; his hair was black and crushed flat on one side, as if he had recently lost a fight with a book. He wore a white shirt with sleeves rolled above the wrist, trousers that had known purpose, and a vest with a pen tucked into the seam like a secret. His eyes were a brown you read twice.

“Cassandra Blythe,” she said. “We have you to thank for the biscuits that compromised my character.”

His mouth tilted, amusement kept on a leash. “I prefer to test new colleagues with sesame. It reveals priorities.”

“I passed,” she said. “I ate two and kept one.”

“You are prepared for diplomacy,” he said gravely, and extended his hand. It was a scholar’s handshake - direct, warm, with calluses earned from the stubbornness of paper and the occasional ungovernable stone. “Tarek el-Farouk. Gringotts has engaged me to help you avoid insulting anyone with antiquity on their side.”

“I only insult in defense,” Cassandra said. “Thank you for the tin. It will be useful in establishing an alliance with tea.”

“Cairo speaks many languages,” Tarek said. “Tea is a dialect of all of them. Come.” He took the handle of her trunk before she could argue, set it rolling with a minor charm that made it heel politely, and began walking. “The city will try to sell you herself within the hour,” he added over his shoulder. “Do not take it personally.”

They followed the gold line up a wide staircase whose balustrade had been carved with ibis and lotus that turned their heads, politely curious. The heat changed with altitude, all of it still present, less direct. As they emerged into the open, Cairo’s sound climbed around them - ropes of voices, the clatter of wheels, the tremolo of distant music, the hiss of oil in pans, and the whispered argument of charms negotiating with physics.

Tarek paused on the terrace so that the city could make its introduction. “The Muggle district runs there,” he said, gesturing. “The wizarding quarter threads through it - garlic in the stew. You will know it by the way the light behaves.”

Cassandra shaded her eyes and watched a sliver of street where the sunlight caught and slid sideways, as if it had been trained. A carpet taxi rose from a roof and zipped into a lane with the verve of a man late to romance. A pair of witches bartered at a stall where bottles kited a few inches off the table, each label hand-lettered and gossiping with its neighbor. Children played a game with a levitating hoop that occasionally turned into a snake and back, causing shrieks of pleasure and the odd scolding.

“It’s… loud,” she said, and found she was smiling.

“It is a conversation,” Tarek said. “If you listen long enough, it will ask you a question you have not considered. Which is troublesome, of course. Are you well after your journey?”

“Unreasonably,” she said. “Perhaps it is the biscuits.”

“Perhaps it is that you enjoy the threshold,” he said. He glanced at her with what might have been approval and might have been curiosity. “Come. Gringotts. You will want to get your papers insulted before the day grows ceremonial.”

They took the gold line down a set of steps and into a street where the heat had decided to retire to a tasteful glow. Stall awnings melodramatically offered shade. The smell of fresh bread marched into the nose and set up a plausible government. A cat slept with insolent abandon on a stack of rugs. A man at a stall coaxed a string of copper amulets to jingle themselves into the right order; when one disobeyed he whispered to it and it repented. The air carried the grainy laugh of someone telling a story well and the soft thud of dates being piled with authority.

Tarek’s pace was patient, not slow; he walked like a person who had learned to let the city arrive. “You have been to Egypt before?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Not bodily,” Cassandra said. “I lived in a library at nineteen and imagined the rest.”

“Which library?”

“Hogwarts,” she said. “We measure time there by how much the books disapprove.”

“Ah,” Tarek said. “The old Roman in me respects that.”

Gringotts Cairo had chosen its building with a goblin’s eye for irony. The bank occupied a former customs house on the wizarding edge of the Khan el-Khalili bazaar, its sandstone façade carved with scripts that had learned to harmonize. The goblin crest was carved discretely above the door; it was the only thing discrete about the place. A set of double doors, bronze and bossed, stood open to reveal a hall where coolness had been taught to behave like civility.

Inside, the floor was a mosaic of lapis and bone-white stone that looked expensive and felt like caution. A row of high desks flanked the far end, goblins on their stools with quills poised. The ceiling was painted with constellations that had opinions. The sound of coins moving happened the way breathing did - pervasive, necessary, dignified. Spells kept the heat at the door and moderated it into agreeability.

At the center of the hall, on a dais that gave him jurisdiction over perspective, stood the local director: Griphook al-Azhari. He wore a tailored vest over a shirt so starched it could walk to work alone. His ears were adorned with thin gold cuffs that glinted whenever he adjusted his spectacles, which was each time he decided to be impressed and each time he decided not to. His hands rested lightly on a ledger whose spine had the seductive curve of a snake and the moral clarity of a knife.

“Tarek,” he said, voice like polished brass. “You bring me London’s apology.”

“I bring you London’s Cassandra,” Tarek said, unruffled. “She promises to be both.”

“Director al-Azhari,” Cassandra said, bowing at the precise inclination she had learned to offer goblins who respected precision. “Thank you for receiving me.”

“Miss Blythe,” he said, tasting the syllables for starch content. “The London Director speaks highly of your… initiative.”

“That was kind of her,” Cassandra said. “I’m sure she meant it as a warning.”

He allowed the smallest of smiles, which on a goblin was a transaction conducted in good faith. “Your papers,” he said, and held out a hand.

Cassandra placed the leather case on the dais. The seal felt a different kind of alive here - as if hierarchy had a scent and the case could smell it. Griphook touched the crest with a fingernail. The red vein brightened, then relaxed. He opened the case, glanced through the brief with the unromantic eyes of a creature who knew how many numbers fit into a mouth, then closed it with a decisiveness that might have been relief or strategy.

“We are late to the tomb,” he said. “Not fashionably; bureaucratically. It will not forgive us either way. The Cairo court will require forms to be lodged before we perform even the

courtesy of a sniff. We will lodge them now so that when your hands require permission, the paperwork will already have invented it.”

“Very wise,” Cassandra said. “My hands often outrun my paperwork.”

Griphook led them to a side desk where a clerk awaited behind a mountain of forms. The forms were not blank; they were sleeping. When Cassandra sat, the top form woke, blinked its paragraph eyes, and presented her with a pen that looked like it would report her to the Ministry if she slouched. Tarek took the chair beside her with the long-suffering grace of a man entering into a long engagement with bureaucracy out of love for order and distrust of the people who claimed it.

“Name, occupation, wand registration,” said the clerk, as if reciting an ancient hymn. “Purpose of incursion. Statement of cultural sensitivity. Declaration of weather.”

“Sunny with a chance of regret,” Cassandra murmured, but wrote as instructed. The boxes had small notes in the corners - legal jokes, if such a genre could exist; she suspected they had been added by a goblin in a mood. In the field labeled WHO SPEAKS FOR YOU IN EVENT OF YOUR UNTIMELY FAILURE OF VITAL FUNCTIONS?, Tarek leaned over and said, without looking at her, “Write: my work.”

“That’s grim,” Cassandra said.

“It is honest,” he said, and pointed to another line. “Also, I will sign there.”

“You do not have to,” Cassandra began.

“I know,” he said, and signed. His penmanship was the kind that could cross rivers.

A minor enchantment on the declarations decided to be helpful and translated her English into Arabic, then into a third script that might have been older than both of them decided to be. The Arabic version of Cassandra’s name flowered in a way that felt flattering and mildly incorrect. The old script looked at her with calm indifference. She checked the box that indicated she did not mind being offended by languages as long as they were beautiful.

Griphook watched the forms populate with the indulgent patience of a teacher tolerating a bright child’s handwriting. “There will be a liaison from the court,” he said, “who will evaluate our respectability. Do not show them your curiosity; it has too many teeth.”

“I practice smiling with my mouth closed,” Cassandra said. “It gives me an air of mystery.”

“Here,” Tarek said, sliding a small stack of papers to her, “sign the acknowledgment that you will not remove any artifacts from their context without local authorization, your own conscience, and a miracle.”

Cassandra signed. The forms shivered in satisfaction, stacked themselves, and drifted toward the clerk, who stamped them with the ceremony of a coronation. The stamps left impressions of ibis, scales, and a jar whose lid did not budge.

“Accommodation,” Griphook said briskly. “You will be lodged in a guesthouse two streets over, quiet, with a proprietor who can terrify dust. Leave your trunk there; bring only your satchel to the evening briefing. We go to the site before dawn.”

“The tomb,” Cassandra said, and the word found the place in her mouth it had been meant to sit. “Rahetep.”

The goblin’s eyes flicked to hers and away, a quick acknowledgment of the proper name. “Voice of Amun,” he said. “Politician, priest, or charlatan. He moved money very well. I do not hold that against him.”

“What do you hold against him?” Cassandra asked.

“That he arranged to be alive in a manner that requires paperwork,” Griphook said, and bowed in a way that was really a dismissal in a good suit. “Rest. Think. Do not dream offensively.”

Tarek guided her through the hall and back into the bosom of the bazaar. “We have an hour before we meet again,” he said. “You will want to see the quarter. But first - we set you down at the guesthouse. Otherwise you will spill your enthusiasm in the street and someone will bottle it and resell it to you.”

He was not wrong. The bazaar tugged at the senses with ten small, happy hands. Stalls offered spices in pyramids so precise they seemed to be negotiating with gravity. A wizened wizard with a lute sang a song whose chorus made coins in pockets vibrate in sympathy. Baskets of dates, figs, and persimmons glowed as if lit from within. A boy wheeled a cart piled with pomegranates that had decided to be rubies. A woman in a headscarf extended a tray of sweets that shimmered as if dusted with a charm of polite suggestion. Carpets leaned against one another like conspirators, patterns listening. A fountain in a courtyard lifted water by handfuls and set it back, glossier.

“Look up,” Tarek said.

She did. The wizarding quarter floated a layer above the market, tethered by ropes that did not exist to eyes that had not been taught to see them: a platform of stalls selling bottled sunlight, jars labeled COMPLIANCE (do not feed to governments), tiny pyramids made of nothing that reflected everything, and a teashop whose sign declared, with comic sincerity, WE POLISH OUR TEA. Hot, bitter fragrance drifted down and turned her hands into cups.

“The floating market runs evenings,” Tarek said. “If you go alone, leave a breadcrumb trail of sarcasm. It will find you home.”

The guesthouse Tarek chose for her lived in a street that had learned when to be quiet. Bougainvillea climbed the walls with a purposeful laziness; lizards took their sun on a wall and performed a negotiation with insects. The sign above the door read, in both Arabic and English: RAHEEMA’S ROOMS - TEA AT SENSIBLE HOURS. A bell proclaimed her entry to the proprietor, who emerged from behind the desk like a storm with an apron.

“Cassandra Blythe,” Raheema declared in a voice with rules. She was a woman of indeterminate grandmotherhood, round of cheek and sharp of eye, wearing a cobalt headscarf and the air of someone who had made peace with chaos by teaching it table manners. “The goblin called. You will not cook in the room. You will not conjure goats. You will not set fire to anything that is not already on fire, and if a man comes to the door after ten o’clock, he had better be the moon.”

“I can promise the first three,” Cassandra said. “The moon and I are not on speaking terms.”

“Good,” Raheema said. “Breakfast is bread that has done nothing wrong, cheese that works for a living, and honey with a good heart. Tea at six, eleven, and four. You will be in the room with the sensible window.”

“What makes a window sensible?” Cassandra asked, delighted, following Raheema up the stairs.

“It understands ankles,” Raheema said, as if that explained it, and opened a door.

The room was a gentle punctuation mark. Whitewashed walls; a narrow bed dressed in crisp cotton; a little table with a jug of water that had learned the virtue of cold; a rug whose pattern ran at respectable angles. The window looked out onto a courtyard where a lemon tree had thoughts. When Cassandra opened it a hand’s width, a draft came in that smelled like evening practicing.

“The bath,” Raheema said, indicating a door. “The mirror, there. If it talks to you, tell it I charge extra.”

“I’ve dealt with opinionated mirrors,” Cassandra said. “We’re in a union.”

“Good,” Raheema said again, pleased despite herself. “Rest. Then go to your goblins. If they insult you, insult them back. It means you belong.”

When Raheema had gone, Cassandra set the trunk at the foot of the bed, unlatched it, and let the flat breathe into the room - laundry and tax forms, yes, and a thread of rosemary. She took out the Field Spoon and set it on the table next to the jug. It looked back at her as if considering its own myth.

She washed her face, and the water was cool in the exact way that made grateful a form of prayer. She combed her hair with the patience of a woman addressing a rebel congregation. She set her hat on the peg, fanned the brim as if it were a hawk who had flown well. Then she turned toward the mirror.

It was square and contained and did not pretend to secrets. Its frame was plain wood; its glass had the faint waviness of age. Her face came back to her obediently: ink smudge mostly negotiated into a truce, mouth set in a line she recognized from trying not to be herself too loudly, eyes bright with a species of hope she’d learned to disguise as academic interest.

“Hello,” she told herself. “Welcome to Cairo. Behave.”

The mirror did not offer commentary. This was almost disappointing. She lifted her field journal to the sill, opened it, and wrote, quick, before calm uncovered doubt: Cairo smells like cumin, mint, and old arguments. The light here denies guilt. Tarek is polite in a way that costs him something. Griphook has the morality of a ledger and the humor of one that has seen empires. The city is a conversation. I am listening.

She closed the journal and, only then, saw them.

Just at the edge of sight, in the mirror's glass, a handful of faint, hair-thin lines had formed. They had the particular cleanness of a reed pen's first stroke and the particular arrogance of language that knew it could outlast us. Hieroglyphs - not precise, not overt; the ghost of an ibis, the suggestion of water, a rectangle that wanted to be a mouth. The lines gathered themselves without haste, not reflected from the room, not scratched onto glass, not exactly anywhere. They coalesced until there was no pretending she had imagined them.

Cassandra did not move. Her pulse gathered itself and sat. She knew enough of old things to know that they tolerated theater poorly. She let her breath find its decent pace. The lines shifted - a small arithmetic of strokes - and then, with a softness that resembled kindness, the shapes thinned and reformed, the way a mind thinks its way into a familiar tongue.

The dead have opinions.

The words were hand-written English in the glass and not; they were breath on a cold window and not. They held for the span of four heartbeats and then unwrote themselves, the strokes receding like waves that had liked her and left anyway.

She stood with her hands on the journal as if it were a railing.

"Good evening," she said to the room, because someone should be acknowledged when they had gone to the trouble of being portentous. Her voice did not shake. She refused it permission. She waited, because that was part of the ritual too: you left room for the world to answer itself.

Silence. The lemon tree outside flicked a leaf with tact. In the alley, a cart rolled with all the resignation of wood. Far off, a muezzin called the sky to order, and magic - whatever layer of it draped the city - shifted in its sleep.

Cassandra laughed then, softly, because fear was a beast that preferred to be fed plainly. "Noted," she said, and meant it. "I'm listening."

She washed her hands because she needed to do something ordinary. She pressed damp palms to cheeks that had no business being as hot as they were. She took up her satchel and checked the tools again with a finger's inventory: stylus, chalk, thread, lens, clamp, salts, mirror shard, ring like a sleeper. She tucked the sesame biscuit into the side pocket where superstition lived. She put the leather case in the satchel; it hummed as if it disapproved of cohabitation.

The sun had tilted to evening, the light in the courtyard turning honey with a thin edge of brass. She pulled the window nearly shut and set the latch the way Raheema's rooms had

wanted it; she breathed a charm into the air - lock, hush, be kind. The room accepted it with the dignified relief of a widow accepting tea.

Downstairs, Raheema pressed a paper parcel into her hands without comment. Inside, flatbreads still warm at the heart and a stub of salty cheese; the parcel smelled like a solution. “Eat while you walk,” Raheema said. “Walk while you think. Do not think while you cross the street. The carriages have their own gods.”

Outside, Cairo had lowered a silk over the day. Lanterns came on all at once and then again; some were charmed to burn a shade bluer, some to carry within them a story in the shape of light. The market gathered itself for the hour when everything became possible again. Cassandra ate bread because it knew what to do with her hands. The gold line rose underfoot and led. Somewhere ahead, Griphook would have put down a brass marker that said THIS WAY TO YOUR CHOICES. Somewhere behind, a mirror had shrugged off a message and resumed impersonating glass. Somewhere in between, a woman who lived in her skin and did not always deserve it walked into an evening that had decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

As she turned the corner onto the street that led to the bank, she thought she saw, at the edge of the crowd, a sleek, golden cat perched on a low wall, watching with the weary theatrical disdain of the very competent. It blinked - slow, sovereign - and then leapt away into the tangle of legs and robes and sandals, already and always belonging to the city.

“Right,” Cassandra told the city, the cat, the paper parcel, herself. “Let’s be extraordinarily careful.”

The bazaar answered with a hundred voices and one; the night tipped its ear; a distant door loosened in its frame as if remembering it had once been opened for love. She walked toward Gringotts with the sense that the chapter she had written for herself had inhaled, and Cairo was about to exhale an answer.

Chapter 2: Arrival in Cairo

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The carpet ferry tipped its nose like a courteous bird and coasted down toward Cairo, the city lifting to meet it in a thousand bright fragments: minarets drawn fine as quills, rooftops glazed in sun, alleys stitched in shadow and brass. Heat reached up first - dry, unapologetic, the kind that emptied the lungs and then filled them again with the taste of stone. It smelled of cumin and dust and something sweet that had burned a little, like caramel taught manners.

“Cairo,” announced the steward in a voice that had shepherded far worse passengers than gravity. “Remain dignified.”

Cassandra let the charm-belt slip free. The sash loosened with a satisfied hiss, as if relieved not to die for her. All around, the other passengers unfolded from their seats like complicated letters: a tourist witch coaxing a sulking stormlet back into its jar with a raindrop; a trader rolling up a carpet that had opinions; a young wizard whose hat had decided to stay at a better altitude and had to be negotiated back down by compliments.

The ferry kissed the gate. Magic flexed - runes in the archway pulsing once, approving the landing - then stilled. Warm air stepped aboard with authority. Cassandra stood and felt the heat lay a hand along her cheekbones, not hostile, merely intimate. London’s damp had never been that forward. She forgave it at once.

“Bags from the aft charm,” the steward called. “If your luggage begins reciting poetry, it belongs to someone else.”

Cassandra claimed her trunk from a complaining platform that grumbled in Ancient Greek about journeys and consequences. “I know,” she told it, and set it trundling after her, charmed wheels humming at a pitch just shy of audible guilt. Her satchel sat across her body with the self-importance of a small museum.

Beyond the embarkation gate lay the hall of the Cairo Port Authority: high-ceilinged and blue, the color of old ceramics and sensible skies. The air was cooler inside, shaped by ceiling fans that turned with the serene zeal of saints, and by subtle spells that combed the heat into civility and threaded mint through it. Light fell through tall windows in soft slabs, catching dust motes and polishing them into opinionated stars. Signs wrote and rewrote themselves into welcoming scripts: **Ticketing**, **Permits**, **Customs** - the last underlined with a flourish that implied it had been ignored recently and had made its feelings known.

A banner drifted overhead and adjusted to English as it passed above her: **Declare all conjured weather. No storms over foreign capitals.** A helpful suite of illustrations showed a jar with lightning sulking inside it; a sack of beetles labeled **Absolutely Not**; and a stack of books whose teeth were visible, captioned **Mordant Tomes (Feed Before Transit).**

Cassandra joined the river of travelers and was carried to a window where a clerk with gold spectacles and a pen like a small sword assessed her with professional indifference. She presented her boarding card and the leather case from London with the goblin seal that hummed faintly, as if it knew other seals in this building and was trying to behave.

“Purpose of travel?” the clerk asked, already unimpressed.

“Work,” Cassandra said brightly, because it always sounded dubious in customs halls. “Advisement.”

“Destination?”

“Cairo,” she said, and then, because the clerk’s eyebrows were prepared to be offended by specificity, “The Gringotts branch.”

The clerk touched the seal with a rune-tipped stylus. The red vein in the crest answered with a small, prim pulse. “Four-ten eastbound,” the clerk recited anyway, stamping her ticket with a series of decisive bites: **ARRIVED**, **PROCESSED**, **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN ADVENTURE** (a Department of International Magical Cooperation flourish, cheerful and threatening).

“Welcome to Cairo,” the clerk said, in the tone of a person who had personally invented bureaucracy and regretted how well it worked for other people.

“Your forms smell of cinnamon,” Cassandra said before she could stop herself.

The clerk allowed a microscopic smile, as a treat. “We like to keep morale high.”

Customs resembled a confessional designed by a poet. A row of floating brass hoops waited to be walked through, each tuned to sing if contraband wandered under their noses. Posters along the queue offered friendly reminders in an assortment of alphabets:

- **NO BOTTLED CALAMITIES**
- **DECLARE ALL SENTIENT TEAWARE**
- **IF YOUR HAT TALKS, IT TALKS TO US FIRST**

The hoops hummed amicably at babies, ignored hats that knew their place, and broke into startling arpeggios at a briefcase that tried to ooze sideways. A witch with forearms like law nudged the case with her wand; it stiffened into innocence and was adopted by a man who pretended it had always been his.

“Tools?” asked a customs officer when Cassandra’s turn arrived. The woman had her hair braided like a rope and a gaze that could staple an excuse to the wall.

“Curse-breaking,” Cassandra said, laying out the roll: copper stylus, charmed chalk, lens, red memory thread, the clamp with its delicate little teeth trying not to look predatory. “All domesticated. The clamp bites only nouns.”

The officer peered, unimpressed by nouns. “Any live specimens?”

“Absolutely not,” Cassandra said with admirable sincerity for a person who owned a jar labeled **SPECIMEN: DO NOT OPEN** in a city three thousand miles away. “The only weather I have is a sigh for tea.”

“Good,” said the officer, not meaning it. She pointed her wand. “Hoop three.”

Cassandra stepped through. The hoop sang a single soothing note in the key of compliance and let her pass. Her trunk followed, its inner aura of laundry and tax forms discouraging curiosity like a smell.

Ahead, the hall opened into terraces that gazed over the city and the Nile’s slow curtsey of light. Signs on the stairs painted spells underfoot: **Blue line to Outbound**, **Green to Bazaars**, **Gold to Gringotts**. The gold brightened when she looked at it, pleased to be noticed. Cairo spoke even through tiles.

At the top of the steps, the Port Authority’s grand doors stood open as if to admit the day itself. The threshold had been edged with narrow plaques of inscribed stone; as Cassandra crossed, they warmed under her soles, recognizing her as a kind of truth, or at least as a new problem. Outside, the city’s voice rose to meet her - wheels on stone, the scold of vendors, the bargaining laughter that meant someone had won and no one had lost, the skim of brooms in sanctioned lanes, the metallic squeak of a cart low on oil and high on opinions.

Heat settled around her collarbones and got on with being itself. The light was honest. London’s light negotiated with fog; Cairo’s made its case and rested. Spells sat in the air like orchids - visible if you knew to look: thin weaves holding an awning’s shade steady, a shimmer where a crate hovered two inches off a porter’s back, the neat, quiet line of a ward keeping a fountain’s spray from getting above itself.

Cassandra paused because it felt rude not to. A breeze lifted off the river and rummaged in her hair with familiar insolence. Far along the embankment she could see the aerial lanes twist away, glimmering ladders up which the day’s other ferries stitched themselves smaller. A stray carpet taxi pirouetted out of a side street and was immediately corralled by a traffic charm that made disapproval feel like velvet.

“Green line is to the markets,” a helpful usher told her, nodding at her trunk, at the satchel with its bristling tools. “Gold is Gringotts. If you follow the wrong one, they will sort you eventually, but it feels like a lesson.”

“I like lessons,” Cassandra said. “I prefer them to be funny.”

“They seldom are,” the usher said, with the charity of experience.

She set her trunk to heel and started down toward the gold line’s first turn. The painted band kept a respectful pace underfoot, attentive as a discreet guide. Passing travelers made their own weather - a wake of perfume here, of ink and paper there; a man whose robes carried a delicious aroma of coffee and cardamom; a boy trailing chalky dust that drifted into letters before un-writing itself, a trick that suggested underage magic and a future in either poetry or fraud.

A knot of wizards argued amiably outside a tea stall. A tray of glasses steamed in the shade, narrow-waisted, the tea in them the color of amber that had made a bad decision. A kettle poured itself with practiced courtesy. Cassandra's bones, which were largely tea with pretensions, answered with interest. She filed the stall in the cabinet of later.

At the foot of the terrace steps, a bronze statue surveyed the comings and goings: a witch in travel robes, chin tipped to a horizon only she could see, a rug rolled under one arm. In winter, someone had wrapped a scarf around her neck; now it lay folded back across her shoulders, like a blessing well remembered. The base of the statue bore an inscription in four languages. The English was tidy and self-satisfied:

TRAVEL IS A SPELL YOU CAST ON YOURSELF. DO TRY TO PRONOUNCE IT CORRECTLY.

Cassandra touched two fingers to her brim in salute. The brim had already decided on Cairo: it would cope until it didn't. Her hair, freed from London's humility, began designing new architecture.

The gold line led her under a stone arch into a courtyard where a fountain lifted water in handfuls and set it back with a private smile. A cat slept on the warm ledge with the elaborate indifference of the truly competent. When Cassandra passed, it opened one eye the exact color of gilding and closed it again, having measured her and found her insufficiently edible.

"Fair," she said. The city, so far, had found her the same.

Paperwork found her instead. A stand labeled **Foreign Wands & Other Honesty** waited in the shade with a clerk whose demeanor said he could smell a false declaration a week before you wrote it. "Registration," he said when she arrived, already producing a form that considered itself a small destiny. "Mark any components likely to disturb local weather, grave goods, or courts."

"My wand is well-behaved," Cassandra said, setting it down on the felt. The hawthorn hummed against her skin, the sound you get when a bee has an opinion. "It occasionally hums in E minor."

"We've had worse," the clerk said, and rolled the wand under a little arch of test runes. They blinked, then settled. "No grave goods?"

"Not even the memory of one."

"No courts?"

"I try to keep law on a strictly conversational basis."

The clerk stamped her form with a jackal's head that nodded solemnly as it sank into the paper. "You'll do."

"Is that a prediction?"

"A wish," he said, which was kinder.

The gold line curved to an exit framed in sandstone, each block catching light along its hand-polished edges. Beyond, a flight of shallow steps ran down to the street. A sign painted in a confident hand read: **Gringotts - two streets east, one argument south.** Someone had added, in a different hand, **Bring a hat.** The heat agreed.

Cassandra shaded her eyes and took her first proper look at the city that, for a while, would be the room her life lived in. It was not one city, she decided, any more than language was one voice. It was stacks of time deciding to be neighbors. It was buckets of shade hung where the day needed it. It was a vendor balancing a tray of bread like a crown; it was children playing a game with a hoop that occasionally turned into a snake and back again, causing shrieks and instruction; it was a woman bargaining so skillfully that money felt grateful to change hands; it was a pair of brooms zipping along a marked lane with the efficient insolence shared by birds and civil servants.

Her trunk nudged her ankle, impatient to belong to a place. “All right,” she said, half to it, half to herself, entirely to Cairo. “Let’s try to be useful.”

The gold line brightened under her foot like a word pronounced correctly, and led her into heat that smelled like history deciding to trust her for an afternoon.

“Miss Blythe?”

The voice was sand-dry and library-quiet, carrying easily over the hum of the Port Authority terrace. Cassandra turned from the view and found a man who looked as though the city had been built at his pace: not tall like statues, but precisely as tall as doorframes; a white shirt rolled to the forearms, trousers that had learned purpose, a charcoal vest with a pen tucked into the seam like a secret. His hair had committed to black but was losing a side-battle with a cowlick. His eyes were a brown you read twice.

“Tarek el-Farouk,” he said, and offered a hand that was warm and knuckled by paper-cuts. “Gringotts has hired me to ensure you don’t accidentally declare war on a temple.”

“Cassandra Blythe,” she said, shaking. “I prefer to limit myself to skirmishes.”

His mouth tilted - humor, kept on a leash. “Welcome to Cairo. Your ferry was on time. A miracle. We try not to stare.” He glanced past her at the river of passengers spilling down the steps. “You have luggage?”

“It follows me when I sound authoritative.” Cassandra flicked a finger at her trunk. It trundled obediently, then feinted at her ankle in what might have been affection and might have been union rules. “It also sulks.”

“Good,” he said. “You’ll fit in.”

They stood for a heartbeat with the heat deciding where to sit on their shoulders. Up close, Tarek smelled faintly of ink and mint and something resinous - citrus oil, perhaps - like a bookmark kept in a lemon grove. He nodded toward the exit stairs. “Gringotts is near. Best to get your papers insulted before the afternoon heat learns its full vocabulary.”

They set off along the gold line. It brightened underfoot at their choosing, pleased as a helpful sentence. Cairo presented itself in a sequence of small revelations: a boy balancing a rack of bread on his head like a crown; a broom courier slaloming through a prescribed lane with the sanctimony of a civil servant; a vendor coaxing copper amulets into the proper order by whispering to them until they blushed.

“You’ve been here before,” Cassandra said, because his stride had the ease of a person who had made peace with corners.

“Always,” Tarek said. “And not enough.” He cut her a look as they passed a stall where glass bottles of sunlight dozed in straw. “You, I suspect, are new.”

“I once wrote a paper about Egypt at nineteen inside the Hogwarts library,” Cassandra said. “Does that count?”

“Only if you included footnotes in the local dialect,” he said mildly.

She grinned, then decided not to. “I’m here to advise on a clearance. Routine, I’m told.”

“Yes,” he said. “Many routine things end with people writing letters that begin, ‘If you are reading this, I am dead or bureaucratically inconvenienced.’” He nodded at her satchel. “You are with Gringotts. Their routine is… lucrative.”

“Lucrative is an adjective; I prefer nouns,” Cassandra said. “Protections. Wards. Safeties. My job is to make sure no one sticks their hand into history and comes back shy a few fingers.”

“And to ship the object to London once it has been defanged,” he said, not unkindly.

“Gringotts ships it,” she corrected. “I merely try to persuade curses to retire gracefully.”

“Mm.” He sidestepped a cart that squeaked its displeasure at the concept of wheels. “Cassandra Blythe - how do you say it? Blythe as in happy? Or Blithe as in - ”

Her trunk, clearly charmed to defend something, snapped its clasp like a small crocodile, neatly missing his ankle.

“Ah,” he said, eyebrows lifting a polite centimeter. “Blythe as in bite.”

“It objects to mispronunciation,” Cassandra said. “It once took an inch off a Minister’s robes when he tried ‘Blee-theh’ at a reception.”

He crouched to eye the trunk. “Protective magic keyed to phoneme recognition. Who cast it?”

“I did,” she said, and tried not to look pleased. “In a mood.”

“Effective,” he conceded, straightening. “Though one hopes it doesn’t meet poetry.”

They passed beneath an arch where the shade had learned manners. A fountain lifted its handfuls of water and set them down again, pleased with itself; a cat slept on the warm rim

with the elaborate indifference of a monarch pretending to be a loaf. It cracked one amber eye as they went by, measuring them both and filing the results with ancient bureaucracy.

“You received the… parcel?” Tarek asked after a moment, as if agreeing with the cat first.

Cassandra glanced sideways. “The tin with the compass rose,” she said, neutral as paper. “Sesame biscuits.” The memory of sweetness and sesame and clove smoke passed over her tongue. “A bribe?”

“A test,” he said. “Of character. People who eat two and save one can be negotiated with.”

“And people who eat all three?”

“Are British,” he said gravely.

She laughed despite herself; the sound came out like something surprised into being. “I ate two and saved one. I am therefore… negotiable?”

“Possibly educable,” he said, granting her a promotion.

A carpet taxi heaved up from a side street, tassels stiff with self-importance. It wobbled toward them, its driver - a short wizard in a red vest - calling, “Bazaar! Museum! Very reasonable metaphors!” Tarek lifted two fingers without looking. The carpet subsided with the put-upon patience of a veteran and drifted away to insult someone else.

“You work with the bank often?” Cassandra asked.

“Often enough to know when it has already decided what to hear,” he said. “Also often enough to know its curse-breakers are not, on average, villains.” He considered. “Merely hungry.”

“Hungry for what?”

“Names,” he said. “The true ones. The words under the words.”

Cassandra felt the observation land; it had the accuracy of a thrown pebble and the lack of malice. She shifted her satchel as if to redistribute the truth inside it. “And you?”

“I like things to stay where their stories make sense,” he said. “Transport is a form of translation. Sometimes necessary, often violent.”

“I translate for a living,” Cassandra said. “Runes to speech, curses to consent. I try not to injure the grammar.”

“Language is still a history of wounds,” he said, but without heat.

They turned onto a street that had decided to be sensible: shade at a premium, doors persuaded to open to breezes, awnings with ambitions of tenthood. Children chased a hoop that occasionally turned into a snake and then, embarrassed, back into a hoop; their shrieks of delighted horror refreshed the air. A woman at a stall stacked jars of spice in pyramids so

exacting that gravity watched respectfully. Someone somewhere was singing a tune stitched in a minor key, the notes like stepping-stones across heat.

“Tell me about the job,” Tarek said, incidental as tea. “The version of it your superiors would permit you to speak.”

Cassandra adopted her most officious tone. “Preliminary unsealing. Ambient protections ‘atypical.’ Site identity disclosed on arrival to discourage correspondence in advance. Local liaison” - she inclined her head - “engaged.”

“Atypical,” he repeated. “Excellent word. Means ‘we do not yet know how to be wrong about this.’”

“And yet entirely confident we will discover a method,” she said.

“Always,” he said, and for a moment the smile got off its leash. “We’ll go to the bank first. Griphook al-Azhari will want your signature on seventeen forms, two of which are legally edible.”

“I do hope one tastes of cinnamon,” Cassandra said. “London’s forms have the palate of chalk.”

He slowed outside a narrow passage where the gold line ran like a thread. The air funneled; the heat rearranged its grammar; the smells shifted - soap and brass and ink and the faint sweetness of something like molasses. “Before you meet him - one thing, Miss Blythe.”

“Just one?” she said.

“For now.” He tipped his chin toward the market proper, where traders sang prices and magic overlapped itself like woven shade. “You come from a place that thinks the world is a museum. This is a place that thinks the world is a conversation.”

“I can listen,” she said, and wanted it to be truer than it had ever been.

“Good,” he said. “Conversations here have teeth.” His gaze dropped to the trunk. “As do trunks.”

The lane narrowed, then opened into a square cooled by a charm that made the air behave like a good host. On one side, a courtyard teashop floated six inches above the ground, tethered with ropes that glowed faintly - an evening market setting up ahead of time, impatient. On the other, a doorway had been convinced to grow taller to admit something large and important. A sign above a set of bronze doors announced in tidy goblin script and perfectly behaved Arabic:

GRINGOTTS – CAIRO BRANCH
PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE ACCOUNTING LEDGERS

“Nearly there,” Tarek said, then paused as Cassandra’s trunk slowed. It had angled itself toward a stall where tiny pyramids made of nothing reflected everything. The vendor - an

elderly wizard with a beard that had made several promises and kept none - extended a hand toward the brass handle. “For you, miss, a good price,” he began, and then: “Miss Blithe - ”

The trunk snapped again, very neatly, taking the man’s sleeve between its teeth and releasing it with a guilty swallow. The vendor jumped, clutched his heart, then peered at the name painted on the side panel in neat hand: **C. Blythe**. He tried it again cautiously. “Miss Bly - the - thuh?”

“By ‘the’ but with hope,” Cassandra said. “Blythe.”

“Ah!” He beamed, uninjured. “May your days be as your name.” He wagged a finger at the trunk. “And you, little crocodile, learn patience.”

The trunk flicked its clasp in a manner that suggested it had heard worse.

Tarek’s eyebrows performed a second ascent. “You are well-defended for someone who claims to rely on charm.”

“I rely on both kinds,” she said. The truth of it surprised her into a smaller smile than she would have offered in London.

They crossed the square. Above the bank’s bronze threshold, a frieze had been set: jackals and ibis sharing space with goblin characters, stars pricked into the stone as though the ceiling had become absent-minded at night and written notes on the lintel. As Cassandra stepped under it, the hairs on her arms rose; something in the seal in her satchel answered like a struck string. She felt the file hum, faint and precise, as if it recognized authority and disapproved, but would be civil.

“Griphook prefers punctuality to charm,” Tarek said softly. “And truth to both. He will like you if you annoy him correctly.”

“I’ve been practicing since birth,” Cassandra said, and laid a hand on the leather case where the wax seal with its microscopic runes thrummed like a thought. The metal door handles were cool despite the heat, polished by hands and intent. In the reflection she saw them briefly: herself, hair already abandoning good sense; Tarek, composed at an angle you only learned by living; the city behind, stitched together from brightness and argument.

“Ready?” he asked.

“No,” Cassandra said, and stepped inside.

Gringotts Cairo had the good sense to look expensive without looking surprised by itself.

The bronze doors sighed like restrained gossip as Tarek pulled them open, and cool air rolled out - mint and stone and ink taught to behave. Inside, the floor was a mosaic of lapis and bone-white pieces arranged in a geometry that made standing on it feel like education. The walls were sandstone cut to the bone; the light that fell across them turned warm as tea. The ceiling had been persuaded into night, constellations pricked there in gold leaf and common sense. They seemed to shift when you weren’t looking, not to deceive, only to remind.

A discreet plaque near the door declared in three languages: **DO NOT FEED THE ACCOUNTING LEDGERS. THEY BITE WHAT THEY EAT.**

A ledger on a side table turned a page with carnivorous composure and pretended not to have read that.

Cassandra stepped across the threshold and felt the tremor run up through the soles of her boots and into her bones - the way Gringotts always introduced itself: You have entered a system that predated civility and merely hired it later. The leather case at her hip hummed, the microscopic runes in the wax seal rising like minnows and settling again. Her wand vibrated in its holster with an eagerness that was either anticipation or the beginnings of a sulk.

“Miss Blythe,” Tarek murmured, leaning slightly toward her as they crossed the mosaic, “this branch keeps time by exacting it from others. Try to be punctual about your heartbeats.”

“I’ll set them five ahead,” she said, and the joke liked the room enough to stand up straight.

At the far end, a dais lifted a long slab of desk to goblin height and dignity. Goblins prefer to look down on business; elevation saves them steps. A rank of clerks perched on high stools like predatory birds disguised as civil servants, fingers ink-stained and immaculate. Quills made the crisp, merciless sounds of truth being made legible. A clerk checked a string of coins for lies; the coins told the truth reluctantly and were stamped into virtue.

At the center, on a slightly higher platform, stood Griphook al-Azhari. He wore a vest of dark blue that approached black, a shirt so starched it had opinions, and a pair of tiny gold cuffs clasped to his ears. His spectacles - oval and uncompromising - caught the lamps and turned them into thin knives. He had the presence of a blade laid flat: not threatening if you respected it; very inconvenient if you did not. His ledger lay open before him, its spine a snake, its pages the color of old ivory, its columns as pitiless as math.

“Tarek,” he said without looking up, as if he had already counted their footsteps. “You bring me London’s apology.”

“Close,” Tarek said, composed as a proverb. “I bring you London’s Cassandra.”

Griphook’s eyes lifted. They were dark, not kindly, precise. He took her in - the heat-frizzed hair attempting architecture, the good boots, the satchel bristling tools and intentions - and lowered his gaze again in a way that managed to be both dismissal and welcome.

“Miss Blythe,” he said. “Move closer so I may decide if your name is an adjective.”

“Grammatically.” Cassandra mounted the two steps to the dais and inclined her head, finding the precise angle between goblin courtesy and human vertebrae. “Thank you for receiving me.”

“I did not receive you,” Griphook said. “I am tolerating you. There is a distinction. The bank receives money.” His mouth creased - humor unhooked for one breath. “We make exceptions for the unusually useful.”

“I would like,” Cassandra said, “to be alumni of that category.”

“We prefer patrons,” he said. “Alumni seldom pay interest.”

He held out a hand that had never apologized to a quill. Cassandra set the leather case upon the desk as one sets down a sacred text and an explosive. He touched the seal with a nail as clean as judgment. The red vein running through the crest brightened, recognized its own species, then subsided with a murmur just at the threshold of sound - consent, under protest.

“You traveled light,” Griphook observed, lifting the case’s flap with two fingers.

“I brought all things that make me tolerable and left the others with my neighbors,” Cassandra said.

“We shall test that assertion,” he replied, and withdrew the thin sheaf of papers bound with ribbon. The ribbon removed itself and lay down respectfully. He read the first page with the swift assurance of a being who had memorized the part of the world that mattered and was checking if London had forged it. His eyes flickered once - in interest, not surprise - at a line no human could have seen through the paper. He turned a second page. A column of very small text in the margin breathed a little, then lay still.

“Ambient protections ‘atypical,’” he recited. “Sensible people call this ‘lively.’” He returned the brief to the case and closed it on the seal. The clasp clicked with relief. “We have paperwork.”

“I thought we might,” Cassandra said. “I’m told some of it is even edible.”

“Two forms,” Griphook conceded, “may be eaten in emergencies. They taste like fennel and compliance. We prefer you sign them.” He nodded to a lower desk to the right, staffed by a clerk with a mouth like a line in a ledger.

The clerk slid forward a stack as scenic as a mountain range. The top page woke with a little tremor, paragraphs stretching as though after a nap, and presented her with a pen whose nib winked like a stiletto. The clerk looked at Cassandra as one looks at a new species, not hostile, invested.

“Name,” the clerk said.

“Cassandra Blythe,” she said.

“Spell it,” the clerk demanded, already spelling it correctly.

“Do not encourage her trunk,” Tarek murmured.

“Occupation.”

“Curse-Breaker, Gringotts London. Subspecialty: protective runes, translational sigils, occupational tea.”

The clerk glanced up. “We do not recognize tea as a specialty.”

“You will,” Cassandra said, and received her first Cairo bureaucratic silence.

“Purpose of incursion,” the clerk continued, unimpressed by humor that had not shown the proper papers.

“Preliminary unsealing. Advisement.”

The form’s top right corner wrote that down for itself in a tidier hand than hers.

“Declaration of weather.”

“A personal breeze only,” Cassandra said. “No thunder. I left my storm in a jar with a friend.”

The clerk checked a box labeled **BREEZE (TAMED)** and moved on. “Cultural liabilities.”

“An English education,” Cassandra said, and Tarek made an appreciative, inaudible cough. “I am attempting to rehabilitate.”

“Put: ‘none declared,’” the clerk said. “Declaration of moral hazards.”

“Curiosity,” Cassandra admitted before her politic self could tape her mouth. “And a comorbid wit.”

“Both incur taxes,” the clerk said, and stamped a margin with a jackal that nodded once as it bit.

While they worked, the bank breathed around them. A goblin clerk at the far end argued gently with a parade of coin-bags that insisted on counting themselves into seven when the ledger wanted six. A courier dash-walked in with a portfolio that panted. Somewhere in the back, a small door squealed a protest and was scolded into adulthood. High on the wall, the constellations rearranged a hair’s breadth, as if offering a footnote to some transaction below.

“Local counsel,” Griphook said after the third stamp. “We have engaged a liaison with the court. We must make your presence legal before we make it useful.”

“Inspector Mogrim?” Tarek guessed.

“Later,” Griphook said. “First, a clerk who frightens paper into good behavior.” He tapped a silver bell that did not ring so much as produce the sensation of having rung.

A door in the paneling slid open with the tact of servants. A goblin woman emerged carrying a tray of more forms and three thin cups of coffee that must have been brewed from night itself. She set the cups down without spilling a shadow.

“This is Sumi,” Griphook said. “She will keep you from becoming a human error.” He turned slightly in Tarek’s direction without granting him the full gift of eye contact. “You will translate where our forms become themselves.”

“I always do,” Tarek said. “They never thank me.”

“They pay you,” Griphook replied. “That is gratitude with better handwriting.”

Sumi placed a form before Cassandra that had been folded into a triangle. For a breath it looked like a small tent. Then it unfolded itself, revealed a grid of boxes, and in one corner a discreet stamp that already read **KINDLY READ BEFORE DYING**.

“This is the Acknowledgment of Context,” Sumi intoned. “You agree not to remove artifacts from their narrative.”

“From their… narrative?” Cassandra said, pleasure striking. “That’s the best phrasing I’ve ever been threatened with.”

“It translates badly,” Tarek murmured. “Into English it becomes ‘no taking things without permission.’ Into goblin it is ‘no theft.’ Into Arabic it is more intricate. It implies ‘do not amputate meaning.’”

Cassandra signed, feeling the pen’s magic take her name and file it in a drawer labeled **Promises, Provisional**. The ink glimmered a moment and dried into a seriousness she respected.

The next form had a corner chewed, as if someone had tested its edibility and found it inferior. **DECLARATION OF ANIMATE CONTENTS.** “No specimens,” Cassandra said quickly, and the paper, which had been bracing itself, relaxed.

“You will also initial here,” Sumi said, indicating a sentence that swam nauseatingly before settling into **I understand that ghosts are citizens when present and guests when not.**

“Ghost law,” Tarek explained in a low voice. “It prevents people from using the dead for legal advantage. You may speak to them; you may not subpoena them.”

“Do they subpoena us?” Cassandra asked.

“Frequently,” Sumi said, deadpan. “Their fees are sensible.”

Griphook watched all this with a patience that had nothing to do with time. He stepped down from the dais and paced once along the length of the hall, listening to his own bank settling itself around an afternoon. When he returned, Cassandra had reached a page whose heading read **WHO SPEAKS FOR YOU IF YOU BECOME TEMPORARY OR PERMANENTLY UNAVAILABLE?** The choices included **EMPLOYER**, **SOLICITOR**, **NEIGHBOR**, **MOTHER**, and **WORK**.

Tarek’s sleeve brushed the page as if by accident. “The last,” he said, too softly for anyone but her to hear. “It’s what they expect. And what you will want.”

Cassandra considered and checked **WORK**, because honesty sometimes felt like arrogance and this was one of those times. The box darkened with a little sigh that might have been relief, might have been preemptive grief. She handed the pen back. It bit her lightly, as if to taste accuracy.

Griphook took the stack from Sumi and riffled the signatures. “Acceptable,” he said, which was nearly a caress. He slid one more document across the desk, thinner than paper and heavier than air. Its surface looked like polished bone; letters rose on it from underneath like fish and sank again.

“This is the memorandum of purpose,” he said. “You will read it and say aloud that you have read it. If you do not say it aloud, it will assume you have lied.”

Cassandra bent over the thing. It bore only a handful of lines:

OPERATIONAL PURPOSE: PRELIMINARY UNSEALING OF SITE RA-HTP.
SENSITIVITY: HIGH.
NOTES: AMBIENT PROTECTIONS ATYPICAL. LOCAL LAW OBSERVED IN LETTER AND SPIRIT. LIAISE WITH COURT. DO NOT ANNOTATE THE SITE.

As her eyes traced **RA-HTP**, the letters shivered, testing recognition. A whisper - nothing more than her own breath in her ear - aligned them into a name she already knew was a name. Rahetep. The syllables tasted like the moment before honey burns.

“I have read it,” she said, obedient to magic that liked to be obeyed. The memorandum warmed in her hands and then cooled, satisfied.

“Good,” Griphook said. “Now we can speak like creatures who have admitted the existence of conditions.”

He gestured to a smaller table off to the side, with chairs meant for humans who wanted to feel mostly comfortable and a bench for goblins designed to be exactly so. They sat - Cassandra and Tarek facing the desk, Griphook and Sumi opposite. A silver tray arrived from nowhere carrying small glasses of sugared mint tea and a bowl of sesame biscuits that eyed Cassandra with déjà vu.

She put her hands in her lap.

“The tomb,” Griphook began, and the quiet in the room changed shape. Quills continued; coins told their limited truths; someone coughed politely into a handkerchief; but here, a pocket of intention closed. “You are here because your former employer - ” a sliver of amusement crossed his face at London being ‘former’ for anyone “ - believes your particular temperament could be either a solution or a liability.”

“I’ve seen both,” Cassandra said. “Often in the same afternoon.”

“Rahetep,” Tarek said, as if handling a warm object.

“Lord Rahetep,” Griphook corrected, not out of deference to kings but out of respect for titles as filing systems. “Voice of Amun. Administrator of a great deal of money. Thought himself a priest, behaved like a treasurer.” His fingers tapped the ledger, which purred. “His tomb was sealed as knowledge is sealed: with threats and hope. It was found by men who believe that sand is only useful when it covers their mistakes.”

“Archaeologists,” Tarek translated, without venom and without mercy.

“Some of them,” Griphook allowed. “Gringotts bought the excavation rights from a consortium that had already made all the wrong promises. We acquired, with the deed, a list of obligations to the living and the dead that was longer than it had any need to be.”

“And the protections?” Cassandra asked. “Atypical.”

Griphook’s mouth considered a smile and declined. “The ambient field is… conversational.” He steepled his fingers. “Old magic hums whether or not anyone is listening. This hums even when you try not to. Wards rephrase themselves in response to questions you have not asked. Some sigils are reversible only if spoken by a person who has never lied. We have few of those on payroll.”

“None,” Sumi said, and her pen wrote **NONE** in her notebook in a hand that made the word look proud of itself.

“There is also the matter of law,” Griphook continued, ignoring the attempted joke from fate. “Egypt does not permit the removal of remains or artifacts without the court making a shape with its mouth that means ‘yes.’ The court is presided over, at present, by a sphinx with very good reasons. We will comply with the letter and the intention. We will also be fast.”

“Because others are not waiting?” Cassandra said, too careful by half.

“Because others are already moving,” Griphook corrected. “There are traders in the market - legitimate and hungry. There are scholars with old oaths and new appetites. There are men who call themselves an Order because it makes them feel less like a club.” His gaze flicked to Tarek, who did not flinch. “And there is this bank, which would prefer to be on the correct side of history while still having one.”

“The Order of the Sun’s Shadow,” Tarek said, the syllables laid down like planks for crossing. “You have heard rumors.”

“I have heard invoices,” Griphook said. “Rumors are never itemized.” He turned to Cassandra. “We will go before dawn. Less spectacle. Less heat. Fewer people with opinions and cameras. You will do as little as possible.”

Cassandra lifted a brow. “I’m very good at that when properly motivated.”

“You are very good at pretending you have done little while doing exactly what you wanted,” Griphook said. “Save that for after the forms.”

Sumi slid a thin, bone-colored tablet toward Cassandra. It was etched with a lattice of crisscrossing lines and a single dot of carnelian. “This is the site tablet,” she said. “It records changes to the wards when someone with authority is present. If a rune rephrases itself, we will see it. If it tries to lie, it will glow and be ashamed.”

Cassandra picked it up. It was cool and lighter than it looked - a familiar sensation. Magic that had forgotten to be heavy. The carnelian dot thrummed under her thumb like a small

animal in a pocket.

“You will not annotate the site,” Griphook said again, not because she had not heard him the first time but because he had not enjoyed saying it. “You will not teach it new grammar in order to prove you can.”

“I prefer to correct punctuation,” Cassandra said. “I’ll leave style to the dead.”

Griphook’s gaze did not move, but an atom of amusement passed through it like a fish. “Good. Then we understand each other.” He pushed the biscuit bowl away from her as if that, too, were part of understanding. “Go now. Raheema’s Rooms will keep you. Eat, drink tea, sleep briefly. The carriages leave at four. Tarek will collect you. Wear a hat. Do not try to make friends with anything that has survived longer than your language.”

“Sound counsel,” Cassandra said, standing. The chair exhaled a small noise, whether relief or regret she couldn’t tell. She slipped the site tablet into her satchel beside the clamp and the lens and the red thread, careful not to jostle their pride.

Tarek rose with her. “Griphook,” he said, respectful as a handshake. “We will be efficient.”

“You will be precise,” Griphook corrected. “Efficiency is for markets. Precision is for tombs.” He looked at Cassandra again, and this time there was no knife in it at all, only appraisal. “Miss Blythe.”

“Yes, Director.”

“You are intelligent to the point of inconvenience,” he said. “Do not prove me right until it is useful.”

“I’ll pencil it into the agenda,” she said.

They turned to go. At the threshold, Cassandra looked up at the painted constellations again. For a moment, the gold leaf blurred and struck a new angle, and she realized the pattern above the desk wasn’t a sky she knew. It was not London’s pricked dome or Hogwarts’ remembered heavens. The constellations formed a geometry she did not recognize - a fisherman with too many hands, a ibis with a key in its throat, a long river-knotted snake. At the far corner, a cluster of stars arranged themselves, just for the length of a blink, into a mouth.

She blinked. The mouth became a sensible cluster again, and she could have sworn it had asked a question.

“Cassandra?” Tarek prompted gently.

“Coming,” she said, and the word felt heavier than usual. She dipped her head to Sumi, to Griphook, to the ledger that pretended to be indifferent, and followed Tarek across the lapis-white floor.

As the bronze doors swung back, the heat reached in with a flourish and took her hand, and from somewhere behind the desk Griphook’s voice pursued her, level as arithmetic laid flat:

“Miss Blythe - ”

She glanced back.

“Do not let the site learn your name before you’re ready to hear it in its language.”

Outside, Cairo had put on its late-afternoon face - glare softened to gold, shadows arranged for narratives - and the gold line waited like a sentence finished only when spoken aloud. She adjusted her hat, felt the case at her hip hum again, and decided, sensibly and far too late, to be careful.

Raheema’s Rooms announced itself with the confidence of a place that had outlived several fashions and all their dust. A cobalt sign in neat, uncompromising script read: **RAHEEMA’S ROOMS - TEA AT SENSIBLE HOURS**. Bougainvillea spilled over the lintel in magenta arguments with the sun. The doorway had learned the courtesy of throwing shade.

Tarek tapped the brass bell. It produced the sensation of a bell rung three rooms away by someone who disapproved of shouting. The corridor smelled of stone rinsed cool and lemon rinds with an excellent work ethic.

A woman appeared who could have managed a mutiny with a wooden spoon. She was round of cheek, crisp of apron, headscarf blue as a proper sky, and her eyes classified information as it met them.

“Cassandra Blythe,” she declared, not asked.

“Guilty,” Cassandra said.

“Gringotts,” Raheema added, with the same energy one gives to a diagnosis. “And a hat. Good. Heels on your trunk, please.”

The trunk, startled into obedience by a tone that cut through enchantments like hot wire, pulled itself neatly onto the tiled threshold and tried to look smaller.

“Tarek,” Raheema said, not bothering with titles. “You will carry it up. She is too thin to be lugging anything that sulks.”

“It only bites mispronunciations,” Cassandra offered.

“Then you will speak softly to it,” Raheema said. “House rules.” She raised a hand and ticked them off with the gravity of scripture. “No cooking in the room. No conjuring goats. No weather above a breeze. If a man knocks after ten, he had better be the moon.”

“I can promise three and a half,” Cassandra said. “My moons are unreliable.”

“Tea at six, eleven, and four,” Raheema said, already turning to lead the way inside. “If you miss four, it’s because you are dead or in love; in either case, I will send a blanket.”

The hall was a rib of coolness, whitewashed walls that knew how to hold their breath, blue tiles underfoot that remembered rivers. A lemon tree presided over the interior courtyard -

leaves glossy, fruit scattered with the indifferent generosity of a patron. The house seemed to shed the street at the threshold and keep only the light.

“Room with the sensible window,” Raheema said, taking the stairs with a briskness that made the banister mind itself. “You are here for how long?”

“Undetermined,” Tarek said from behind the trunk. “We go to the site before dawn.”

“Then she will sleep now,” Raheema said, as if sleep were a broom to be fetched. “And you will eat something you did not argue with first.”

“I’m educable,” Cassandra said. It was beginning to feel like a refrain and a wish.

On the landing, a cat lay sprawled in a sun-rectangle, all miraculously golden fur and insolence. It opened one eye the precise amber of old honey. Raheema clicked her tongue. “No politics in the hall, Nebi,” she said, and the cat - Nebi, not Nebu; this one less sleek, more local king - closed its eye again, assured of its rights.

The room had learned grace through constraint. White plaster walls caught the light and arranged it into civility. A narrow bed in crisp cotton, a small wooden wardrobe with the resigned gravity of an elderly relative, a washstand with a jug beaded in condensation, a rug meant for bare feet and better mornings. The window was small and deep. When Raheema threw the shutters wide, the courtyard’s lemon scent walked in and sat down.

“The sensible window,” Raheema said. “It vents heat and admits breeze. It does not encourage ankles to the ledge. Your mirror is there. It is not a gossip. If it talks, tell it I charge extra.”

Cassandra peered. The mirror was square and modestly framed. Its glass had the faint, gentle waviness of age and the discretion of a good butler. It held the room and returned it without editorializing. Her own face looked back - hair inventing architecture, freckles recalibrated by the sun, ink smudge at the cheekbone downgraded to a rumor.

“I’ve dealt with mirrors that think they’re playwrights,” she said. “This one looks like a clerk.”

“Good,” Raheema said. “Clerks know where to stop.” She placed a small brass key on the table. “Lock if you wish. It will hold even against relatives. If anyone asks for you by name, you are not in unless you say you are.” She turned on her heel toward the door. “I will send up tea and bread. Eat before you faint and shame me.”

“Wouldn’t dream,” Cassandra said. Shame seemed structurally impossible under that gaze.

When they were alone, Tarek lowered the trunk by the bed. The trunk made a soft, chastened clack as it settled, then nosed his anklebone apologetically with its clasp. He patted its lid. “Behave.”

“I forget,” Cassandra said, reaching for the satchel, feeling its familiar weight like a palm on her sternum. “Is ‘behave’ an Egyptian word or a British prayer?”

“In this house,” Tarek said, “it is a survival spell. Do you need anything?”

“Directions back to sanity,” she said lightly, and then, more level, “No. Thank you. For… the biscuits. And the education, as far as it’s begun.”

He glanced at her, one brow ticking. The humor there was quieter than hers and older. “Sleep. I will come for you before the night has forgiven us. Four o’clock. Wear shoes that can talk to stone without raising their voice.”

“I brought my language shoes,” she said.

He nodded, a compact promise of later, and left, his footsteps translating down the stairs into the house’s rhythm.

Cassandra let her breath lengthen into the room. The quiet was not silent. It was woven: ceiling fan turning with monastic composure on the landing, courtyard water arguing softly with a small fountain, a vendor’s voice far beyond the wall braiding numbers into invitation, the thin metal thread of a cart’s wheel needing oil and not getting it in this lifetime. Somewhere, the call to prayer rose and rethreaded the light. It did not ask her anything; it did not leave her out. The house accepted it the way it accepted breeze.

She set the satchel on the table and emptied it with the tenderness of superstition. The leather roll of tools unspooled its small reliquary: copper stylus, charmed chalk, lens that saw more than it was polite to repeat, skein of red memory thread coiled like a kept promise, severing clamp with its delicate little teeth shining a warning about nouns. The site tablet Sumi had given her lay bone-pale, the dot of carnelian asleep. It hummed once when her finger brushed it - a small, alive thing pretending to be mineral.

From an inner pocket she withdrew the saved sesame biscuit. It had survived the journey with dignity. She set it carefully on the saucer - field ration, favor, omen.

A knock at the door delivered tea that argued on her behalf. A tray: a narrow-waisted glass of mint tea sugared into sense, steam rising with opinions; a stack of flatbreads wrapped in cloth, still warm at their hearts; a small dish of white cheese that tasted like a lake that had learned manners; a smear of honey the color of a childhood she hadn’t had. Raheema’s handwriting on a small card: **Eat now. Sleep before you begin making summaries. - R.**

Cassandra laughed into her hand, then obeyed. The tea tasted like a stern lecture that adored her. The bread had the perfect humility of good labor. The cheese worked for a living. The honey was almost indecent. She ate until the edge of travel stopped spitting grit between her teeth and turned to something kinder.

She washed her face at the basin. The water was cool enough to make gratitude feel precise. Her hair, which had behaved like a union in London, took one look at Cairo and declared independent nationhood. She bullied it into a bun that would last through the first five minutes of sleep. Her fingers smelled of lemon and ink and mint - a grammar she could get used to.

The mirror, if it had any sense of theater, refused to display it. It held her without judgment. She tilted her head and practiced a neutral expression. The mirror did not applaud. She appreciated its restraint.

“Hello,” she said to it, because she had been raised correctly. “You will be asked to perform miracles of self-esteem. I shall not believe you.”

It offered no opinion. Good clerk.

She turned to the trunk. It had opened a fraction on its own volition and peered at her with the hinge equivalent of puppy eyes.

“Fine,” she said, and lifted the lid.

Inside lay her field wardrobe folded into the plausible fiction of order: linen shirts the color of sand that had been persuaded; skirts that could run without scandal; trousers that could choose decorum without apology; a scarf the color of tea gone strong; the sensible hat with its enchantment against heat and patriarchy; the belt with the morally compromised buckle that squeaked regardless. Tucked into the side was her field journal, elastic weary from duty. She set it on the table.

The journal warmed under her palm as if pleased to be chosen. She opened to a fresh page and let the nib find its pace.

Raheema’s Rooms: a house that has taught light to behave and preserves the dignity of water. The landlord is a force of nature with an apron. The window is sensible. I am, perhaps, not. Cairo conducts the air like a choir. Tea at four is a law. I meant to keep London at arm’s length; Cairo has already shaken my hand.

She paused. The nib hovered. The street sketched itself beyond the window - voices rising, dropped again, the brass clatter of something useful, the call to prayer sliding away into afterthought. The sound did not ask anything of her except honesty.

Griphook’s bank is a geometry that banked itself. The forms taste of fennel. Tarek speaks in lines that require a second reading, then turn out to be instructions for living. I saved one biscuit and did not die of it.

She added: *I am not here to win; I am here to learn how not to take.*

The words sat on the page like a resolve that might survive until morning.

She closed the journal and let her body recall sleep. It arrived as if it had been waiting in the wardrobe and stepped forward only when it was sure she had eaten. She lay back on the bed. The cotton learned her shape and decided to allow it. She pulled the sheet over her waist and listened to the ceiling fan be reasonable. The lemon tree’s shadow wrote itself onto the wall and moved when an idle breeze shuffled the page.

She meant to nap. The nap arrived immediately and without negotiation.

Time did a useful thing and paused to let her catch it. When she woke, the angle of light in the room had shifted from brass to honey. The courtyard had leaned into evening. Somewhere a lute tried three notes and decided they were a story. The air had cooled from pronouncement to persuasion.

Her mouth tasted of mint and relief. She drank the last of the tea without disillusionment. The glass had sweated itself into charm. She washed again, because the water here forgave repetition, and pinned the hat in a way that promised survival rather than elegance. The house adjusted to her rest with the grace of a hostess who knows when to pretend she didn't notice. Downstairs, Raheema's voice engaged a recalcitrant pan and won.

Cassandra crossed to the window. Dusk had been set to "generous." The courtyard's lemon leaves shone like coin edges. A gecko on the outer wall paused in the middle of deciding to be ornamental or useful. The breeze carried spice from someone's kitchen and the soot-sweet ghost of lamp oil. Between the house and the sky, magic laced itself into that familiar shimmer - public and private at once, the way wards always were in cities that remembered themselves.

Her reflection in the sensible window glass did its clerkly duty: a woman in a hat that forgave nothing, a collar unbuttoned to let heat pay its respects, a mouth trying on different versions of caution and calling them all humor. She placed two fingers to the sill and leaned into the evening the way one leans into a question that is not yet dangerous.

For a heartbeat, the breeze cooled further. Not London cool; not nightfall cool. A coolness like air that has been inside a building for a very long time and learned to keep secrets. It touched her cheeks and then was gone.

She made a note of nothing. She had learned from mirrors.

Down the hall, someone's luggage had an opinion. The cat on the landing turned over and displayed its unassailable belly to the world. A neighbor coughed exactly twice with the care of someone not wanting to intrude. Far off, Cairo changed key; the city did that when the light turned a certain color.

She set the hat aside long enough to unlace her boots. Her feet found the rug with gratitude. On impulse she took the saved sesame biscuit from the saucer and wrapped it in a clean handkerchief, tucking it into the satchel's side pocket beside the red thread and the lens. "For luck," she told the tools. The clamp clicked its little teeth in disdain at superstition and then, perhaps, in solidarity.

The mirror, when she looked at it again, gave back only what she offered. A professional courtesy. It did not fog with prophecy. It did not scribble in its own hand. It did not even flatter her hat. It had the enormous decency to be only glass.

"Thank you," she said to it, absurdly.

It held its silence like a well-kept ledger.

A knock - less a sound than a phrase - came at the door. Raheema did not wait for permission to be herself; she opened it with a tray that smelled of history forgiven. “Bread for later,” she said, setting down folded cloth, a wedge of something that had remembered to be salt, a small jar of jam that looked like a sunset in a jar. “You will forget to eat. I refuse to let you come back thin.”

“You’re very kind,” Cassandra said, meaning it in the way one means a life raft.

“I’m very busy,” Raheema corrected. “Kindness is a hobby. Tarek will fetch you before the night becomes inconvenient. If you see the floating market, you will come back with three things you did not need and two people’s opinions you did.”

“Only if their opinions match the house rules,” Cassandra said.

“Smart girl,” Raheema said. The word *girl* in her mouth did not diminish; it included and advised. “If your mirror speaks, tell it to sing. People who gossip cannot hold a tune.” She turned to go, then looked over her shoulder. “Miss Blythe - ”

“Yes?”

“Do not apologize to the dead for being alive,” Raheema said simply. “They had their turn. Take yours properly.” And she left, trailing competence.

The room had absorbed the counsel and shifted around it. Cassandra let it settle in the corners. She fastened the satchel, slid the site tablet into the sleeve lined to keep egos from bruising one another, checked her wand by touch and listened to its hum - steady, interested, not yet opinionated. She tested the hat again; it consented. She pressed her fingers to the door and said the kind of charm that locks because it knows she will return. The brass warmed under her palm in assent.

On her way out, she paused at the mirror as if at a friend’s door. No portent rose. No hairline cracks of language formed. Only the square of a room kept neat and the square of a face trying, hard, not to be only a pair of clever eyes in a hot place.

“I’ll be back for tea,” she told it.

The mirror was content to believe her.

In the hall the cat opened one eye, then both, and yawned in an accent that suggested superiority. “You are not the interesting one,” it seemed to say, then amended, “yet.” It stood, stretched, and padded ahead as if leading her to the stairs were its idea. On the landing, the fan continued its work of giving time a shape. The house smelled now of cumin and clarified butter and something sweet that had decided not to apologize.

At the threshold, the street’s breath met hers. The evening had tuned itself to conversation. Shadows arranged chairs against walls. A boy raced past with a kite that kept forgetting it was not a bird. Two women laughed in a way that reminded her of kettles just before the boil. The sky held to its last blue as if reluctant to make way for lamps.

Cassandra stepped out into it. The gold line was waiting, a promise written underfoot. Somewhere not far and very old, stone lay with its mouth closed over a name. Somewhere very near, a window decided what it would show her tonight.

She took the stairs down into the street with sensible caution and an unreasonable willingness to be surprised. Behind her, the lemon tree turned one leaf and the mirror remained loyal to glass. Ahead, Cairo inhaled.

She did not hear what the room would say after she left - a soft disturbance in the mirror’s patient surface, not a word, only the thinnest drawing of a line, the ghost of a reed pen remembering its work. It vanished before it could become anything but practice.

Cassandra squared her shoulders, closed the door with a promise, and followed the evening toward the bank and whatever shape the night had chosen for its first question.

Night arrived the way sensible people do: on time, with a gift for quiet.

Cairo lowered its voice to the register of confidences and card games. The street outside Raheema’s Rooms braided the clink of glasses with the soft metal squawk of a cart that would never see oil, and the occasional, cheerful outburst of a neighbor greeting another neighbor as if distance were a misunderstanding. Lamps woke one by one, making small amber arguments with the dark. The house absorbed the new temperature and arranged its bones accordingly.

Cassandra set her satchel on the table and loosened her collar. The hat hung on its peg, stern and expectant, a prim crescent against plaster. She poured the last thumb of tea from the glass Raheema had left - still warm, sugared into reason. Mint rose under her nose like a polite hand. She drank, let the sweetness tidy the edges of her nerves, and placed the narrow-waisted glass back onto its saucer with the solemnity of a completed ritual.

The sensible window admitted night as a well-behaved guest. Through it, the courtyard’s lemon tree held its leaves very still, as if listening for an appointment. Somewhere a lute practiced a fragment of melody over and over, finding the place where grief turns into ornament. In the lane, a cat announced itself to another cat, and then announced nothing at all with greater conviction. The air had acquired a new texture - a velveteen coolness that touched the backs of her wrists and the hollow at the base of her throat.

Her body was tired the way well-used tools are tired. Not defeated; merely aware of its edges. She loosened her boots, slid them off, and felt the rug lift to meet her bare feet - a private greeting. She washed her face at the basin. The water yelped once at the temperature and then forgave her. On the towel, the cotton left small, efficient clouds.

The mirror on the wall regarded all of this with clerkly competence. It had observed people preparing themselves for beginnings and endings for longer than anyone living could remember, and it had been paid in dust and glances. Cassandra gave it a nod of mutual recognition. It did not nod back.

She opened her field journal. The leather cover had warmed to her so often it might as well have learned her palms by name. The elastic band yielded with a sigh. She turned to a clean

page and uncapped her pen. The nib kissed the paper.

Evening settles. Cairo hums like complicated sugar. Griphook: a blade laid flat. Sumi: a pen with opinions. Tarek: the voice you have to lean in to hear. Raheema: benevolent tyranny. The city keeps offering information the way a good teacher does - without asking if you deserve it.

She paused. A draft - no, not a draft; something with intention - moved across her skin. Not coolness from outside; a pocket of air that had been indoors for a very long time and had learned how to keep secrets. It carried the faintest suggestion of honey that had been warmed past virtue and the dusty, papery smell of linen that had a better memory than she did. Not rot - the way living noses remember it - but a sweetness altered, a library's notion of decay.

Her heart made the small, precise adjustment it made when the past decided to occupy the present.

"All right," she said, very quietly, because she had entered rooms like this before and knew what doors closed when you raised your voice. "Hello there."

She turned toward the mirror. Nothing. Her reflection: hair making architecture in defiance of gravity; a line at the mouth that had not yet decided whether it wanted to be resolve or worry; eyes bright enough to be accused of curiosity in public. The mirror returned her unedited.

Cassandra exhaled and returned to the journal.

Tomorrow before dawn: the desert. The bank wishes for precision; the court will demand it. The job description is 'do nothing, carefully.' I am underqualified and trying to learn.

Something ticked, soft and final, as if a watch had decided. The glass on the table grew a new ring of condensation and then, faintly, as if out of courtesy, let it evaporate.

She felt, rather than heard, the moment the air made room for the other.

The mirror did not fog. It did not darken. It did not show another room, or her future, or London doing its best impression of regret. The change was subtler, as if an old pencil had been lifted and drawn, very lightly, across the surface from behind. A hair-thin line appeared in the lower right corner of the glass. Another line crossed it. A delicate angle joined them. Nothing dramatic. A thought considering itself.

Cassandra did not move. The journal rested under her left hand, as solid as a railing. Her right hand set the pen down, gently, as though not to startle a bird. She let her breath happen in small, polite amounts.

Lines gathered themselves in the mirror, sparing as grammar on its best behavior. A tiny ibis took shape, nothing more than a suggestion: a curve for a beak, a line for a neck, the merest indication of a leg. Beneath it, three short ripples - the oldest sign for water. Beside them, a rectangle with a tidy mouth, and above it a single stroke crossing a small square. More marks - so simple a child might have claimed them; so intentional no child would dare.

She recognized, in that unnerving way recognition works on knowledge you haven't earned, the early bones of a sentence.

"Please," she whispered, to the glass, to herself, to an audience the size of a history. "Be kind."

A feeling like a page turning passed through the room.

The hieroglyphs gathered, tested their weight, and then - no dramatic flare, no thunderclap - thinned, as if the pen had been lifted and the words had decided to find the nearest tongue. For a heartbeat they were both at once - the language under language, and the one that owed her no accommodation. Then the strokes untied and reknit themselves into four English words written in a hand that was not a hand.

The dead have opinions.

Not gouged. Not etched. Not fogged. As if written in light that had listened to calligraphy for a long while and wanted, at last, to try.

Cassandra's throat closed the way you shut a drawer with something dangerous in it. The words held. No flourish. No signature. A statement anyone could deny and everyone already knew, and therefore the most dangerous kind.

She should have called for Raheema. For Tarek. For any other witness with a mouth that would believe what its eyes told it. Instead, she did what she always did when the world made a claim on her that might swallow her whole: she looked for specifics.

"Opinions," she said under her breath. "Plural. That's worse."

A ridiculous thought, then, and therefore a relief: *Of course they do. Most people become more themselves when no one can interrupt.*

The scent of honey-thinned-to-bitter thickened very slightly. The lemon tree's shadow tilted its head. A gecko froze on the courtyard wall as if listening for ancient gossip. The mirror did not fog with the warmth of the words. The words were the warmth.

"How?" she began, and then shut her mouth on the rest. The room didn't need questions; it had come to make a statement. Respect is a kind of silence. She remembered Griphook's caution, and Araminta's cold pleasure at rules, and Tarek's insistence that this place is a conversation.

The dead, then, had joined it.

She counted four heartbeats, because four is as obstinate as it is unlucky in some languages, and she had decided not to be superstitious unless it was useful. On the fourth beat, the words thinned, and the glass resumed its perfect blankness. No smear. No ghost of a letter. Only Cassandra again, the lemon leaves behind her, and a woman in a hat that knew too much about work.

Her heart resumed the polite schedule Tarek had suggested. She waited. The mirror offered no second performance. The scent of warmed honey diffused like a rumor that had done its work and was content.

She wrote, because she had once survived by writing down what scared her until it looked like a list.

- *Mirror. 21:37. Glass un-fogged; image unaltered. Hair-thin lines formed at lower right - initially hieroglyphic (ibis, water, mouth, bread loaf, stroke) → rearranged to English without visible intermediary: "The dead have opinions." No casting performed. Air temperature shifted locally (perceived drop). Olfactory: honey (heated), linen-dust; no rot. Emotional: not frightened. (This is a lie. Amend: frightened, but not insulted.)*

She stared at *not insulted* until it settled into honesty. She drew a small square in the margin and filled it in, because sometimes the hand requires a small piece of certainty.

She hesitated, then added: *tone: neither threat nor plea. Statement of fact. Implication: I am in conversation whether I like it or not. (Try liking it.)*

A knock sounded like punctuation - three knocks, evenly spaced, the last slightly softer, as if the knuckles were polite for their own amusement.

Cassandra closed the journal around what it already knew and slid it into the satchel. "Enter," she said, and Raheema's tray preceded Raheema herself by an inch and a half.

"Bread," Raheema announced, installing folded cloth and a pot of tea with the efficiency of rain. "And dates that remembered to be fruit." She took in Cassandra's face with the practiced glance of someone who can triage a person with a wooden spoon. "You have the look of someone who has either solved a problem or invented one. Tea will assist both."

"Thank you," Cassandra said, which was inadequate and still the only currency that spent.

Raheema did not look at the mirror. She did not, Cassandra noticed, *avoid* looking at it. She topped off the glass with fresh tea and tapped the metal rim with her nail once. The tea obediently cooled to the exact temperature of trust.

"Before dawn," Raheema said, satisfied that the universe was now correctly provisioned. "Tarek will knock like a person who respects woodwork. Wear the hat, even if it makes you cross. Eat the dates when the world asks for more sugar than sense. Do not take anyone's blessing unless you're willing to owe them."

"I'll… try," Cassandra said.

"Do not try," Raheema said, with the bluntness of a person acquainted with catastrophe. "Do or do not. Try is a foreigner's word." She nodded at the satchel. "Your tools. Do they know how to keep quiet?"

"They're learning," Cassandra said. She did not add that she had just learned the same.

Raheema’s gaze softened by a single degree, which in that face was the equivalent of tears. “You are welcome in this house,” she said, as if giving a verdict. “The house does not choose poorly.” She lifted the tray, pivoted, and was gone, leaving behind a promise shaped like steam.

Cassandra ate a date because obedience had begun to feel like wisdom. It melted on her tongue into a sweetness so deep it felt like learning a language you had secretly spoken since birth. The tea made everything hum at a frequency that belonged to working and to prayer.

She stood, slowly, and approached the mirror. The clerk-glass returned her in its honest hand. She lifted two fingers as she might to a colleague. “Noted,” she said to the emptiness that wasn’t. “I’m listening.”

For a breath, her reflection seemed to incline her head at half a degree different from her own movement, as if there were a lag in light. Then the world resumed behaving, and she smiled at her own foolishness the way a parent smiles at a child who’s run into a wall and will do it again.

She locked the door with the charm that tasted like rosemary and iron and loyalty to the person who set it. The brass knob warmed in assent. She set her boots side by side on the rug, a domestic pair, and slid under the sheet that was cool where it had been folded and warm where it had been hoped for. The ceiling held its breath with her until both were satisfied.

Before she lay down, she took up the pen once more.

If the dead have opinions, she wrote, *I should learn better questions.*

She tucked the journal under her pillow, because habit and superstition have an understanding and she had decided to give both their due. The satchel hung on the chair back, tools breathing their particular silence. The site tablet lay face down, the carnelian dot asleep.

In the courtyard, a breeze lifted. The lemon leaves applauded once and became still. Somewhere, far off and very near, a door in an old city shifted in its frame and remembered the shape of hands it had known.

She reached to the bedside table and turned the glass so that the tea caught a sliver of lamp light and held it like a promise. “Four o’clock,” she told the room, and the room delivered her a drowsy *mm* that might have been the fan turning, might have been sleep acquiring manners.

If there was one last change in the mirror, she did not see it. After the lamp went out and the sensible window admitted a slice of night the width of a blade, the glass in the corner scribbled the barest beginnings of a mark - an ibis’s beak, the first ripple of water - and then, as if remembering Raheema’s rates, erased itself out of respect.

Cassandra slept. Outside, Cairo debated what kind of dawn it intended to deliver. In the desert, wards shifted themselves into older grammar. In a tomb that had not yet decided to forgive, a name inhaled, and the future held its breath until “before” became a time of day.

Chapter 3: The Tomb of Rahetep

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The Tomb of Rahetep

The desert had not yet chosen a color when they set out, only a temperature and an opinion.

Cassandra stood in the gray before dawn on the edge of Cairo where the city ran out of nouns and turned into wind. The air tasted of stone kept awake all night. Far behind her the Port Authority lamps guttered like civilized stars; in front, the world unstitched into low dunes and the suggestion of a horizon someone had sketched and then lost interest in finishing. A line of date palms made a last, dignified attempt at being a boundary. The rest belonged to breath and distances.

“Rolls,” announced Griphook’s quartermaster, snapping a lacquered case open on the back of the wagon. “Chalk. Rods. If any of you drop a rod, I will write to your mothers.”

“Mine would write back,” Cassandra said, tucking her hair ruthlessly under a scarf. “She always enjoyed correspondence with authority.”

Tarek handed her a cup of something that might be tea and might be kindness. “Drink,” he said, eyes crinkling against the wind. “It will name your bones to the sun before the sun remembers to do it.”

The Gringotts field crew had arranged itself with the efficiency of creatures who considered mornings a personal affront. Two goblin engineers - Kheth and Barma - were already arguing over a canvas roll of instruments, their ears twitching in precise disapproval.

“It is not the sand,” Kheth declared, tapping a brass scale that had decided to be melancholic. “It is your clumsy calibration.”

“The scale is in mourning for your methods,” Barma replied, without looking up. “Do not interrupt grief.”

A pair of human assistants - one lantern-jawed, one soft-eyed and wearing a protective charm like a second throat - tried to look useful by tying down bundles that had been tied down perfectly ten minutes ago. The wagon creaked, offended at the quantity of purpose placed upon it.

Cassandra sipped the tea and let the heat itemize her. Fingers. Wrists. The small bones of the ear. A pulse that had decided to be punctual. Tarek, not yet fully a silhouette, moved with the steady competence of a man who had negotiated with both camels and professors. He had changed his vest for something travel-sensible and stowed a notebook in the pocket like a concealed argument. When she caught his eye, he lifted his chin toward the east.

There, the first thin thread of light drew itself along the seam of the world. It was not yet gold. It was merely a promise written in pencil.

They started walking when Griphook’s quartermaster was satisfied the ledger of gear matched the ledger of expectations. The dunes out beyond the palms had been combed by a wind with opinions; their edges were knife-clean and soft as a sleeve. Each footfall sighed and forgot itself. The crew fell into a broken line: goblins ahead with divination rods tucked under their arms like particularly judgmental umbrellas; Cassandra and Tarek behind, sharing a map that tried to crawl away whenever it felt it was being misunderstood; the assistants further back, muttering agreements with the sand about the stupidity of boots.

“Lane markers,” Kheth called, stabbing a rod into the ground. The rod thrummed, then leaned like a plant toward a place that was not visible yet. “It listens there.”

Cassandra had never watched the rods work in open desert. In vaults and catacombs they had stiffened like dogs catching a scent; here they hummed at a pitch she felt in her teeth, and the sand around their points darkened a fraction, obedient to mathematics older than coin. She extended her wand to the near one and felt the answering thrum lift into her palm and crawl along her knuckles. E minor, her mind decided, because music had always been her way of pretending not to be afraid.

“Do they always… choose?” she asked, half to Tarek, half to the wind.

“They remember,” Tarek said. “Stone does not forget where it learned to be a door.”

The sky took on color as if one of Gringotts’ better clerks had been allowed to shade it in. Lavender gave way to cautious gold along the lip of everything. Heat was still a rumor. On the right, a low ridge warmed and began repeating itself in light. Something far off cried once - bird or hinge - and fell silent.

Barma and Kheth set a pace that was not foolish and not slow. Every hundred steps they paused, leaned their foreheads briefly to the rods, listened. The brass chimed in a voice that had never quite trusted people, and the goblins nodded the way mathematicians nod when the numbers have decided to be merciful.

Cassandra shifted her satchel’s strap over an ache she would not acknowledge yet and tried to catalog the desert’s sounds before the sun erased them. Sand, which is not a sound so much as a consent. Leather complaining. The quick, perfunctory clicks of Kheth’s abacus - no beads, just squares of glass that turned from clear to smoky under his fingertips. And underneath, a hum she could have mistaken for her own blood, except it came from the ground and from a long way ahead, persistent as breath.

Tarek caught her listening. “You hear it?”

“Something,” she admitted. “A kind of… grammatical insistence.”

He smiled with half his mouth. “That’s one way to name a tomb.”

They crested a small rise and everything below them resolved into a place the map had not had the nerve to be. The dunes folded back into a shallow basin. Along its floor the sand lay smoother, as if lacquered. In the center, a shape pressed up from beneath like a memory trying to surface: the squared suggestion of a lintel, the faint geometry of a threshold. Around it, random stones had decided, at some previous century, to become a circle and were now keeping their promise.

“Entrance,” Kheth said, unnecessarily. His rod sang a polite C. “The wards breathe here.”

Cassandra felt it at once - the exhale. It wasn’t wind. The air pooled at ankle height and moved, and with the movement came a scent that rode memories rather than nose: honey that had been burned a little and learned discipline; linen dust that had kept secrets; a trace of resin, old as bargaining. She had smelled it in the tomb in her dream that wasn’t a dream. She kept her mouth shut on the name, because names start things, and there was no stopping once they began.

Barma was already unrolling the canvas kit, revealing the tools of consent: chalks in restrained colors; a coil of red thread that had seen more important knots than most people; a set of brass plates etched thin as excuses. He glanced at Cassandra with a professional’s polite hostility. “You will not annotate,” he said.

“Not where it can see me,” Cassandra said.

He handed her a chalk stick without further comment. She crouched by the first stone of the circle. Its face was rough where weather had argued with craft and won, then smoothed in two places at palm height where, perhaps, hands had rested, or prayers. She set the chalk to it. The first rune she wrote - containment - took like water finding a groove. The second - respect - made the chalk skid and refuse her. She swallowed, adjusted the stroke, tried again. The line settled, reluctant, then held. Above them, the sky gave up lavender entirely and began the serious work of being blue.

“Left of your hand,” Tarek murmured, leaning with his shoulder against the wind. “Your loop is English.”

“I was educated to believe English was inevitable,” she said. She redrew the loop with a clipped flourish and heard, rather than heard, a tiny sound like satisfaction.

The circle of stones began to look less like an accident and more like an agreement. Kheth planted the two divining rods at the north and east points. Their hums braided into a title. Barma set the brass plates at the cardinal edges and whispered through his teeth the names of angles. The assistants arranged blankets and a folding table and tried not to look either at the not-quite-door or the line of light on the horizon where the sun’s first coin lifted and made them all pay attention.

A mirage formed, obligingly, along the ridge beyond the basin: heat that was not yet heat wavered and drew out shapes. For a moment - no more - they were a row of figures walking, bent under lengths of stone, moving in that smooth, jointed rhythm of practiced work. Not men, not quite; more like memory with elbows. One paused, straightened, looked down toward the basin, and put two fingers to his forehead in a salute that might have been habit in

the time before habit had a choice. Then the light changed and the ridge was only ridge, the air only air.

“Did you - ” Cassandra began.

“No,” Tarek said, almost kindly. “We did not.”

Kheth pretended not to see anything that could not sign a receipt. “Begin,” he said, and tapped the ground with the back of his knuckles, as if knocking politely on a table before a meeting.

Cassandra took her place at the threshold that wasn’t one and drew the larger sigil, bending the chalk’s whisper into a figure-eight that intersected with the stones’ old grammar. The desert took her breath and returned it warmed. She felt the first hair lift along her forearm. Her wand, tucked at her wrist, developed opinions.

“Procellae contineo,” she said - storm, behave - and the chalk’s line glowed a shade colder for a blink. “Humilitas” - a word that never came naturally to her mouth - “non invasio.” Two goblins, in unison, sniffed at her Latin. She switched tongues and tried a borrowed Egyptian invocation she had learned the way a child learns table manners: by watching people who matter. The consonants felt like being careful. The sand approved, laid itself a little flatter, closed tiny mouths around each grain.

“Do not charm the door to like you,” Barma said, entirely too late.

“I am charming myself not to fuss,” Cassandra said, and heard Tarek’s soft huff of laughter behind her.

When everything that ought to be drawn had been drawn and everything that ought to hum had chosen a key, Barma placed his hand on the center of the circle. Kheth laid his fingers four points around, precise as a clock. Cassandra pressed her palm flat to the sand where the geometry insisted the lock would be and felt, ridiculously, as if she were about to be introduced.

“On three,” Kheth said. “One. Two - ”

The ground exhaled.

It was not wind. It was not magic as she had been taught to feel it in school - no crisp surge, no theatrical tingle. It was the sensation of a room remembering it had lungs. Warmth threaded between their fingers and up into the hollows of their hands. The chalk lines brightened, not light but intention. Somewhere beneath, something like a sigh turned coherent and said nothing a human could quote.

The rods answered, their hum sliding up a half-step. Kheth’s eyes sharpened. “Now,” he said, but the now was reflex; the door had already decided it would allow the pretense of being opened.

Cassandra withdrew her hand to a flutter of pins-and-needles and wiped her palm, pointlessly, on her skirt. The scent bloomed: honey, yes, but corrected by resin, disciplined by linen, and under it the living-mineral smell of stone that had elected to be a room for a very long time and was reconsidering. She felt her heart count itself twice in surprise and once in a language she did not yet know.

Tarek’s voice, low: “Breathe.”

“I am,” she said, and discovered she had been holding the wrong kind of breath.

The first illumination slid along the seam of the lintel, no brighter than a coin tilted in shadow. Sand inside the circle subsided by a finger’s breadth, then another. A hairline crack - no, a script - drew itself where smooth had been, characters not inscribed but revealed, as if their invisibility had been a polite fiction the door no longer believed it owed them. Cassandra lowered her head, and in the moment before awe put its foot on her neck, she saw the simplest of them resolve. Water. Mouth. Bread. A bird with a beak like a reed pen.

“Hello,” she whispered, because she had manners, and because the desert did not deserve her arrogance.

The horizon, as if cued by courtesy, lifted the sun in a single, precise motion, and the basin filled with gold like a bowl being set at a table. The breath from the doorway warmed to meet it. Behind her, one of the assistants crossed themself with the fervor of a person who had met their own smallness. Kheth shut his eyes and opened them again in a way that counted. Barma rubbed his thumb over a brass plate as if to remind it who had done the paperwork.

“Kindly,” Kheth said, very softly, to the unseen thing that had just admitted them. “Kindly, now.”

Cassandra realized her hand had found Tarek’s sleeve and removed it with the dignity of someone who wished not to notice herself. He did not mention it. The chalk around her feet cooled. The hum under her skin settled into a tempo she could walk to. The door, which had not moved, felt open.

“Right,” she said, voice steady by intent. “Shall we go wake history and ask not to be slapped?”

Barma snorted, not entirely unkind. “After you, Miss Blythe. If the sand criticizes your penmanship, I will be taking notes.”

They built the little republic of work around the threshold: table, instruments, and the square of shade conjured by a fussy parasol charm that kept relocating itself toward the goblins no matter who cast it. Sand drifted into orderly drifts as if it had been told there would be a meeting and wanted to look presentable.

“Seal’s primary grammar is logographic with a phonetic brace,” Kheth said, checking his abacus of glass panes. Each pane clouded into a symbol and then cleared like a thought reconsidered. “It will respond to meaning before sound.”

“Good,” Cassandra said, kneeling, the chalk already reproducing the scuffs and glamour of her fingers. “Meaning I can do. Sound is where my accent commits crimes.”

Barma rolled out a length of red thread and pinned the four corners of their working square with brass tacks etched in triangles. “Keep to the grid,” he warned. “If you step out of the grid during containment, you will be invited to leave your body in an undignified fashion.”

“Invited?” Tarek murmured. “Such hospitality.”

“Ancient doors are very polite,” Barma said. “They simply do not take no for an answer.”

The not-quite-lintel waited under a thin veil of sand that seemed to have been ironed. Cassandra brushed it aside with the bristle of her sleeve. Underneath, obsidian caught the light and held it like a breath. She leaned close. At first there were only faint irregularities in the sheen, the kind that make a surface look as though it has been almost, not quite, forgotten. Then, at the corners of her eyes, something conducted itself into the visible - the ghost of line work, glyphs emerging from dormant to deliberate.

She did not touch the stone. She traced with her eyes, murmuring the names of what she knew. “Water. Bread. Reed-leaf or arm - no, arm; the elbow is wrong for reed. Bird. Mouth.” The sequence would have made no sense to a clerk; to a curse-breaker, it read like an equation with teeth.

Tarek crouched to her left, notebook open, using the shadow of his own shoulder for a screen. “You can read them straight?”

“Enough to be embarrassing,” Cassandra said. “Enough to offend any self-respecting archaeologist.”

“You have already offended several today,” he said. “Why stop now.”

The grid around them brightened as Kheth and Barma set the rods in their north and east points. The rods’ hum settled from C to something between C and C sharp, the sort of note that made one’s molars think about complaining. With each adjustment, the chalk lines around the grid brightened, not with light but with attention. Cass felt it as a pressure along the skin, as if her edges had been crisply cut and labeled.

“Containment first,” Kheth said. “Then call-and-response.”

He handed her a small brass stylus with a split tip. It was not a wand; it had no patience for flair. “Use this when you address the mouth-glyph,” he said. “This seal prefers physical compliance.”

“Don’t we all,” she said, and immediately regretted the flippancy as the mouth-glyph - the neat curve like a doorway - seemed to deepen. It remained carved into stone, but the idea of it thickened and pulled. She felt the urge to lean closer, as one leans toward someone whispering. She stayed very still.

She drew the first containment rune on the south stone - a figure-eight whose crossing point sat exactly where the sun’s angle would put emphasis. The chalk caught and slid and then took: there is a rightness to lines when they sit where they were meant to sit, a relief like furniture finally moved to where it belongs. She linked the figure-eight to Barma’s cardinal plates with a pair of short, precise stitches of chalk, an invisible sewing that set the grid into the world.

“Language?” Tarek asked, keeping his voice lower than the sand.

“Mixed,” Cassandra said. “Latin bones. Egyptian flesh. A little Old Norse tendon because the north plate is peevish. Please don’t tell anyone with a degree.”

“I will tell only the door,” he said. “It seems to respect mischief.”

She blew dust off the lines. The exhale did not drift away. It hung, slowed, spread, and flattened along the chalk in a way air does not. The hair along her nape stood up and organized itself by rank. She put her hand down, palm on the sand just outside the grid, and felt the grain count her lifelines.

“Humilitas,” she said, and it laid itself as weight over her tongue. “Non invasio.” The chalk lines cooled, tone-shift, like water made thoughtful. She switched to the older tongue, careful with the consonants that cut like reed-knives: *“Open to consent, close to theft. We ask, we do not take.”*

It was not an incantation so much as a promise said aloud. The difference mattered. Doors keep track.

Kheth lowered one rod, then the other. “Call,” he said.

Cassandra lifted the split stylus. It was unexpectedly warm, as if a hand had just been using it. Her hand remembered the thousand mornings at the Gringotts practice wall, learned and unlearned muscle memory: don’t press; invite. Don’t force; suggest. She traced the air above the mouth-glyph in the pattern that would have been a knock if you could knock on the idea of a door. Once. Twice. The third in a different rhythm, the one that said: I know you. Not intimately - no presumption - but enough to be given a hearing.

“Listen,” she murmured, and then, because she could not help herself, “Please.”

The stone answered, not by sound but by respiration. The obsidian grew less like rock and more like a skin with chill beneath it warming. The scent deepened out of the air - resin, linen, honey, that stern sweetness - and the breath of it touched her wrist where the stylus hovered. Her wand at her forearm twitched - tiny, arrogant - and decided to hum. The hum matched the rods’ pitch a fraction too high, the way pride matches instruction. She shushed it under her breath.

Barma’s voice, metallic with focus: “Feel that shift? The seal is awake. Begin statement of identity.”

Cassandra nodded. Her mouth had gone dry; her humor tucked itself modestly out of sight. She said her name in the three languages she possessed, and then again with the one she didn’t, the one she had only heard moving through dream corridors and letters on Rahetep’s wrappings. The syllables shaped themselves in her throat reluctantly and then, with the relief of long practice, fit. It felt like unbraiding and braiding again around a smoother cord.

The obsidian did not light. It did not glow. It became intent. She could feel - ridiculous - its consideration. Not of her credentials or rank. Of whether she understood what she was asking. The mouth-glyph deepened a fraction further, and a feeling like wind in a closed room threaded her curls and lifted the scarf at her nape.

“Statement of purpose,” Kheth said, quiet.

Cassandra had written the statement a hundred times in reports: The safe neutralization of active warding for the retrieval and study of artifacts. It tasted like paper even in her head. She did not say that. Instead, she heard her own voice say, “We are not here to steal you.”

Tarek’s pen paused, then resumed.

She continued, more formally, in the ancient tongue and then in Latin, stating intent to enter without stopping what ought to continue, to keep seals intact that are not hers to break, to leave names where names should remain. Each sentence steadied her heartbeat and, by some sympathetic magic, steadied the hum from the rods. The grid around them dimmed from keen to calm - obedience rather than alarm.

“Response,” Kheth said, and tapped the plate with the glyph for ear.

The door whispered. She could not swear to it afterward - she would write that the desert breathed and the air moved and the heat arrived - but in the moment she heard it the way you hear your name in a crowded room from someone you love. No voice, exactly. Just the fact of having been heard.

“Proceed,” Barma said, but he did not sound as if the order belonged to him anymore.

Cassandra adjusted her grip on the stylus and began the unsealing. It was a sequence learned in vaults all over Europe where Gringotts had persuaded ancient doors to be reasonable: inversion of the outer bind, release of the social wards, restoration of the inner lock so it would not collapse when the weight changed. Here, each stroke of the stylus through the air left a barely visible line like the trail of a disciplined spark. Those lines hung for a breath - hers? the door’s? - and then settled into the stone and became the thing the stone had been waiting for.

She reached the section with the pictograms for “breath,” “life,” “seat,” and “sleep.” Her hand hesitated. The little story in them was naked and shameless. It said: Here the breath sits and does not sleep. She swallowed, annoyed at the treacherous human part of her that thought of Rahetep’s parchment-colored hands and the humor in them. She rephrased, with the stylus, a gentler sentence: Here the breath sits, rests, and is not disturbed.

The obsidian cooled under her hand and the stylus grew briefly more weighty - as if someone had put their fingers on it from the other side. When she drew the next sign - water - the stylus flowed, seductive and easy as a lie. She corrected the flourish to austerity. The soundless click of approval echoed in the chalk at her knees.

“Bracing,” Kheth muttered. “They always put the ethics in the clauses.”

Barma’s mouth twitched. “It deters amateurs.”

“Amateurs bring ladders,” Kheth said. “Professionals bring hubris.”

Cassandra finished the clause and set the stylus point-down in the sand within the grid. It held itself upright, gently vibrating. She lifted her wand. It was the right time for sound.

She cast a locking-buffer - not to open, but to catch what might fall when opening did happen. The charm was simple, the way a chair is simple: brilliant in its brutality. Her wand, feeing important, over-enunciated the initial consonant, and the first ring of the charm cracked like china. She swallowed an oath and corrected down. It held. A second circle, thinner, more like a whisper asking for quiet in a library. That one sat perfectly. The third, a tiny, almost embarrassed loop around the mouth-glyph itself to keep any escaping air from behaving like opinionated weather.

“Better,” Tarek said, very low.

“Do not compliment me while my hands are full,” she said, very low, and heard him smile.

Kheth’s abacus chimed three short notes. “Pressure equalized. You may unseal.”

Barma had positioned himself a fingertip’s breadth outside the grid, his palm hovering over one of the brass plates, the way one hovers a hand over the back of a horse about to be mounted. He glanced at Cassandra with the formality of a dance partner in a court where dances could go wrong.

“On your invitation,” he said.

Cassandra lowered her wand to the chalk line that connected the north rod to the east plate. The line looked like nothing. It was anything but. She breathed in - real breath, not the thing moving under the stone - and let it out steadily through her nose, the way she had learned to do when a curse in a vault three streets beneath London’s Ice Market had tried to turn everyone present into a ledger entry. Her voice was crisp and quiet.

“By consent and careful step,” she said. “By courtesy and comprehension. We do not force. We ask that you choose to open.”

She lifted her wand that inch that turns suggestion into act, and at the same time Barma pressed his palm down onto the plate.

The change was minute and everywhere. The obsidian did not part; the world changed its mind about where the edges of things were. The mouth-glyph deepened again and became, unmistakably, a boundary crossed. The chalk at her feet exhaled. Air - sweet, disciplined -

rolled over her boot and up her shin as if to smell her and decide. It paused. It continued. The brassy sweetness of resin and the clean dust of linen saturated the square of their work. Under it, something else moved, ancient enough to make language give way. Not a person. Not a god. The custom of breathing itself.

The parasol charm skittered five feet closer of its own accord and then fastidiously pretended it had meant to shade Kheth all along.

Tarek coughed once into his sleeve - not in distress, but because a person must make some noise when the air changes its identity. The assistants behind them made identical small sounds and gripped their amulets. The rods tipped toward the seam along the lintel where there had been no seam before. They hummed the note between C and C sharp and then, with the relief of a shoe finding the missing stair, slid into C.

And with the hum, the whisper came. Cassandra would deny it in any official setting, but here, where the sand had decided to hold all statements in confidence, she heard it as clearly as she had heard the mirror and the wind the night before. Not English; not Egyptian; something like both, and as intimate as breath against skin.

Welcome home.

The words were not for her. They were for someone who was not here yet, or not awake yet, or not willing yet to admit it. Still, her mouth filled with the metallic taste of having been accidentally included.

She felt Tarek turn his head toward her without looking away from the stone. “Did it - ”

“No,” she said too quickly, and then more honestly, “Yes. Perhaps.”

Kheth did not look up from his panes, which were clearing and clouding like thought. “They all say something,” he murmured. “The new ones say ‘enter.’ The old ones say something like ‘remember.’ The very old ones say ‘home’ and make people cry.”

Barma flicked a finger; the tiny loop of air-buffer above the mouth-glyph trembled and held. “Containment stable. We can break the outer lock.”

Cassandra drew the last figure with the stylus. It was the least impressive line of the day - a short vertical with a curl at the base. Every student in her cohort had mocked it for years. The little hook that turned No into Almost. But the moment her wrist made the curve, the world under her hand nodded.

There was no boom. No hiss. No cinematic shudder of sand. The seam along the lintel widened to a width that was not width. The light inside it shifted from cool to the particular warmth one gets from a brazier that has been banked and coaxed awake. The breath it exhaled met the desert’s dawn and agreed, and the combination washed over them like the very first cup of tea on a day that promises you both trouble and answers.

Cassandra closed her eyes for a heartbeat and allowed herself an unbecoming thought: that sometimes the world feels like it is looking back, and if you are lucky and careful, it is not

looking for a flaw.

When she opened them, the obsidian was still obsidian. The grid was still chalk. Her hands were steady. She returned the stylus to Barma, who took it with a fractional bow, as one musician nods to another when a difficult passage is done.

“Alive?” Tarek asked, under his breath.

“No more than usual,” she said. “Which feels like rather a lot.”

Kheth tucked away his abacus of glass panes. “Secondary wards are dormant. Psychological countermeasures at standard range. Expect murals. Possibly audible ethics.”

“Audible ethics?” one assistant croaked, fascinated and horrified.

“Chants,” Barma translated. “The walls will sing about behavior. If you are inclined to repent anything, now is efficient.”

The parasol charm, finished with its feelings, rotated half a degree to improve the goblins’ shade by a trivial amount. A breeze decided it had other business and wandered off. The scent settled into the seams of their clothes.

Cassandra stood and brushed sand from her knees. In the unstable edge of the open seam, she saw not darkness but density. A corridor waited that did not mind being corridor. She adjusted her scarf, pressed her palm once - just once - to the warm stone beside the mouth-glyph, and did not let her fingers linger.

“Thank you,” she said, to the seal that had decided to be persuaded. The politeness was unnecessary; the politeness was essential.

The whisper that followed was not a word. It was the sense of a nod.

Behind her, the day had become day - blue corrected to certainty, the horizon edited into sharpness. In front, the air within the tomb breathed that measured, honeyed breath. She looked back once at Tarek, who seconded the nod with his own; at Kheth and Barma, whose dismissive professionalism was, she suspected, its own form of piety; at the assistants, who were already telling their future children the story of the polite door.

“All right,” Cassandra said softly, letting the desert hear her smile. “Let’s go hear what the walls think of us.”

The first breath of the tomb reached out and laid its palm on Cassandra’s cheek, cool from stone and warm from intention, smelling of resin that had decided to be immortal and linen that had learned patience. The seam across the lintel widened no further, yet when Barma touched the plate with two fingers and Kheth dipped the tips of his rods, the boundary yielded with the deference of a curtain pulled aside.

They stepped in.

The light changed the way manners change when the door closes. Daylight thinned to a respectful thread behind them; ahead, the dark was not absence but texture, crowded with time. When Cassandra lifted her wand and cast the dimmest globe she could manage - no theatrics, no offense - the glow hung at shoulder height and behaved like a polite guest, lighting what asked to be lit and refusing to pry.

The corridor did not begin so much as continue the idea of threshold. Its walls were obsidian at the base and smoothed sandstone above, the juncture between them inlaid with a repeating band of gold leaf so thin it might have been humor. The ceiling canted inward in a shallow vault, painted in a blue so saturated it felt wet, pricked with tiny stars no larger than pinheads. As her light breathed, the stars gave the impression of exhaling back.

“Mind where you put your gaze,” Kheth said softly, ears twitching toward a rhythm only his rods could hear. “Some of these constellations are opinionated.”

Tarek made a note without looking down. “I will avoid offending the sky,” he said. “I have enough trouble with the ground.”

The first mural began after three steps, as if the tomb had waited long enough to see if they would enter and then remembered its pride. Figures stood in bright profile against the dark, their skin the color of sun-baked clay and river silt, their eyes elongated and indifferent. A procession of bearers carried lengths of stone, jars, instruments; a man with the narrow beard of command turned to speak to a scribe whose quill flickered even in paint. The pigments had been ground from minerals that had not forgotten they were mountains. The blue of a lapis collar seemed to ripple when Cassandra’s light passed; the green of malachite leaves was tender without being soft.

She moved closer and the painted scribe’s hand shifted a fraction. Not a trick of shadow - a reconsideration.

“Ah,” Barma said under his breath in the tone of a craftsman appreciating another’s audacity. “Active pigment enchantment. It will record us.”

“It is already drawing your worst angle,” Tarek murmured.

Cassandra found her hand had lifted, palm open - the universal human offering of see, empty. She let it fall, annoyed with herself and with the part of her that wanted very much to be seen by paint. “We signed in outside,” she said to the wall, and, because the notion of courtesy here had already taken on weight, she added in the old tongue, “We pass with care.”

The figures looked over her shoulder, not at her, and accounted for the goblins. One of the painted bearers rolled an eye toward a jar and made, impossibly, a face at Kheth that could only be read as “don’t drop it.” Kheth sniffed. “Impertinent,” he said, and kept walking.

The floor underfoot was packed earth over stone, hard as a decision and slightly springy with the memory of reed mats. Sand had drifted into patterns that were not quite random. Cassandra’s wand-light slid along the edges of those drifts and found them aligned to the invisible geometry she had traced outside. Somebody had planned the lay of dust.

The air cooled another degree. The second mural carried them into a room without changing rooms. Here the figures were less interested in labor than in etiquette: a table laid for offerings - bread, onions, beer in tall jars that fizzed with bubbles no one had blown in millennia - and a seated lord, handsome in the uncompromising style of the underworld, receiving petitioners. He bore the flail and crook lightly, as if they were accessories chosen after breakfast. Over his shoulder, within the border that suggested he existed in a more intense sort of here, a cat sat on a cushion and watched everything with the proprietorial calm of a creature who has never paid for anything in its life.

“Ah,” Tarek breathed. “There he is.”

Cassandra didn’t ask which he. The lord’s name blazed above him in a cartouche like a bracelet clasped around a throat. The shapes were the same she had met on wrappings and in sleep: sun disk; mouth; a lion’s head stylized into personality; ripple-lines for water. The arrangement was elegant the way a verdict is elegant.

“Rahetep,” she said, and the phonemes curled through the corridor like smoke. The gold band at the base of the wall warmed to the word and then cooled, faint as a pleased sigh.

Her name, spoken earlier on the threshold, had been an act of being present. His here was an admission that the past was, too. The painted cat’s ear twitched toward her and then dismissed her with the serene cruelty of cats everywhere.

“Don’t flirt with the wall cat,” Tarek said.

“He started it,” Cassandra said, and felt the ridiculous urge to bow.

They passed niches where jars rested behind latticed stone screens. Tiny hieroglyphs labeled the contents in a hand so fastidious Cassandra’s own neatest rune-work felt sloppy. Not organs. Stories. Fragments of a voyage in a boat that moved through reeds that gleamed like knives; accounts of an argument between priests and a man who insisted on sealing something no one should have had to name; inventories of the number of lamps lit in the last night and the number extinguished. She pressed two fingers against the screen of one niche and felt, humming behind it, a spell of forgetting that had agreed - reluctantly - to remember.

“Do not open those,” Kheth said without looking back.

“I am a model of restraint,” Cassandra said.

“Yes,” Barma said. “You have restrained yourself from touching anything for nearly one minute.”

They reached a widening in the corridor - no wider than the swing of a door, but unmistakable as a breath taken in. The ceiling lifted a hand’s breadth and the stars above them shifted an inch. Here, the mural on the right wall ended in a vertical band of red; the one on the left began after a finger’s space. Between them, obsidian showed through, polished to a flawlessness that dared reflection. Cassandra’s light trembled in it and steadied. Beneath the shine, lines too thin to be seen at a glance etched the surface: not pictures, but grammar. The oldest sort of spellwork, where meaning is a lattice rather than a sentence.

She crouched, the better to see, and as she did her wand’s hum - so faint as to have been mistaken for thought - matched a vibration from the stone and organized into a chord. E minor, again. The sense of being addressed increased.

“What do you think?” Tarek asked over her shoulder.

“That if I say what I think out loud, it will count as consent.” She traced the air. Lines rearranged themselves as if embarrassed at being caught in an off-duty posture and tried to look like decoration. “It’s listening to the shape of the sounds.” She ordered herself not to whisper; whispers assume intimacy. “And to how I breathe when I move my hand.”

“Flirtatious wall,” Tarek said. “Be firm.”

She was not sure firmness was the point. She inclined her head as one does to a personage in a receiving line. “We have read the terms,” she said in the old tongue. “We will not edit them.”

A faint rasp traveled the corridor ahead - a sound more like a thought scraping past a memory than sand moving. The painted figures a few paces down shifted again; a musician lifted her harp and let the suggestion of a note bloom, then put it down. Kheth carefully did not sigh. “Audible ethics,” he muttered. “Here we go.”

The walls began to sing.

It was not song as Cassandra had learned it at school. No melody; no beat one could borrow for marching. This was recitation ornamented with music’s muscle, the text of a law that had agreed to take on grace. The words did not cling to grammar she could translate all the way through. She caught phrases as if catching cups set floating down a stream: Do not take what is placed for another. Name nothing that has not named you. Return what you are given in equal measure of silence. Beneath the recitation, an ululation of reeds, the steady thrum of a drum that might have been the pressure in her temples, the occasional punctuation of hand on skin - clap, clap, not to scold but to keep humans from forgetting they had hands.

The assistants breathed too quickly. Cassandra felt the old, cruel thrill - recognition of a higher order - shake itself into attention at the base of her skull and made herself catalog the mundane instead: the seam where two slabs met; the faint nick on a painted ear; the way the gold band at the base had been mended in one place with resin and the mend had been done lovingly.

“Keep moving,” Barma said, quiet. “It is a lullaby. You will fall asleep standing up and never wake if you let it.”

“I am not sleepy,” one assistant whispered, then yawned in a panic so loud even the painted cat looked offended.

They moved. The corridor narrowed and widened without becoming wider or narrower, the way memory does. In one section, the murals dipped into a perspective that made the floor appear to tilt toward the wall; Cassandra’s inner ear protested and righted itself out of sheer stubbornness. In another, a painted door stood ajar in paint and offered a painted passage into

painted gardens so inviting that for three breaths she believed she could smell damp earth and hear frogs.

Tarek touched her elbow, deliberate. “Not that way.”

“I know,” she said, and startled herself by meaning it.

They turned a corner that refused to be a corner - no angle, merely a change in intention - and the corridor presented them with a scene so domestic Cassandra nearly laughed. A great bed with lion’s feet carved at the posts and a mattress piled with orderly linen; a low table bearing combs and jars and folded garments; a niche with a shelf full of rolled papyri bound with ribbon; a chair set by a window that did not exist. And there he was again, Rahetep, painted younger than power and older than complaint, seated and looking over his shoulder with a weary amusement that felt rehearsed to the point of becoming a reflex. The painted cat had its back to him and was looking out of the painted window at painted birds with the savoring concentration of someone planning to misbehave later.

“He had taste,” Cassandra said, and then, because honesty seemed to be a toll charged at this depth, added, “and a sense of staging.”

Tarek’s mouth tilted at the corner. “He was made of both.”

Her light grazed the painted linen and a pitiless little detail clicked into view: at the very edge of the sheet on the bed, the tiniest of glyphs, nearly invisible, had been worked into the hem stitch. It was the sign for mouth again, but smaller and altered - not speaking; breathing. The breath is here, said the hem. The breath is wrapped.

She stood too fast and the stars on the ceiling rang like struck coins. The air pressed against her sternum in a way that could have been admonishment. “All right,” she said aloud to herself, to the tomb, to the part of her that would happily lie down and become a very attentive stone. “All right.”

They reached the first doorway that was truly a doorway. It came with jambs and a lintel and a sense of having been waited for. Between jamb and jamb, a curtain of linen had been painted, then charmed to imitate what the linen outside this place had decided to do: let air through and keep intentions out. As they approached, the curtain lifted a fraction at one corner, like a eyelid. Cassandra’s wand-light dimmed of its own volition, settling into the color of beeswax.

“Containment holding,” Kheth said, not to reassure them but to remind himself to say it. The rods were angled so precisely they might have been protractors.

Barma touched the painted linen, not with his fingers but with the shadow of them, which is what the charm had asked. The painted fibers separated in obedience to a rule older than thread, and a sliver of the room beyond became visible: the glint of metal worked so thin it could only be ceremonial, the flat shine of water that was not water, a broken ring of shadow on stone. The air that came out had the bright dryness of well-kept books and the sweetness of incense that knows why it burns.

“We’re close,” Tarek said.

“Yes,” Cassandra said. She could hear her own pulse as a drum under the recitation of the walls, a mortal percussion insisting on being counted.

The stone at ankle height nuzzled the sole of her boot like an animal seeking attention. No whimsy; a shifting of level - barely a finger - where the floor sloped down into the next chamber. She adjusted her weight without looking away from the seam of painted linen and felt, in her ankles and knees and the small of her back, the engineering of the place: how traffic should move, where it should hesitate, where the body should understand respect because the architecture had explained it.

“Step with your left,” Kheth said mildly.

She did. The painted linen lifted all the way, becoming suggestion more than barrier. They entered.

The chamber made a low sound that could have been delight or relief. Whatever light Cassandra had brought with her committed to the politeness of a smaller flame; the room produced its own glow, pearly and calm, emanating from the stories written into it. The walls were crowded with scenes of breath - children blowing through reeds to make little flutes; cattle exhaling in the cool of dusk; a priest placing two fingers beneath another’s nose to feel for life. Between the scenes, tiny channels had been cut and gilded and left open, so that air could run along them when the world outside moved. Here, breath had been given something to do.

Against the far wall, set slightly askew in a manner that said engineering had finally bowed to symbolism, lay the sarcophagus. It was not gaudy. It was inevitable. Its lid bore the relief of a man lying as though he had just decided he would nap for a moment and then attend to state business. The mouth in his face was not closed; it was at rest. Around his head, the carved suggestion of linen rippled with such controlled motion Cassandra had to touch her own scarf to remind herself what cloth felt like.

At the foot of the sarcophagus, a low table held a set of implements so perfect in proportion that her hand ached. The hook and knife for delicate removals; the spoons for oils; the reed-pen with its slit angled for ruthless elegance. Beside them, a cup carved from a stone so orange it could have been a sunset held something that had once been liquid and had thought itself into stillness. On the floor between table and bier, circles upon circles of ink had been drawn and sealed and drawn again, the record of a debate with the divine that had ended in a truce.

Cassandra did not go to the sarcophagus. She knew how stories punished people for hurrying to their center. She went to the circles and crouched and studied the ink. It had cracked along one line - not from age, but from the faint, almost nonexistent shift of pressure that comes when a door elsewhere decides to open. The crack had been mended with something the color of late honey.

“Someone touched this recently,” she said. Not accusation. Observation.

Tarek said nothing. Barma breathed through his nose in the careful way that kept his mind inside his head and not inside the room. Kheth set his rods gently on the floor and laid two fingers on the topmost circle without breaking it and then, as if the contact had told him a joke only he found funny, withdrew them with a faint smile.

“What?” Cassandra asked.

“Nothing,” Kheth said. “It enjoys your pronunciation.”

She could feel it - the way the circles hummed when she moved, the way the murals glanced when she inhaled. Her presence here made a chord. It was flattering. It was dangerous.

“Do not be charmed,” she told herself aloud, which earned her a raised eyebrow from Tarek.

“By the tomb?” he asked.

“By the idea that it was built for me.”

He nodded once, and if there was a smile in it, it was the kind that tasted of agreement rather than amusement. “We will make sure you remember it was not.”

The walls’ recitation dropped to a murmur, as if, having shown the terms of hospitality, they were content to let the silence do the rest. In the sudden hush, the soft sound that is not sound at all - the measure of a breath held and released somewhere beneath stone - became audible enough to settle on the skin.

Cassandra stood. Her knees cracked in the immodest way knees do in rooms that predate modesty. She adjusted her scarf, tugged her cuff down over her wrist where her wand had begun to misbehave out of sheer excitement, and turned finally to look full at the carved face on the lid. The features were refined without being precious; the mouth had been given to a sculptor who understood restraint; the eyes were closed with the clarity of someone who knows exactly where he is sleeping.

“Lord Rahetep,” she said, not a summons, not a greeting. An acknowledgment. A name spoken as if it were a sentence. The name eased through the chamber and settled in the gold channels and the inked circles and the painted linen like a coin slid onto a table between friends who know how to bargain without cheating.

Behind her, the strip of daylight in the corridor thinned, as if the sun had looked away. In front of her, the silence smiled with all its teeth.

“Tea first,” Cassandra said, absurdly, to the quiet, and the quiet - in the way of all good hosts - made room.

For a long moment the tomb held its breath the way a person does when a beloved guest is almost at the door and dignity demands patience.

Cassandra did not touch the sarcophagus. She let her light drift to the base of it instead, to the chiselled feet that made a lion of stone look as though it might flex, to the shallow groove worn into the floor where ritual steps had counted themselves into memory. The cup of

orange stone on the low table held the residue of something once poured and never wasted; the scent of it - honey disciplined by resin - gathered in the hollow above her collarbone like a hand that meant reassurance.

“Containment stable,” Kheth murmured from the threshold of the chamber, rods angled, eyes half-lidded not with fatigue but with specialized listening. “Nothing pushes.”

“Let’s not take that as a challenge,” Barma said. His palm hovered over a brass plate he had set upon the floor like an opinion.

Tarek stood beside Cassandra with the quiet of a man who had come to terms long ago with the fact that the future moves in other people’s feet. His notebook remained closed. He had decided not to write in this room yet. That, too, was etiquette.

On the lid, the carved face of Rahetep lay with its mouth at rest and its eyelids given to a sculptor who believed in restraint. The relief of linen around his head pretended motion without daring it. At the very edge of the headdress, a line of hieroglyphs so small they might have been the shadow of writing rather than writing itself ran like a seam. Cassandra’s light caressed them and something answered - not illumination, not movement, but a correction in the air, a polite clearing of the throat of history.

“Do we…” one assistant whispered, and then, remembering where he was, let the question die without the indignity of verbs.

“No,” Cassandra said, to him and to herself. “We wait.”

She waited through three breaths - hers slow by intent, the room’s steady as an instrument tuned to the pressure of stone - and on the fourth the resonance under the circles of ink changed key. It was very slight, the way a face changes when the person who wears it decides not to hide a smile.

Something loosened. Not in the sarcophagus yet; in the murals. The painted harpist on the right wall lifted her hand an unnecessary inch and let it fall, as though giving permission for a prologue to end. Across from her, the painted cat curled its tail with proprietary grace. The gold channels within the walls’ grammar warmed - a temperature you feel in teeth before skin.

“Do not panic,” Barma said, which is the sort of thing people say to ward off their own excellent instincts. He adjusted the angle of the plate by a breath.

The lid shifted.

Not with the drama of cinema, not with the vulgar efficiency of hinges. It floated, a hand’s thickness above the relief of the carved body, as though the idea of weight had gone to stand in the corridor for a smoke. The seam that was not a seam kissed cool air. Resin sighed. Linen whispered somewhere not on the lid but within the world; a sound like paper promising not to tear.

The assistants took a synchronized step back without authorizing it.

Cassandra stayed where she was. She had only a ritual to offer, and her rituals were small and human. “Good morning,” she said, and the old tongue furnished her with a version older than that: *May your breath arrive exactly where you left it.*

The lid did not heed her; it obeyed its own engineering. It drifted sideways the width of a palm, and the narrowest of shadows opened: the kind that cuts the world into before and after.

Heat rose, not hot enough to burn, but definitely heat, and with it a scent that smelled like the color amber would smell if someone taught it manners. Resin. Beeswax. The faint metallic sigh that lives somewhere between bronze and blood. And another thing, impossible to name if one had not had childhood winters and once, long ago, the comfort of bedding that had been aired in cold sun: the inhale-exhale of cloth.

“Stabilize,” Kheth said through teeth that did not want to clack. His rods sang a high harmonic and settled.

Cassandra found she had lifted her free hand. Palms say hello the same way in every century.

The lid slid the rest of the way, not off - never off - but enough. It made no noise. The floor accepted the new balance without complaint. The circle of ink at Cassandra’s feet cracked along the repair line again and then, as if remembering dignity, resealed itself with the softness of late honey.

Inside, swaddled in linen that had learned obedience in a hundred ritual hands, lay a figure whose first act was an act of posture. Not breath yet. That came after. First, the linen bound across the chest gave the smallest impression of loosing and taking back, like a very old man letting a younger one stand first.

Then the breath.

It came not as a gasp, not as a resurrection’s theatrics, but as a choosing. Air found the idea of lungs and decided to be employed. Cloth lifted and fell with the intention of tide. In the brief silence - no recitation from the walls now, no ethics sung, only the room’s listening - Cassandra heard exactly one human sound: a swallow. Not dry. Considered.

Across the lid’s opening, a pair of hands, parchment-colored and still magnificent, smooth even where time had insisted, released their crossed grip. The right hand flexed with a courteous economy; the left adjusted the angle of a wrist as if it belonged to a man seated before an audience. Bandage edges gleamed with the faintest charmed sheen. She had the irresistible impression of gloves being removed in public, neatly, one finger’s width at a time, without fuss.

The figure sat up.

It was done with dignity that had been practiced into instinct. Wrappings did not ruck. Linen made exactly the sound linen makes when it agrees. The man’s head lifted; the gold paint at the corner of the headdress glanced the light and decided not to flare. A thin drift of resin dust, like pollen, rose and fell without touching anyone who hadn’t earned it.

He did not look at any of them first. He looked at the room - at the walls that had held his story, at the gold channels that had transmitted breath, at the circles of debate on the floor, at the painted cat that held his stare and yawned. He inclined his chin to the architecture. Only then did he tilt his head down in a clear angle of courtesy toward the people standing where people had been intended to stand.

He cleared his throat.

The sound echoed in the chamber and decided to be gentlemanly.

“Would someone kindly explain,” he inquired, in an accent crisp enough to slice a cucumber and spread it thinly on bread, “why my nap has been interrupted?”

Time broke like an assistant.

One assistant shrieked with the high note of a kettle and clamped his own mouth shut as if attempting to cork a potion after the boiling. The other managed an oath that began in Arabic, detoured through Italian, and arrived breathless in English: “Nope.”

Kheth’s rods clanged harmlessly against his shin as he shifted back on reflex; Barma’s brass plate skittered and stopped exactly where it needed to. Tarek said something that would have gotten him censured by his grandmother and then, rather heroically, did not run.

Cassandra, who had been born with a treacherous and incurable reflex, found herself straightening and answering the question to the person who had asked it.

“Tea,” she said.

Silence did something ridiculous - it raised an eyebrow.

“I beg your pardon?” the mummy asked.

“We have tea,” Cassandra clarified, and hated herself very gently. But she couldn’t un-say it; it had been the right thing, absurd and therefore human. “If you would like to… wake slowly. Sir.”

The bandaged head tilted, not in confusion but in that feline evaluation that precedes amusement. The eyes - lid edges traced with kohl so fine the paint might have been persuaded rather than applied - did not open. The formality of the closed lids made every gesture seem adjudicated. Then a sliver - no more - of dark iris showed, as though the world were being let in after the proper announcements.

“Ah,” he said mildly. “Civilization persists.”

He drew in another long, thoughtful breath, and with it the resinous sweetness in the room flexed. The walls’ painted harpist inclined her face so minutely that only a goblin would have noticed. The gold lines along the grammar lattices warmed from coins to sunlight. The bandages across his chest dimmed their charm-glow from guard to garment.

“You are Lord Rahetep,” Cassandra said, because sometimes names are bridges people can choose to cross.

“I am obliged to be,” he said, and his mouth, visible now under the precise lattice of wrappings, smiled with half its authority. “Though I confess I expected a more dignified hour. Who is in charge of the clock?”

Kheth, regaining his principles with the speed of a creature to whom principle was breakfast, sniffed. “The door opened at our invitation,” he said. “We did not wind you.”

Rahetep turned his head, and the movement had the grace of old discretion. The linen did not bind. Whoever had wrapped him had loved doing it. “Goblins,” he observed, neither delighted nor dismayed. “I trust your ledgers are pleased.”

“They are offended by sand,” Barma said, composure tightened into courtesy; it made him sound friendlier. “They will recover.”

Rahetep looked to Tarek, except it wasn’t a look so much as a weighing - the sort of seeing a man accustomed to audiences performs automatically. There was no condescension in it, only habit. He found only dry amusement in Tarek’s lifted chin and respectful distrust.

Then he faced Cassandra. Not a mirror - not yet - but interest sharpened, as a musician sharpens attention when the room produces a note it didn’t expect. The faintest tremor ran along the linen where her wand-light grazed the hieroglyphs stitched into the wrappings; the glyph for mouth breathed. Her own breath decided to be accounted for.

“You speak properly,” he said, not of her language but of her posture and her audacity. “And improper things as well.”

“My specialty,” Cassandra said before she could stop herself. The assistants looked as if they wished to insert themselves between her and the last five thousand years and found their legs unwilling to perform.

“Miss Blythe,” Tarek said in that neutral tone that in any court in the world translates as kindly do not provoke the monarch.

“Cassandra will serve,” Rahetep said - correcting his own title rather than hers - and made a small motion with his fingers that managed, through linen, to indicate he would like to step down from his own carved bed. He paused, as a good host does, and waited for someone to have the sense to prepare.

Barma recovered second. First, to everyone’s surprise including his own, was the assistant with the best scream, who darted forward and set the small folding stair they had brought for ceremonial purposes - not because anyone believed they would need it, but because Kheth had insisted on packing it - against the sarcophagus. He did it trembling and correctly. Rahetep nodded to him as if to a herald.

“Tea,” Rahetep reminded Cassandra, as though he had submitted a not unreasonable request and expected a world that knew how to read a list.

“Of course,” Cassandra said, because living through history involves kettles. She reached into her satchel for the compact travel kettle, thumbed the charm awake, and glanced at Tarek. He had already palmed a wrapped sugar cube from his pocket with the innocent guilt of a schoolboy and was producing, of all holy and ridiculous things, a small tin.

“Chamomile,” he said, very blandly.

Cassandra’s laugh came out in an undiplomatic snort and turned into an exhale that admitted she was charmed against her will. “You carry chamomile into tombs?”

“I carry chamomile everywhere,” Tarek said. “It discourages hubris.”

Steam rose obediently without thinking it was a portent. The smell of flowers overlaid resin and linen with the domesticity of an ordinary afternoon that refuses to be intimidated by a pharaoh. Cassandra poured into a cup whose porcelain had survived four field seasons and three managers; Barma murmured a drying charm over one spot where the steam condensed; Kheth’s rods settled into a purr so faint it watched its own manners.

Rahetep slid to the sarcophagus’s edge with the wary delicacy of a man wearing new shoes. The small staircase accepted his weight without complaint. He sat on its third step a moment, chest lifting and falling with deliberation, and looked down at his hands as if reacquainting himself with them. The linen at his fingers was clean and old; the nails beneath were buffed to a softness that belonged to someone who had been an idea for a very long time.

“Thank you,” he said as Cassandra offered the cup. He did not reach for it; he waited for her to place it in his hands. Protocol more than fragility. She did, and he held it, inhaled steam, and said, with deep feeling, “Ah. My civilization, at least, survives.”

The assistant who had supplied the staircase made a noise that might one day become a brag and today was only relief. The other assistant, who had until this moment been studying the back of the room with religious fervor, dared to look.

Cassandra, cup distributed, took inventory: If this was going to be a problem, it would already be one. The murals had not sharpened into alarm. The gold channels were content. The circles of ink did not seethe, they breathed. Her wand’s hum was high with excitement but not edging toward danger.

“Lord Rahetep,” she said, softer, the way one says a name to someone whose body might not believe it yet. “You have been resurrected under legal investigation. There is a court in Cairo that will be anxious to interview your manners.”

He lowered the cup. The hint of a smile - one a man might wear to a tedious reception where the canapés at least are decent - touched the visible corner of his mouth. “A court,” he said. “How reassuring. I find I excel at bureaucracy when properly caffeinated.”

“Tea is not - ” Tarek began, then decided, as he so often did around Cassandra, to conserve his pedantry for better prey. “Yes,” he finished. “Excellent.”

From the corridor, the parasol charm made a valiant attempt to scoot itself closer to shade the resurrected monarch and, thwarted by a doorframe, rotated to shade Kheth more, which Kheth accepted as his due.

Cassandra let herself blink and be a person for two seconds. Her heart had calmed into a rhythm the room approved of. The tremor in her fingers - the useful, human tremor that kept vanity from touching power - was still there. She acknowledged it as a colleague.

“Right,” she said, businesslike in self-defense. “We’ll collect your… necessities.” She glanced at the implements, at the papyri in the niches, at the cup of sunset-stone on the low table. “And we’ll keep our hands to what we’ve asked for.”

Rahetep inclined his head, satisfaction - no, relief - warming his tone by one degree. “You ask,” he said. “Good. Be so kind as to continue that habit.”

The walls hummed a chord that could have been agreement. Behind their politeness, somewhere unseen and not yet anyone’s business to name, the room breathed.

Outside, in the light that had chosen the day, a wind began that would later pick up the edge of a tent and carry it laughing down the slope, and a ghost scribe in a mural no one was watching made a small note in the margin: properly awakened; requested tea; unexpectedly civil.

They made a procession of it because the tomb insisted on ceremony and because even the irreverent become solemn when carrying a person who is both artifact and audience.

Barma took the lead with one hand hovering over the brass plate as if conducting a quartet, and Kheth walked backward with rods aloft, his ears aimed like instruments, his dignity restored to preternatural levels. The assistants bore the folding stair like pallbearers who had missed the funeral and were determined to excel at the after-party. Tarek moved beside Rahetep, offering an arm which was politely declined and then accepted not for balance but for etiquette: a king permitting the present century its courtesies.

Cassandra went at Rahetep’s other side - neither guiding nor guarding, merely present - and tried not to be aware that every time she said a token phrase in the old tongue necessary for the door’s continued good behavior, the hieroglyphs stitched into his wrappings answered her. Not with light, not with movement, but with the impression of breath taken at the same moment as hers. She swallowed the urge to speak too much just to test it. Curiosity is not a grace; restraint is.

At the painted linen, Barma raised his fingers to the level of suggestion. The curtain obeyed; the corridor let them out like a host escorting guests down a hallway after a long evening, pleased and sad all at once. The walls resumed their soft recitation of ethics as if to reassure themselves they were still themselves. The painted harpist’s hand hovered in a chord no one needed, then returned to its proper octave. The painted cat didn’t even glance up. Of course he was bored; this was all arranged centuries ago.

The seam across the lintel acknowledged their approach with the barest pulse, a heartbeat of stone. The daylight beyond looked improbable in the manner of miracles one is forced to take

as normal because there are sandwiches that need making. The parasol charm fussed theatrically, then drifted to meet them with an exaggerated air of having already been there.

Rahetep paused under the lintel and inclined his head to it as a gentleman nods to a footman who has known him since he mastered spoons. The gold channels along the wall warmed in a low, contented flare, and the breath of the tomb - the actual, literal movement of trained air along carved paths - parted around him and slid forward into the corridor as if to accompany, as one friend does another to the door.

They stepped into the basin as the day announced itself decisively. The edge of the sun had turned from coin to tax; color picked up its pens and worked in earnest. Heat sketched the clean line of Rahetep's profile and found it acceptable. Sand made its particular sound at their ankles, a hush that carried weight once and gossip now.

The world obliged them with a small absurdity to restore scale: one assistant sneezed and then bowed to the desert in apology; the parasol charm caught the sneeze mid-flight and folded it into itself with a prim tuck, as though to refuse any aromatic competition. Rahetep inhaled, and for the first time his eyes - those precise, amused instruments - opened fully. They were dark and not kind by default; kindness, in his gaze, would be a decision. He tilted his head back to consider the sky with a familiarity that made Cassandra think of a man returning to a city after long absence and humming as he identifies the new buildings by their bad taste.

"Ah," he said softly. "We kept the stars right side up. How enterprising of the heavens."

Tarek followed his gaze and offered, because he could not help the instinct, "There was concern during the Ptolemies."

"Just so," Rahetep said, as if they were resuming an old argument. "They meant well with their vowels."

The camp, which had earlier been a republic of work, had now become a small country of problems. The assistants had set out the low folding chairs (one broken and enchanted to behave), a table for notes, a chest containing items that might reassure a resurrected monarch that modernity could be understood (bread, salt, a hand mirror, a copy of the latest issue of the Daily Prophet which would only confuse him, a pencil), and the kettle, which had decided to be loyal to whomever spoke to it last. Kheth and Barma were already writing notations in two ledgers at once without looking, a feat that would make junior goblins weep with either aspiration or despair.

Rahetep took the chair nearest the shadow of the parasol and transformed it, through posture alone, into something much more dignified than canvas on sticks. He set the empty teacup on the little table with the same care with which one puts down a decree. Cassandra found herself absurdly relieved that the cup did not leave a ring. Some part of her had expected magic to refuse housework.

"Now then," Rahetep said, folding his hands - the linen there newly snug, the fingers unwrapping their old memory of rings - and turning the full attention of a man trained to hear petitions upon Cassandra. "What have you done to me?"

The assistants made choking sounds; Kheth’s quill blotted; even the sun seemed, for an instant, to tilt its head.

“Woken you,” Cassandra said, letting the humor stand bare so that the respect beneath it would be visible. “Legally. Temporarily. With every possible clause of humility attached. We have not altered you; we have interrupted custody.”

“Hm.” Rahetep’s eyes flicked to Tarek. “Witness?”

“Against my will,” Tarek said, dry. “For the sake of the living.”

“Against my will for the sake of the dead,” Rahetep returned, equally dry, and there it was: a grin lived at the edges of his propriety and would be coaxed out by company of quality.

Barma cleared his throat with bureaucratic tact. “Lord Rahetep, we are obliged to inform you that the Wizarding Court of Cairo will require your presence within twenty-four hours - allowing for transportation charms and bureaucracy - to assess your… eligibility for corporeal continuance.”

“You will be delighted to know,” Kheth added, almost warmly, “that they possess a magnificent seal. It bites.”

“Reassuring,” Rahetep said. “So much of the modern age seems toothless.”

Cassandra drew her chair nearer and set her notebook upon her knee. She would not take dictation; she would make a record. There is a difference. “Before that, if you can be persuaded, we’d like to ask you a few questions to prevent - ” She almost said mistakes. That presumes a singular, correct past. “ - to prevent accidents. For example: Is there a thing we must not do that you suspect a group like us would find irresistibly sensible?”

Rahetep’s gaze slid to the tomb mouth, which sat in the slope like a thought you keep on the edges of your tongue. “Do not seal what has promised breath,” he said. “Do not name what has not asked to be named. And above all, do not decide that your kindness is clever.”

“My condolences,” Tarek murmured. “You have met us.”

“You have met yourselves,” Rahetep said. “That is dangerous enough.”

He reached again for the teacup and held it under his chin for the steam, eyes lowering with appreciation, then sipped as if indentured to elegance. When he set the cup down the second time, he turned his left hand so the inner wrist faced Cassandra with unconscious grace - the way one shows a physician where the pulse lives. The linen there was embroidered with a thin ribbon of characters that were not quite hieroglyphs and not quite runes; when Cassandra leaned, the ribbon shivered. Her wand, tucked along her forearm, thrilled to a higher pitch and then steadied, recognizing a key in which it had been taught to sing. The sensation traveled up her skin such that her breath did something she would never, later, be able to describe without feeling foolish: it matched his for exactly one cycle.

She forced herself to look away first. “We won’t… prod,” she said. “Not the bindings. Not the - ” She groped for a word that would not tempt any of this to think she named it. “ - agreements.”

“Good,” Rahetep said, comedy in the relief. “I find prodding does little for either the dead or the living. It only inflates the courage of people who ought to be afraid.”

The parasol charm, apparently moved by the philosophy, inched three degrees to better shade the crown of a king, but it stalled again on the limit of its tether. The sun, which likes kings, threw him a spare cloud. He made as if to accept the gift and then paused. His head turned sharply, not toward the tomb nor toward the desert, but toward a point as yet unoccupied by any ordinary nuisance.

“There he is,” Tarek said to no one, or to inevitability.

They heard the voice before they saw him - a voice that could have been poured over ice and then set in a sunbeam until the edge of poshness curled into audible smirk.

“I see the collective has discovered resurrection, tea, and the ability to litter my favorite threshold with furniture. How enterprising.”

The golden cat walked into the camp the way cats enter rooms that already belong to them: with a lack of surprise that implies everyone else is late. He was sleek as a sin, his fur burnished by the sort of sun that flatters rather than damages, eyes the exact color of amber when it has learned sarcasm. Around his neck was a silk bow that had once been white and had decided to become cream, in order to be forgiven.

“Nebu,” Rahetep said, with relief he did not conceal. “I was beginning to suspect they had banned you for common decency.”

“They tried,” Nebu said, sitting neatly in the shade as if conjured for that spot, and allowing the parasol charm to adjust itself with reverent terror. “But decency and I have an understanding. I ignore it, and in return it makes everyone else look worse.”

He inspected the camp with professional disdain. The assistants were immediately and forever in love with him. Kheth made a note in a new margin: cat. Barma pretended his heart was immune to charm. The parasol charm rotated out of habit to improve Nebu’s shade by a whisper.

Cassandra, who had been insulted by the best and owned a medal for not laughing in front of unhelpful men, nevertheless had to put her fist against her mouth to keep the sound in. Nebu noticed, which made him like her a little. He arranged his tail with the fussy efficiency of a butler reorganizing someone else’s cupboard.

“Who is she?” he said, not bothering to lower his voice.

“Cassandra Blythe,” said Rahetep. “Curse-breaker. Rationalist. Fond of inappropriate beverages.”

“Tea is not inappropriate,” she said, attempting gravitas with a cat, which seldom goes well.

“Tea is a sacrament,” Nebu said. “You have already abused it once today by offering it as a solution. We will speak later.”

He rose without moving any unnecessary part of himself and leapt, impossibly gently, onto the low table. He sniffed the cup Rahetep had held and, ignoring all known laws of cat-kind, did not try to put a paw in it. Instead he sat, put his back to Rahetep - affection, in cats - and looked Cassandra full in the face. It was like being appraised in a language that had always frightfully enjoyed adjectives.

“Well then,” he said. “You woke my master. You did not explode. You are not weeping. You are, I note, freckled, which suggests an optimistic relationship with the sun and therefore an imprudent relationship with deserts.”

“I have a parasol,” she said.

“It has chosen a different allegiance,” Nebu said, without looking at it. The parasol charm lowered itself guiltily. “What do you want, Miss Blythe? And do try to tell the truth the first time, for fun.”

Cassandra, who had mastered the art of lying to forms and not to rooms, decided in an instant to be the person Nebu accused her of not being. “I want to understand what I did,” she said. “I want to protect what should not be touched, even from people who call touching ‘protection.’ I want to keep my job or despise it honestly. And I want - ” She cleared her throat. Ambition tastes like too much sugar when you say it aloud. “I want the world to feel bigger when I leave it than when I entered.”

Nebu’s eyes narrowed into slits that glowed with faint interest. “Hm,” he said. “Foolish. Possibly redeemable.” He looked over his shoulder at Rahetep. “I like this one. She is inconvenient.”

“I had noticed,” Rahetep said, and this time the grin broke and stayed. “She offered me tea before questions.”

“Civilization,” Nebu said, and then, with the gravity of a condemnatory bishop, “We do not serve hangovers.”

Cassandra looked at Tarek in despair. “He speaks as if it were a menu.”

Tarek, who had been waiting for this, produced a scrap of dignity and offered it to her like a handkerchief. “It is,” he said. “You are not ready for the soup.”

Barma could be heard muttering the following note into his ledger: interlocutor, feline; chief characteristics, unfair. Kheth was scratching Nebu under the chin with two fingers like a man demonstrating he was above such petty charms, and Nebu, traitorously delighted, allowed it and pretended it had been his idea.

The interviews, which Cassandra had promised would be brief, went on at a humane pace. Rahetep answered questions with a lawyer’s discipline and a poet’s economy. Yes, he had ordered the Breath sealed. No, he would not tell them, yet, where. Yes, he recalled his priests; no, he would not curse them under oath here. “A curse is a form of loyalty,” he said mildly. “We reserve it for those to whom we dare make promises.”

At the more technical queries - the arrangement of inner wards, the hierarchy of authority among the sigil-makers, who could override what - his answers became so precise the page felt cut. He spoke the names of tools and people with such clarity that Cassandra imagined, for a painful instant, what it would be to have a mind like that and never be allowed to rest. Every few minutes, Nebu interjected with the derailing exactitude of a cat batting at a too-serious object: “You are assuming a door is a wall with manners, when in fact it is a negotiation,” or “He does not remember the seventh priest because the seventh priest bored everyone including himself,” or, to Cassandra, “Stop leaning. Your curiosity has elbows.”

When Cassandra reached a question she had not written - when did your breath last belong to you? - she closed her notebook with a click and pretended the sound was a decision. Rahetep heard the not-question anyway. He did not answer. He set his fingers lightly over the embroidered ribbon at his wrist and breathed once, twice, meeting her gaze as one meets a student at the point where understanding should be spared.

“Enough,” he said gently, to her and to the day. “You will manage to be serious later. For now, allow me dignity. It is half of what remains of me, and I have already given you the other half in the tomb.”

Silence in the desert is not absence; it is company. It gathered around them as the sun climbed its first tall stair. Far off, the ridge’s mirage rehearsed its procession and then dismissed practice. One of the assistants tried to unwrap a sandwich without offending history and was forgiven because hunger is an ethic too.

“Food,” Nebu announced, as if he had invented the concept. “And shade. And we will discuss grooming. You have all sinned against it this morning.”

“You may begin with me,” Rahetep said pleasantly. “I am in need of an opinionated comb.”

“We have three,” the assistant with the parasol said, eager - then wilted under Nebu’s glance. “Two,” he corrected.

Cassandra stood to stretch her legs and found that being vertical did not correct the sensation that the world had adjusted itself by a whisper to accommodate all this. The basin felt occupied in a way it hadn’t earlier; the door looked less like a wound and more like a mouth resting at the natural shape of closed. The parasol charm, having satisfied its fetish for goblin heads, attempted a wobbling expansion to include all of them and, thwarted by spell physics and indecision, settled on shading Nebu and half of Rahetep’s shoulder. Which, given the history of monuments, was a fair outcome.

She poured herself a second cup of tea and burned her tongue, and the human indignity of it made her laugh. Tarek looked at her with that faint fondness he permitted himself when she

behaved in ways that would not topple civilizations. He gestured with his chin toward the tomb. “Do you think it… approves?”

“I think it is relieved,” she said. “Rooms prefer to be exactly what they were built for. We have finally given it a scene it recognizes.”

Nebu yawned in arabesques. “Rooms prefer to be fancied,” he said, eyes half-closed. “You are all flirting with architecture. It is distasteful and will end in poetry.”

“Poetry is not always a crime,” Rahetep said, and the look he gave the tomb was not love and not hatred. It was the kind of attention a man gives a decision he has already made but has not said out loud.

Kheth clicked his abacus; Barma checked the brass plate’s patience; the assistants began the gentle ritual of sandwiches in the presence of a myth. The desert shifted its weight politely and resumed being larger than anyone could stand.

Cassandra opened her notebook - not for questions now, but for the record that isn’t a record, the one you write because your hands have to keep moving or your mind will run into the wall of how stacked this moment is. She wrote the unoffending facts: tea, linen, cat, etiquette. She wrote one opinion: the sky has a sense of humor. Then she closed the notebook on the temptation to confess more.

Nebu hopped down with negligent grace and threaded himself under Rahetep’s hand, consenting to a stroke as if it had been his idea in the first place. He blinked, slow, priestly. “You will make mistakes,” he said, to all of them and to the chapter of this day. “Try to avoid the fatal ones. They are dull.”

“And if we do not?” Tarek asked.

“Then,” Nebu said, arranging his paws, “we will have tea.”

Rahetep laughed softly, and the roomless space of the basin accepted the sound the way a tomb accepts breath. Cassandra felt the tilt in her chest that means a day has chosen its memory. She looked toward the dark seam of the doorway - now only shadow, now only stone - and had the treacherous impression it looked back with approval, as a stage might look at actors who have found the rhythm.

The wind lifted, carrying with it scents that had no right to be present - street smoke from Cairo, baker’s sugar, the faint metallic tang of ink - and dropped them again like a promise deferred. The parasol charm shivered in contentment. The sun, having done its best for everyone, promised to do worse later. Someone’s sandwich leaked pickle into the sand, instantly sanctifying the place with something unmagical and true.

“All right,” Cassandra said, as much to herself as to the company she found herself responsible for. “We’ll eat. We’ll rest. Then we’ll pack you for court, Lord Rahetep, as gently as one packs a storm.”

“Flatterer,” Nebu said, without looking up.

“Realist,” she said.

“Bureaucrat,” Kheth suggested.

“Host,” Rahetep decided, and raised his now-empty cup to her in a toast that, for the moment, required nothing more heroic than it had already demanded.

Around them the desert pretended not to eavesdrop, and the day, satisfied it had achieved the proper ratio of awe to farce, went on.

The desert decided evening by degrees, as if reluctant to admit that even days like this end. Heat loosened its grip. Color put away its brags. Shadows, which had lurked behind objects like bored relatives, came out and did the thoughtful work of contour.

Camp contracted into a village around the square of shade and the kettle. The assistants performed rites with sandwiches and string and quietly triumphant lists. Kheth and Barma packed their instruments with the reverence thieves reserve for locks; each rod went into its sleeve, each pane of the abacus into its nest, each brass plate into a pocket that had been embroidered long ago by someone who thought protection a domestic art.

Rahetep sat not so much on the chair as inside it - chair as throne, throne as good posture. If grandeur could be humble, it would look like this. His hands made lazy decisions in his lap. From time to time he rolled one shoulder, testing the range of a joint that had agreed to be a joint again. The linen had lost its ceremonial sheen and settled into garment. Steam from a second cup made a small house around his face and vanished, as houses do. He watched the slope of sand below the tomb mouth with the expression of a man remembering a staircase in a palace he no longer owns and deciding to be generous about it.

Nebu had annexed the folding table. He lay sphinx-length along the wood with the proprietary indolence of a creature who believes everything horizontal was designed for him. The parasol charm hovered above him with the idiot devotion of a dog that wants to be a hat. If Nebu’s tail flicked - twice, precise - Cassandra suspected he was issuing orders in a syntax known only to cats and weather.

Tarek finished a page of notes and tucked the pencil behind his ear as if the day itself could be annotated there. He had helped one assistant fold the stair; he had discreetly removed the Daily Prophet from the tray and replaced it with a clean scrap of parchment, as if protecting Rahetep from the present were an achievable goal. Now he looked a moment at the sky he had grown up under. Evening’s first thin star had started its performance too early, as eager stars do; the rest held back, dramatic.

“Court in the morning,” he said, not to anyone in particular. “If we wish to be on time for bureaucracy, we must arrive late.”

“Then we will already be modern,” Rahetep murmured.

Cassandra had not sat since the first cup. If she stopped moving she might begin feeling, and she was not certain this day’s feelings could be contained by what she had brought with her. She walked the perimeter of their small republic and checked the ward pegs she and Barma

had driven into the sand - the little humming anchors that made a circle acceptable to the night. She repaired a knot here, tightened a thread there, soothed a sulking rune with a promise of breakfast. She did not look at the door every time she passed it. She tried very hard not to.

When she finally allowed herself to sit, it was with her journal on her knees and her legs arranged in an angle that let one boot toe press, lightly, into the cool of evening sand. The page waited without judgement. She sharpened her pencil promptly to avoid using it as a spine. The first sentences insisted on being practical: Site: Basin North-East. Time of unsealing: after dawn; before hubris. Present: Rahetep (alive-ish, civil), Nebu (alive, uncivil), Tarek (sane), Barma & Kheth (triumphant, pretending otherwise), two assistants (heroic in stairs). Spells: containment stable. Murals: opinionated. Tea: essential. No explosions, only decisions.

She stopped and breathed. The desert returned breath carefully. Her hand wrote something she would not have admitted in front of anyone with a badge: I am grateful and a little afraid. It looked indecent on the page. She drew a line through it with the courtesy of a woman closing a curtain so as not to scandalize the neighbors.

At the tomb mouth, the seam of the lintel had returned to the idea of uninterrupted stone. From the basin, it read as shadow; from the corner of her eye, as a mouth at rest. Evening cooled the obsidian into a darker thought. The gold channels within the hallway - hidden now - still seemed to hum, the way you swear you hear the ocean when you put a shell to your ear and refuse to be told it is your own pulse.

Something sang, very far in. Not the walls - their recitation had ended when the day did - but a thinner thread of sound, less song than the intention of it: reed and river and air taught to carry meaning. It moved along the back of her teeth like a draught in a library doorway.

“Do you hear - ” she began, and Tarek shook his head with the blunt kindness of a friend who chooses sanity for both of you.

“No,” he said. “We are hearing nothing at all.”

Nebu did not bother to lift his head. “We are hearing an obligation,” he said. “Which is much worse.”

Barma snapped his ledger shut. “We are hearing bedtime,” he said, and glared at the horizon as if daring it to argue about time.

Kheth had been counting starlight for the last ten minutes, making a private inventory of the ways ancient ceilings and modern skies failed to align. At Nebu’s remark he lifted his chin. “We will do watches,” he decided. “Two hours each. The door is politer than most doors, but this is precisely when impolite people like to be clever.”

“Cleverness,” Nebu said with a theatrical sigh, “is a disease of the afternoon. Night is for superstition and soup.”

“We don’t have soup,” an assistant said earnestly.

“Tragedy,” Nebu said. “Add it to the list under ‘hair,’ ‘manners,’ and ‘parasol etiquette.’”

The wind changed its mind and came up the basin from the direction of Cairo smelling faintly of smoke and lemon and the fiction that cities tell about their cleanliness. It licked the light from the edges of things. It lifted a corner of the tent that had been dutifully pegged and then let it go again in apology. It passed Cassandra’s face with cool fingers that smelled like linen and read her freckles like a map.

Her pencil moved. A different hand wrote: He knows us already. Or we are simply very predictable.

Rahetep, who was not reading her journal and whose eyes were closed, said: “Both can be true.”

She looked up, caught. He had leaned his head back, exposing the curve of throat where linen ended and intention began. Without opening his eyes, he continued, “The living are exquisitely reliable in their mistakes. It is what makes love possible. It is also why the dead have opinions.”

Cassandra’s smile arrived without permission and then hid in her cup. “I prefer to think of mine as corrections.”

“Of course,” he said, almost asleep. “Corrections are what the arrogant call prayers.”

Nebu’s tail thumped once. “If you begin praying, pray for decent pillows. I am not sleeping on sand like a barbarian.”

“You never sleep on anything less than worship,” Tarek said, mild.

Nebu pretended to consider this and then decided to accept it as his due.

They made camp proper at last. The assistants unfurled bedrolls with trepidation, as if the desert might judge their thread count. Tarek laid his blanket on the side furthest from the door in a concession to Fate’s sense of humor. The goblins slept the way competent men always sleep in the open: on their backs, with their tools within reach and their expressions all business. Nebu tested every blanket and then, in what he pretended was a coincidence, chose the one nearest Cassandra’s boots.

“Protection,” he said, curling with impossible geometry.

“Of you?” she asked.

“Of standards,” he said, and shut his eyes at an angle that communicated a demand for silence.

Rahetep did not lie down. He arranged himself in the chair and became, to all appearances, an old man indulging in a nap after a good story. The bandages across his chest rose and fell with the patience of bells. He did not require sleep, she suspected; he required the act of resting, which was different - ritual more than repair. When the first truly honest star lit, he

turned his face politely toward it and said nothing, which is an older prayer than any spoken one.

Cassandra wrote a last line: Tomorrow we take a mummy to court. Then she put the journal away and let her hands be empty. Her empty hands told her things her pencil had edited out: that her skin hummed at the same key as the rods had; that her bones were tired somewhere behind the adrenaline; that the word “home” had mislaid itself and might, inconveniently, be wandering around in the tomb.

The night arrived without fanfare and sat with them like a relative no one had invited and everyone loved anyway. From inside the door’s idea of itself, that thin not-quite-song threaded the air, receded, returned - less a melody than an exemplar of breathing. The dunes softened their outlines into sleeping beasts; Cairo’s glow in the distance promised a thousand small arguments in the morning. The parasol charm, exhausted by loyalty, drooped to shade no one and only later realized what it had done and stiffened in embarrassment.

Cassandra lay down with her head toward the tomb - as if listening were a posture - and closed her eyes. The sand under the blanket pressed its individual opinions against her shoulder blades. She could have sworn - ridiculous - that it spelled something. She did not look. She did not want to give the night the satisfaction.

Somewhere behind sleep’s first gate, she felt rather than heard the cool draft of air that speaks fluent corridor. A phrase slipped across her skin like a polished coin passed hand to hand in a dark theater.

The dead have opinions.

She opened her eyes to stars that had arranged themselves into ordinary patterns and a sky that insisted it had always been this blue-black. The wind, sweet with resin and the kind of cold that belongs to linen aired after heat, ran a finger across her hair.

“Only the wind,” she told herself, softly, politely, like a woman refusing a second dessert.

The wind, obligingly, disagreed.

Chapter 4: A Most Undignified Resurrection

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A Most Undignified Resurrection

The reception chamber of the Cairo Gringotts outpost looked as if a hurricane had enrolled in night school and taken an introductory course in paperwork. Ledgers lay like fallen soldiers, parchment draped over chair backs in exhausted surrender. A globe of the Nile, usually sedate and informative, had wobbled off its pedestal and now revolved against a wall at anxious speed, projecting watery light that slid over sand-colored stone. Someone's Bewitched Inkwell of Inexhaustible Black had been knocked sideways and was currently expressing its feelings by dripping a disconsolate ribbon across the floor.

In the precise center of this wreckage sat Lord Rahetep.

He had chosen a patch of unbroken carpet with the judiciousness of a chess player selecting an opening square. Cross-legged, straight-spined, immaculate in his wrappings, he looked less like a walking relic than a magistrate who had been forced to weather a riot of interns. A porcelain cup steamed in his linen-wrapped hands; every time he lifted it, the scent of chamomile and clover honey curled through the room, gentling the dust.

"Your tea," said Cassandra, for the third time, because saying something practical kept her from saying, You're not real. "I found the honey."

"Miss Blythe," Rahetep murmured, his voice smooth as a seal pressed into wax, "you have found honey with the devotion of a pilgrim. I applaud you." He sipped, sighed, and closed his eyes briefly. "This century does not understand tomb design, but it brews a passable comfort."

Around them, goblins attempted damage control with the tight, outraged efficiency of accountants who had discovered the moral failings of a universe that allowed accidents. Griphook al-Azhari, the branch director, limped past with a splintered walking stick and a clipboard that had bitten him in the mêlée; two junior clerks chased a sheaf of enchanted contracts that flapped like panicked doves. Charms hung in the air like spider silk, catching lamp-light and dust motes. When Rahetep breathed, those charms quivered minutely, as if tuning to a note only he could hold.

Cassandra set the honey jar nearer his reach and tried not to stare at the place where his wrappings parted over one wrist. The linen there was faintly translucent, and beneath it - no, not flesh. Something like lacquered shadow, the shape of a man's arm remembered by the air.

"Do you take sugar?" she asked, because normalcy had a taste and she was determined to bite it.

"Only when I intend to lie," Rahetep said, with mild regret. "Today I am merely confused."

“Good,” she said. “I mean - good that you’re not lying. Not the confusion. Obviously.”

“Confusion,” he said, with a sip, “is merely the first step in learning one has been wrong in an interesting way.”

A junior goblin skidded to a halt at Cassandra’s elbow. “Miss Blythe - your - your report - should - ” He pointed at a quill that was trying to write atop an overturned chair, nib squeaking. The quill glanced at Cassandra (quills, like cats, were outrageously judgmental), then resumed scratching the words RESURRECTION EVENT: ADDENDUM in aggressive capitals.

“I’ll fix it,” Cassandra promised, in the crisp tone of a woman who has never once been in charge of fixing reality. She lifted her wand. The air thinned - no, not thinned: bent. She felt it as the smallest pressure against her teeth, as if a storm were far away and thinking about them. The strokes of ink in the report pooled, then held. The quill shivered, affronted, and consented to wait.

Rahetep watched without interruption, cupping his tea in both hands. The lamplight wove gold along the ridges of his wrappings, and Cassandra noticed - there, again - that faintest glow across the hieroglyphs stitched at his throat. Earlier, in the tomb, when she had said the name Amun, the symbol there - the seated god with plumed crown - had brightened for a heartbeat, as if called from across a room.

She must have looked too long. Rahetep lowered his cup and followed her gaze with dry amusement. “Yes,” he said. “I have always worn my opinions on my sleeve.”

“They’re on your neck,” Cassandra replied, before she could stop herself.

He inclined his head. “The neck is nearer the mouth. It shortens the distance.”

A goblin clerk stumbled over. “Director says - Director says - he wants it contained. I’m not sure what ‘it’ is in this sentence, Miss Blythe, but he was very specific about the full stop.”

“It,” Cassandra said, and realized she meant the air. The lamps had settled into a steadier burn since Rahetep began to drink; the globe on the wall had slowed its fretful turning. Even the inkwell’s drip fell at a polite interval, as if embarrassed. The chamber was calibrating itself around him, furniture inching by degrees toward an older idea of symmetry. A bronze wall sconce - Carthaginian, probably fake - squeaked as it straightened. She had the keen, absurd sensation of a theater set correcting itself for a more exacting director.

“I am very sorry about the chair,” Rahetep said to the clerk, who stared at him and looked as if he might either bow or faint. “In my time, chairs with backs were considered dangerously indulgent. We preferred stools. A good stool demands a good spine.”

“Yes, Your - Your - Lordship,” the clerk managed, and fled.

Cassandra pulled another chair upright and sat opposite the Pharaoh. The cushion had split in the chaos, and a wisp of stuffing stuck to her robes like a domestic cloud. She brushed it off, then gave up; it hovered at her elbow as if taking notes.

“Lord Rahetep,” she said, adopting her official tone, the one she used when inspectors doubted women could do arithmetic, “we need to establish a few facts for the record.”

“Records,” he said fondly, as if she had mentioned a beloved cousin. “Tell me: do yours still gossip when tilted to the light?”

“Only on even-numbered days,” she said, and the corner of his mouth bent, and she had the irrational sense of being inspected and, for the moment, approved.

“Your name,” she continued, and the quill shook out its plume and leaned forward like a nosy relative. “Titles, if you wish. Condition of resurrection, if known.”

“Rahetep,” he said, with the calm of a man announcing a sunrise. “Voice of Amun. Keeper of the Eastern Gate. Tax Reformer. Amateur Gardener. Perpetual Disappointment to My Priests.” He lifted the cup. “Resurrection condition: Inconvenient.”

“Inconvenient,” the quill wrote, and underlined it three times, splattering a dot of ink onto Cassandra’s cuff.

“Dates?” she asked.

“At my last living breakfast,” Rahetep said, “the bread was warm, the honey was fragrant, and I informed my High Priest that immortality was a poor use of good magic. He said he would take it under advisement. Now I am here, where your lamps wag their tongues at me, and your walls wear foreign stone with admirable bravado.”

Cassandra bit back the urge to apologize for the walls. “You’re not in pain?”

“I am in tea,” he said simply. “It is the better alternative.”

Something in her shoulders released at that. “We - ah - we tried not to disturb your - rest. The wards were… your tomb was particularly well sealed.”

“Your people,” he said, with a glance that was not unkind, “have a habit of confusing sealed with solved.”

“I’m not my people,” Cassandra said, before she could consult caution. “I’m a curse-breaker. I don’t break them to steal.” A beat. “Not primarily.”

“Ah,” Rahetep said, and the hieroglyphs at his throat warmed faintly, gold within gold. “A poet of clauses.”

Griphook al-Azhari arrived, breathing like a kettle. His waistcoat bore a papyrus smear and what Cassandra suspected was a shoe print. “Miss Blythe,” he said, and managed to compress reprimand, terror, and client-relations into two words. “We have to move him. Quietly. Before the inspectors arrive. And for the love of vaults, get that globe off the wall.”

The globe chose that moment to sigh and come to a stop, as if mollified; the projected river slackened to a gentle ribbon of light and rested across Rahetep’s knees. The blue shimmered over linen, and for a blink the wrappings looked like water over carved stone.

“No,” Rahetep said softly, not to the globe, but to the room in general. “Here will do.”

“Here,” Griphook echoed faintly, then shook himself. “No. Not here. We are not licensed for… for… hospitality to the deceased. Not of this quality.”

“We could take him to the Interrogation Chamber,” Cassandra offered, at the same time the quill scratched INTERROGATION CHAMBER? with a little too much enthusiasm. “It’s secure.”

Rahetep tilted his head, listening to some internal courtier. “Interrogation,” he mused. “Such a Latin word. In my day, we called it conversation with a purpose. I do not object.”

“Splendid,” Griphook said, in the tone of a man who would have found a burning building splendid if it meant the paperwork would end. He rubbed his temples. “Discretion, Miss Blythe. Use back corridors. And - ” He faltered. “And perhaps a shawl.”

“A shawl?” Cassandra repeated, startled.

“To avoid alarming the junior staff,” Griphook said. “One does not parade antiquities without approval.”

Rahetep set his cup down with delicate finality. “I will not be paraded,” he said mildly. The air along the ceiling ribs rippled - the barest suggestion of heat. “But I shall walk where Miss Blythe walks.”

Cassandra stood. Her knees ached with the sand-walk, with adrenaline, with the absurdity of needing to fetch a shawl for a resurrected Pharaoh. “All right,” she said. “We’ll do it quietly.”

She helped Rahetep rise. His hand met hers through linen, and it was not cold. Not warm, either, not dead weight, but something in between - a temperature that felt like stone with sun in it. When he straightened, the globe’s river tightened again around his knee and then slid away, satisfied.

As they began toward the side door, the reception chamber had one last protest. The Bewitched Inkwell, affronted by the idea that an event should proceed without proper notation, juddered and splashed a dramatic blot on the floor. The blot wriggled, elongated, and formed into a little serpent of ink that lifted its head and hissed.

“Enough,” Cassandra said, with the calm patience she reserved for misbehaving artifacts and men in committees. She tapped the serpent’s nose with her wand. It sneezed into a comma and lay quietly, drying.

Rahetep watched, eyes crinkling with private amusement. “In your nation,” he asked conversationally as they slipped into the corridor where the light ran thinner and cooler, “do commas also put kings to sleep?”

“Only when they’re used correctly,” Cassandra said. “Unfortunately, that’s rare.”

The corridor smelled of cooled brass and chalk dust. Protective sigils embossed into the stone glimmered as they passed, then - subtly - shifted their angles, aligning themselves toward

Rahetep as flowers might toward a new sun. The sensation in Cassandra's teeth returned, a pleasant pressure, like a yawn that almost began.

"Do you feel that?" she asked, half to herself.

"Yes," Rahetep said. His voice, still mild, carried the weight of a door opening on a long room. "The house is remembering how to breathe."

They reached the Interrogation Chamber - square, disciplined, a table bolted to the floor, two chairs, two lamps. It was the sort of room designed to make truth feel tidy. Rahetep paused on the threshold and glanced up. On the lintel, in tiny carving, sat a glyph Cassandra had never noticed: a reed pen beside an ear. Listen, then write.

He stepped inside, the lamps blooming brighter without flame being coaxed. Cassandra felt the quill in her pocket quiver, then settle, obedient and ready.

Behind them, the reception chamber exhaled, and the last loose papers descended, one by one, to the correct stacks.

"Please," Rahetep said, reclaiming the chair with no back, because of course the Interrogation Chamber owned none with backs, "let us continue our conversation with a purpose."

Cassandra sat, her hand still tingling with the memory of his. She smoothed the parchment, steadied the quill, tasted dust and honey in the air, and thought - briefly, absurdly - of how she would describe this moment in her field journal. She decided she would note the way the lamps seemed to hum, the almost-music under the silence, like a temple throat clearing.

"All right, my lord," she said, and the room listened. "Let's begin."

The Interrogation Chamber had the optimism of a broom closet that had been told, very late in life, that it could be a courtroom if it believed in itself. No windows. Two lamps whose light pooled like quiet arguments. A table bolted to the floor as if the truth might try to run off with the furniture. Someone had scrubbed the stone recently; it smelled faintly of chalk, brass, and a cleaning charm that insisted on notes of lemon regardless of context.

Cassandra took the chair that had the least wobble, set her portfolio square in front of her, and arranged her quill, ink, and wand in a line that radiated competence. Her palms were damp. Her mouth tasted of dust and honey. She wished, very briefly and very fiercely, for a cup of tea, then was immediately, furiously annoyed at herself for the cliché.

Rahetep lowered himself onto the opposite stool with meticulous grace. The linen at his knees creaked softly; the hieroglyphs stitched at his throat caught the lamplight and drank it - gold brightening into a warmer, deeper tone, as if a memory were being held up to the sun. He folded his hands and looked, for all the world, like an accomplished guest prepared to be interviewed by an earnest host. The difference was that the guest had died three thousand years ago and the host had forgotten to eat lunch.

"Lord Rahetep," Cassandra began, forcing her voice into the steady cadence of officialdom, "this is a formal statement taken for the records of Gringotts Wizarding Bank, Cairo Outpost,

pursuant to an event categorized as an unusual corporeal restoration - ”

“Resurrection,” Rahetep said, without malice. “It is a kinder word. Restoration suggests a craftsman glued me together.”

“Resurrection,” she conceded. “For the record.” The quill scratched the word with satisfaction.

He inclined his head. “Accuracy is the first step toward dignity. If we must be ridiculous, we may at least be exact.”

“Right.” The quill waited, angled toward him like a small terrier anticipating treats. Cassandra set the tip in the ink and decided not to imagine the consequences of spilling any. “Please state your full name, titles, prior condition, and current… state, as you understand it.”

“Rahetep,” he said, with a smoothness that felt like a door closing against a draft. “Voice of Amun. Keeper of the Eastern Gate. Judge of the Flood Calendars. Patron of the Royal Apiaries. Amateur Gardener.”

“I do hope the apiaries are separate from the flood calendars,” Cassandra said before she could stop herself. “Although the honey would be very… punctual.”

“It was,” he said, and the linen at his temples crinkled in what might have been a smile. “Prior condition: peacefully deceased, properly honored. Current state: inconveniently ambulatory.”

The quill underlined inconveniently. Cassandra resisted the urge to apologize to the quill.

“Date of birth?” she asked.

“In the year my mother lost three moons to storms and ordered the boat builders to carve prayers into every oar,” he said. “Consult your scholars; they have put my breath inside their tables.”

“Approximately,” Cassandra translated, scribbling a range. “Date of death?”

“The day after the last flood of a generous year.” He tilted his head. “My priests called it auspicious. I found the timing theatrical.”

“Cause?”

“The conclusion of a life.” He looked down at his folded hands. The linen creaked again. “No spear, no fever. A quieting. I ate honey, I made a joke about taxes, and then I walked with my mother into a garden I had never seen.”

The quill faltered, then resumed with unexpected neatness. Cassandra cleared her throat, which had become inexplicably less cooperative.

“And the manner of your resurrection,” she pressed on gently, “as you understand it?”

“Miss Blythe,” he said, and his voice flattened into something wry and old, “I woke because your century knocked too loudly on a door that was designed to be opened from the inside. I am awake because curiosity does not understand sleep.”

The lamps hummed a fraction louder, then steadied. Cassandra made herself note the phrasing. She wrote it as if copying a charm.

“Do you have in your possession any documents, artifacts, or proofs you wish to add to the record?” she asked.

“I do,” he said, with satisfaction, and reached into the folds of his wrappings as a duke might into a coat pocket. When his hand emerged, it held a narrow roll of papyrus, sealed with a nugget of dark resin impressed with a cartouche. The smell of it filled the room - spice and smoke and something like sun-baked grass. Not damp archive; riverbank at noon.

He set it on the table. The plume on Cassandra’s quill quivered like a bird that has just realized it is indoors.

“This,” Rahetep said, “is my declaration of death. Signed by my physicians, witnessed by my sister, certified by my High Priest, countersigned by the Chief Bee-Keeper, who - ” he paused, considered - “was very thorough.”

“The Chief… Bee-Keeper,” Cassandra repeated, wondering why that worked so well on her heart.

“In my house,” Rahetep said gently, “honey was not a luxury. It was a vocabulary.”

She breathed out. “May I?”

He gestured. “I would be delighted to see you argue with my bureaucracy.”

Cassandra leaned forward and, with the reverence she reserved for curses more delicate than deadly, touched the seal with the tip of her wand. The resin warmed under a muttered unlocking charm and released with a sigh that was almost a note. The sooty impression of the cartouche lifted like a bubble and hovered, faint as the outline left by the sun when one closes one’s eyes. Inside the papyrus, the ink was still lively; when she unrolled the first span, the hieroglyphs blinked once, waking, then arranged themselves in lines that to any untrained eye would have been pictures, and to hers were sentences breathing in a different shape.

She translated under her breath to the waiting quill. “Declaration: Lord Rahetep, called Voice of Amun, concludes his mortal account, witnessed at dawn. Cause: completion.” She frowned. “Completion?”

“It is not euphemism,” he said. “We did not mistake endings for disease.”

“Right.” She adjusted. “Completion. Offerings tallied; debts balanced; soul measured; tomb sealed with mercy.” She paused. “That verb - mercy?”

He nodded.

The quill hesitated on the word, then underlined it once, neatly.

Cassandra skimmed ahead with her mouth quietly moving. Her wand hummed at the edges of her palm; the lines brightened when she touched certain sigils as if pleased to be acknowledged. When she reached the sign for Amun, the little seated figure with plumes, the hieroglyph on Rahetep's throat answered - just a fractional glow that made the skin of the room twitch. She looked up.

"The name," she said, keeping her tone calm, "activates your - ah - the wrapping glyphs."

"It always did," he said. "Names open more doors than keys."

She made a note that read dangerously like a proverb.

"Please describe," she continued, "any sensations or - changes - since awakening. For the record."

He considered, hands still, not a shred of theatre in the thinking. "The world is louder," he said at last. "Not with voices. With intention. Your rooms have opinions. Your lamps argue about brightness. Your quills believe themselves artists."

The quill, traitorous, added a flourish to its own capital letter.

"I am also," he added with courteous candor, "hungry and not hungry. I desire tea because it is civilized. I desire honey because it remembers sunlight. I am not hungry because hunger implies a lack and I am, at present, inconveniently complete."

"Any pain?"

"I ache where I am looked at," he said. "It is not harm. It is attention."

Cassandra's pen slowed for a heartbeat. She thought of every gaze in the reception chamber snagging on him like cloth on a nail. She thought of herself.

"All right," she murmured, and wrote more softly. "Thank you."

He tilted his head. "You thank me for answering, which means your questions will become impolite."

"They always do," she said, relieved to be caught out. "It's the job." She set down the papyrus with care and reached into her portfolio for the Gringotts standard questionnaire: twelve pages of grids, squares, and boxes designed to bring the universe to heel through enumeration. "These are mostly perfunctory. I'm obliged to ask them even when they're absurd."

"I adore absurd obligations," Rahetep said, sounding like a man who had chaired many committees. "Proceed."

"Do you pose an immediate threat to life and property?"

“I am a threat to complacency,” he said. “Property is a side effect.”

She marked NO with a lawyerly asterisk.

“Are you under the control of any curse, entity, enchantment, or contractual obligation not of your choosing?”

“Death,” he said pleasantly. “It is entirely of my choosing. I am overdue to return to it.”

The quill blotted slightly. Cassandra waited for her pulse to climb back down from its sudden vantage point.

“Do you intend to remain in this plane of existence?”

“I intend,” he said, “to be polite. If this plane insists on continuing the conversation, I will not interrupt. If it yields the floor, I will sit.”

She checked “Undetermined.” The form did not offer “eloquent.”

“Can you,” she ventured, “cast magic?”

“I can be magic,” he said. A skein of warm air crossed the room, the lamps cleared their throats, and one of the tidy lemon-scented motes of cleaning charm drifted toward him and dissolved against his wrappings as if brought to sense. “Casting is a habit. Habits require muscle. I have linen.”

“Understood.” She fixed the boxes with the most neutral pen strokes she could muster.

At the bottom of page three: Language Profile. She brightened faintly - her territory. “For the record, you’re speaking excellent English. How?”

“I am listening to your mouth,” he said. “And arranging the old words in new shapes. Your vowels are impatient. Your consonants enjoy uniforms.”

Cassandra blinked. “That is… not inaccurate.”

“Your transliteration of the reed-leaf sign is, however, a scandal,” he added, gently. “In your notes from the tomb, you confused it with the arm. The reed is a breath. The arm is a boast.”

Heat flared in her cheeks. “I - yes. You’re right. Thank you.”

“If you correct it now,” he said, conversational as weather, “you will save yourself two centuries of mockery from insufferable graduate students.”

She stared at him, momentarily robbed of speech by the image of her notes enduring two centuries. The quill made a little sympathetic dash on the margin, as if patting her hand.

“Fine,” she said briskly, recovering. “Reed is breath, arm is boast.” She made the edits. “While we’re exchanging scandalous corrections: your ordering of the funerary spell in the west alcove - you inverted the last two lines.”

He looked delighted. “On purpose. It irritated a priest.”

Cassandra stopped writing. The room seemed to gather itself into a listening shape. “Why?”

“Because he had started to love the spell more than the person it protected,” Rahetep said simply. “A spell is an oar. It is meant to touch the river.”

She swallowed. “Right.” Her voice sounded like the memory of itself; she cleared it. “We can proceed.”

There were a few more boxes. She filled them with facts that felt woefully smaller than the air. At the end, the form required signatures. She slid the parchment across to him, placed the quill beside it, and felt something like stage fright.

Rahetep looked at the quill with an expression that was not disdain but the patient amusement of an elder statesman confronted with a very tall hat. “May I sign with a name that is true?”

“That would be ideal,” Cassandra said, and then, before she could talk herself out of it, added, “But perhaps not the most powerful variant. For everyone’s… comfort.”

He inclined his head, accepting the boundaries. He took the quill. For a heartbeat, nothing happened; then the feather steadied, the nib dipped itself, and his hand - linen, shadow, sun-warmed stone - moved. The lines he drew were not simply letters. They were pathways. The strokes seemed to know where they were going. The script curled into a name that felt like the quiet of the last minute before dawn.

The glyph at his throat glowed in answer and dimmed, amenably. The lamps exhaled. The table’s bolts did not loosen, but for the first time Cassandra felt as though they might not be necessary.

She pulled the parchment back, blew gently to set the ink. “Thank you,” she said, feeling the inadequacy and meaning it anyway.

“It is a pleasure to be alive,” Rahetep said gravely, “and a duty to be legible.”

There came, then, the softest sound: a thud against the lower panel of the door, the scrape of something small and confident. Cassandra’s hand drifted toward her wand; Rahetep did not turn his head, but his attention altered a degree, as if a compass had acknowledged north.

The latch lifted of its own accord. The door opened far enough for a sleek golden shape to pour through like warm light.

Nebu trotted in as if chairs, lamps, and law were arranged for his convenience. His tail wrote an elegant curve in the air; his whiskers announced that he disapproved of the cleaning charm’s lemon. He leapt onto the table without a pause, inserted one paw squarely into the wet corner of Rahetep’s signature, and left a perfect pawprint beside it.

“For legal purposes,” Nebu said, in a voice that could have cut cloth, “I am a witness.”

Cassandra, who ought to have protested, laughed instead. It came out a shade breathless. “Fine,” she said. “Please state your name for the record.”

“Nebu,” said the cat, inspecting his paw with deep interest. “Spelled as the hieroglyph for gold, pronounced as the noise you people make when you pretend to be affectionate.”

The quill, delighted, wrote NEBU (CAT) with a flourish it had clearly been saving.

Rahetep, without looking at Nebu, placed his linen hand gently against the feline shoulder. For a blink, Cassandra swore she felt - not saw, felt - the room’s angle shift again, the lamps’ pools draw closer, the discipline of the chamber soften into a civilized circle around the three of them.

“Miss Blythe,” Rahetep said, returning his attention to her with that small, courtly gravity, “shall we continue your perfunctory absurdities? I believe next you will ask me whether I am in possession of hexed livestock.”

Cassandra shuffled the stack. “As a matter of fact,” she murmured, finding box seven, “yes.” She tapped the line with her quill. “Any hexed animals in your direct care?”

Nebu narrowed his eyes. “Careful.”

Rahetep looked amused. “Only one,” he said. “Violently opinionated. Moderately magical. Insists on being paid in sunbeams.”

“Noted,” Cassandra said, and ticked the box that did not exist. She wrote it in anyway, in the margin: One cat.

She looked up again, and the air seemed steady, and the job had its corners back. Somewhere, faintly, she could hear the reception chamber remembering how to file. The quill poised, ready. The lamps held their breath. On the table, the pawprint dried to a gold-tinged brown, as if the ink had taken Nebu at his word.

“All right,” she said, and smiled despite herself. “Let’s be exact.”

The table belonged to the cat now. That was the impression Cassandra had, watching Nebu make a neat geometry out of himself between the inkstand and Rahetep’s papyrus, as if paper and paw and parchment were all merely varieties of him arranged at different densities.

He was an elegant creature even in repose - sleek as burnished metal, the gold of him not yellow but deep, like honey seen through amber. His coat had the faint nap of a velvet you would be scolded for touching. When he yawned (and he did, extravagantly), the pink of his mouth flashed like a rose carved into a seal. His eyes, half-lidded, held the lamplight and then gave it back in pieces.

“Now,” Nebu said, without looking at either of them, “which of you has been speaking ill of reeds?”

Cassandra, who had been writing a note about the pawprint’s legal status (unclear, menacingly adorable), blinked. “I - no one here.”

“Someone has,” Nebu said. He extended one foreleg and flexed the toes so that his claws appeared like a line of punctuation asserting itself. “A reed is a breath made visible. It is a reed when it grows and a reed when it dries, and also when it writes. If it hears that it is an arm, it will sulk, and sulking reeds write brittle laws.”

“I’ve amended my notes,” Cassandra said, resisting the urge to defend her entire academic career to a cat.

“Good,” Nebu replied, with the satisfied air of a headmaster who has discovered contraband sweets and chosen to keep them. He closed his eyes, then opened one, suspiciously. “Why does the room smell of lemons? Have you angered a house-elf?”

“Cleaning charm,” Cassandra said. “We anger dust instead.”

“Dust,” Nebu pronounced, “is ancestry in particulate form. You should be more respectful. Hello, Master.”

He turned his head at last toward Rahetep, and the shift in him made something in the air tilt as if two mirrors had found each other’s gaze. Rahetep inclined his head a fraction, the linen at his neck tightening - deference, affection, history, all crisped into one precise motion.

“Nebu,” Rahetep said. “You have made your mark.”

“It needed making,” Nebu answered. He licked his paw and applied it delicately to his ear, combing the air. “Being official is simply being clean about it.”

Cassandra found she had written the sentence down verbatim. She underlined being clean about it, and was immediately embarrassed, as if she had made an overly admiring note in a lecture.

“Nebu,” she said, schooling her voice into its brisk register, “for the record - are you in fact Lord Rahetep’s familiar?”

“I am in fact Nebu,” he said. “Familiar is a term of art invented by people whose cats do not love them. I am an associate.”

“Associate,” the quill wrote, primly. The plume trembled, as if suppressing laughter.

“And your… present residence?” Cassandra asked, because the form demanded place of domicile, and she was not in the mood to wrestle with the box later.

“Light,” Nebu said. “Preferably a rectangle of it on a tiled floor between the hours of nine and noon. In the afternoons, cushions embroidered with scenes of triumph. If none are available, I accept an argument to win.”

“Noted,” Cassandra said, solemn as a clerk. “Purpose of visit to this chamber?”

“To supervise your nouns,” Nebu said. “Your pronouns will be next.”

She glanced at Rahetep. He looked not amused so much as quietly relieved, as if the world had remembered a line in a song. “Nebu,” he said, “Miss Blythe is charged with asking sensible questions in a senseless situation. Be merciful.”

“I am never merciful,” Nebu said. “I am precise. Miss Blythe - ask your sensible questions. I will add the answers you overlooked.”

Cassandra straightened, because something steadied in her at the offer, however barbed. There is comfort in being corrected by a creature who has made a profession of it. It means there are still rules.

“All right,” she said. “The tomb. When we opened it, were there any wards, signs, or… objections that we missed?”

Nebu’s ears shifted, minute sails catching a current. “You missed the taste,” he said.

“The - taste?”

“Of the air,” he said. “It had been told to wait. When air has been told to wait a very long time, it becomes patient in the wrong places.”

Cassandra made a dot of ink that was almost a period and decided to call it an asterisk. “We noted a pressure. A kind of… bending.”

“Yes. Old spells lean,” Nebu said. “They do not break. They are the elders at a wedding who refuse to sit where they are told and end up in the best seats.”

Rahetep’s linen crinkled again in a near-smile. “Nebu speaks in furniture today.”

“I speak in what you understand,” Nebu replied. “Do not change the subject. Miss Blythe - your unsealing charm had a British edge. Sharp. Efficient. It cut cleanly, and where it cut, it invited.”

“Invited what?”

“An answer,” Nebu said, and for the first time the sardonic glaze slid off his voice to reveal metal beneath. “You knocked. The door you chose answers politely. Politeness is not the same as kindness.”

Cassandra’s hand paused. The lamps hummed, then softened back. She thought of the lid sliding on its own. She thought of the honey-and-rot of the first breath of the tomb, and how it had felt not like escape but like welcome.

“We didn’t mean - ” she started, then caught herself at the childishness of that and amended, “We intended to secure and study, not to - awaken.”

Nebu’s pupils narrowed into coins. “Intention is what children bring to a river. The river brings the river.” He flicked a whisker. “Write that down; it sounds like something your Department would enjoy misquoting.”

The quill obligingly wrote THE RIVER BRINGS THE RIVER and drew a little wave, which Cassandra erased with a glare.

“Very well,” she said. “If we were - if we are - engaged in a dialogue with a door, then what is on the other side of it?”

Nebu, at last, looked away. His gaze went somewhere inward and far, pupils widening until the gold of his eyes became a rim. His voice lost its ornament and kept only its grammar.

“Breath,” he said. “Not air. Not wind. Breath. The first grammar. The word before the word. We called it many names. We argued theology until noon and agreed on honey at dusk. But the Breath remained what it was: a way of refusing to leave.”

Rahetep did not move. The hieroglyph at his throat gave a soft, internal answer, a pulse of gold like a heartbeat turned sideways.

Cassandra’s own breath snagged. She thought of the hieroglyphs in the mirror that first night, the way they had tried to be English for her. She thought about language like a reed: a breath made visible.

“The Order of the Sun’s Shadow,” she heard herself say, though that belonged to narrower corridors and future chapters. “Are they involved?” The word Order felt too tidy; she nearly pressed pen to her own skin to write a ruder one.

Nebu blinked, long and slow. The sardonic returned like a cloak drawn up against a draft. “You will find that when there is a door and a knock, there is always a committee.”

“That’s not a denial,” Cassandra said.

“It is an improvement over confession,” Nebu replied. He rose and padded across the table, not disturbing the papyrus more than light disturbs a pattern in a pool. At the table’s edge, he paused to look straight at Cassandra. His eyes narrowed, then widened, as if deciding which mirror she required.

“You,” he said, and his voice went velvet-quiet, “must decide whether your curiosity is a lantern or a knife.”

The question slid under her skin and made a home. She hated him for it and was grateful, and the two feelings sat companionably, like rivals sharing a bench.

“Is there a third option?” she asked, trying for levity and nearly finding it. “A spoon, perhaps?”

“A spoon,” Nebu conceded, “is an underappreciated weapon.” He flicked his tail, approving of the attempt. “But spoons are for serving. You are not a server of other people’s appetites, Miss Blythe. Do not let your bank persuade you otherwise.”

“Is that advice,” she asked, “or a threat?”

“It is a remembrance,” Nebu said, and looked back to Rahetep with a softness so brief Cassandra would have missed it if she had not already begun to collect such moments with the greed of a scholar and the guilt of a friend. “He does not belong to you,” he added, quieter still. “Nor to them. He belongs to the fact that he ended, and then was made to begin again.”

Rahetep’s hands - linen, shadow, sunlight stone - unfolded and refolded with etiquette precise enough to be reverent. “I have always belonged to breath,” he said. “As we all do.”

The room, which had spent most of its life aspiring to tidy truth, became a place where an untidy truth could sit for a moment without embarrassing itself.

Cassandra swallowed. Tea would have been a mercy; lemon would have been honest. She settled for the discipline of the form and the mutiny of ignoring it. “Nebu,” she said, “one more practical question.”

“Your questions are all practical,” Nebu said. “It is your answers that will be ethical.”

“In the reception chamber,” she said, “things… rearranged. The sconce straightened; the globe calmed. Is that you? Him?” She tilted her head toward Rahetep. “Or the - door answering?”

“House manners,” Nebu said, dismissive and affectionate at once. “He is a habit the world remembers. The room stood up straighter. You will find that with him around, even your punctuation behaves.”

As if to oblige, the comma Cassandra had subdued earlier gave one reluctant wiggle, then lay flatter.

“There will be more,” Nebu continued. “Objects that prefer him. Spells that defer. And people,” he added, looking blasé and not at all, “who perform politeness in hopes of touching some of what he is. Beware them. They will smell of frankincense and management.”

Cassandra allowed herself one unprofessional snort. “I know the scent.”

“I should hope so.” Nebu sniffed the air - actual sniffing; his nose twitched, derisive, dainty. “Your Director approaches with a shawl and three excuses.”

Footsteps. Griphook’s brisk, anxious cadence, the faint rattle of someone’s sense of order held together with string. Cassandra straightened on instinct; Rahetep did not. He looked at the door as a man looks at weather.

Nebu hopped down from the table in a single unbroken line of motion that made gravity look like a rumor. He sauntered to the door and sat with his back to it, tail wrapped neatly, the implacable seal of a sphinx in miniature.

“Final note for your record, Miss Blythe,” he said, without turning. “When you speak the name Amun in this room, speak it like a reed, not an arm.”

“Breath,” she said.

“Breath,” Nebu affirmed.

The latch lifted, the door opened, and Griphook al-Azhari filled the doorway with a shawl of uncompromising beige and an expression that had been filed in triplicate. Behind him, a junior clerk breathed like someone who had been told he might at any moment be turned into a beetle for policy reasons.

“Miss Blythe,” Griphook said, in a whisper that somehow thundered. “We will move our - guest - now. Quietly. I have secured a closed carriage. And a hat.”

“A hat?” Cassandra echoed, delighted and doomed.

“For him,” Griphook said, jerking his chin at Rahetep. “Nothing ostentatious. Discretion is a cardigan.”

“Discretion,” Nebu murmured to the floor, “is a door that pretends to be a wall.”

Rahetep stood. The room breathed with him, and then, as if deciding it had better manners than to cling, let him go. He accepted the shawl with graceful patience, as a king accepts the customs of a foreign court: lightly, without mockery. When Griphook made to drape it over his head, Rahetep lifted a hand - not rebuke, merely a stay - and settled it himself over his shoulders like a mantle, the beige becoming, impossibly, dignified.

“Miss Blythe,” he said, and his eyes - what lay behind the wrap’s eye-slits - found hers with that courteous weight that made rooms behave. “Shall we continue our conversation elsewhere?”

Cassandra gathered the papyrus, the signed statement, the quill that had begun preening as if it had been praised. She tucked everything into her portfolio with a care that verged on ceremony. Her hands knew what they carried: ink that had agreed to be a witness, a pawprint that had agreed to be a seal, and sentences that had agreed to be heavier than they looked.

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s be - quiet.”

They moved toward the door. Nebu flowed out ahead, leader by right of confidence. Griphook flanked them like a parade marshal haunted by ethics. The junior clerk scurried behind, clutching the hat, which, to its credit, seemed to be reconsidering its destiny.

As they stepped into the corridor, the lamps brightened and then gentled, accepting the change. The sigils on the stones shifted their angles, not enough to be noticed by anyone without a quill’s attention span, but enough to be felt in the teeth. Air carried the faintest smell of honey, less like sweetness than like an old story deciding to be told again.

Behind them, the Interrogation Chamber settled its papers with a sound like rain beginning, and then, dutifully, silence. In the damp edge of the ink on the signature, the gold undertone glimmered once and went discreetly ordinary.

“Lantern or knife,” Nebu murmured, not to be dramatic but because he could not help being accurate.

“Perhaps,” Cassandra said under her breath, “a spoon.”

“Try not to stir,” Nebu said dryly, and led them into the nearer dark.

The boardroom always looked like it had just eaten someone respectable. A great mahogany table sat like a contented beast in the middle of the room, polished to the shine of a still pond. On the walls: framed contracts - the sort you did not sign so much as surrender to - hung in sober rows. A portrait of an elderly goblin accountant presided over the head of the table; he wore a pince-nez held not by nose but by indignation, and his expression gave the strong impression that decimal points had feelings and most of you had hurt them.

Morning had found Cairo again. You could tell by the thin ladder of light climbing the slatted blinds, and by the heat already condensing in the corners, and by the way the owls, exhausted from a night of bureaucracy, sulked on the sill in a posture that said if anyone tried to requisition a feather they would bite for principle.

Cassandra sat three chairs down from the head, because that suggested seniority without hubris. She had her portfolio open and her wand across the spine like a paperweight. The signed statement lay between blotters; Rahetep’s name had dried to a steady brown, Nebu’s pawprint to a bronze your eyes wanted to call gold if only to be dramatic. A tray with a teapot steamed gently, as if practicing being helpful.

Griphook al-Azhari paced with an energy that would have filed itself if it could. “We must be sober,” he said, to the table, to the portraits, to the tea. “We must be meticulous. We must be quiet.”

Nebu, coiled in a perfect ouroboros on the far end of the table, opened one eye. “You sound like a pantry.”

“And we must not,” Griphook went on, not hearing or choosing not to, “indulge in adjectives.”

The door latch clicked. A junior clerk entered with an armful of telegrams like kindling and the face of someone who knew that kindling for once was the better option.

“From London,” he said to Griphook, who took the lot as though they were about to explain why the Nile had been a misunderstanding all along.

“Sit, Miss Blythe,” Griphook added absently, already tearing open the first telegram with his teeth.

“I am sitting,” Cassandra said, because petty unhelpful accuracy felt safer than helpful honesty.

Rahetep, directly opposite her, had chosen a chair without arms and made dignity look like it required no furniture at all. He wore the beige shawl with obstinate elegance; it had stopped trying to be invisible and settled for being devout. He had no tea. The teapot seemed unwilling to presume upon him with civility without being introduced.

The first telegram snapped open. Its paper crackled with that particular official charm Prudentia overezcelsior - letters that refused to smear and a tone that refused to apologize. Griphook read, his mouth flattening as the message marched through him.

“From Araminta Voss.” He did not so much say the name as set it down, carefully, away from the good china. He handed the paper to Cassandra because she had, technically, been the original recipient; because she had, actually, been assigned to this mess; because somewhere a form required her to initial a perforation.

Cassandra smoothed the page. The letters were prim and irony-proof.

MISS BLYTHE -
HANDLE THE MUMMY DELICATELY; ENSURE MINIMAL SCANDAL AND MAXIMAL DENIABILITY STOP
IF POSSIBLE ARRANGE FOR VOLUNTARY STORAGE PENDING LEGAL DETERMINATION STOP
AVOID RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY IN PUBLIC CORRESPONDENCE STOP
(SEE APPENDED TALKING POINTS) STOP
REMEMBER: GRINGOTTS GUARDS WEALTH; IN THIS INSTANCE WEALTH INCLUDES REPUTATION STOP
DO NOT ALLOW LOCAL SENTIMENT TO OVERRIDE PROTOCOL STOP
- A.V.

Below, a second strip of paper fluttered like a scolded ribbon: TALKING POINTS (AGREED LANGUAGE FOR PUBLIC/MEDIA): “TEMPORARY UNSEALING,” “HERITAGE PARTNER,” “CULTURAL LIAISON,” “HONEY IS A METAPHOR.”

“Honey is rarely a metaphor,” Rahetep observed, with the sadness of a beekeeper who has watched a poet hazard a swarm.

Nebu, who had been pretending to be a paperweight, became disdain to scale. “Your Araminta speaks fluent apology,” he said. “Every sentence holds its breath so it can deny itself later.”

Cassandra kept her face neutral and wrote, as the form preferred: Received guidance re: discretion, storage, terminology. She did not write: The phrase “local sentiment” can fight me behind the owlery.

“Voluntary storage,” Griphook repeated, reading another telegram as if by chewing through paper he might finally taste common sense. “Voluntary storage. As if we are to offer a velvet vault.” He exhaled. “There are… additional instructions concerning taxation.”

“Of course there are,” Nebu said. “The dead are famously delinquent.”

Griphook pinched the bridge of his nose. “London asks whether, in the event of extended corporeal status, Lord Rahetep owes inheritance levies from the Third Sun Dynasty through present day, adjusted for exchange rates and - ” he glanced down to be sure he was not hallucinating - “sand.”

“Adjusted for sand?” Cassandra asked.

“Theft index,” Griphook said unhappily. “London has a model.” He riffled the next sheet. “There is also a query from Accounts: are any artifacts in his immediate possession to be considered collateral.”

Rahetep regarded him with politeness that nevertheless found a place to sit down. “My immediate possession consists of patience, opinions, and a linen inventory.”

“Opinions appreciate oddly,” Nebu said. “I recommend declaring none.”

Cassandra swallowed a laugh that would not have helped anyone. She lifted her quill. “For the minutes: Lord Rahetep does not currently possess transferable artifacts.” She stopped. “Unless we consider the papyrus, which belongs to him.” She slid a hand to cover it reflexively, as if the paper might skitter and be cataloged.

“We will register it as a personal document,” Griphook said. He paced, stopped, paced again. “We must, however, classify his legal status for the court referral. Temporarily Revived seems prudent.”

“Temporarily Alive,” Nebu murmured. “Revived implies he had the decency to be unrevived previously. He did not. He has been terribly consistent.”

“Temporarily Alive,” Cassandra repeated before she could think better of it, and wrote it, and the ink behaved with suspicious good humor.

A clerk appeared with a ledger so large it had its own gravity. He thumped it down on the table. The boardroom portrait winced.

“The Master Ledger,” the clerk announced, reverently, and opened it to an index whose letters were older than any of them, hard black strokes laid by hands long gone and still impatient. Tabs winked: RESURRECTIONS; REANIMATIONS; REPUTATIONAL RISKS.

Cassandra’s stomach did something nuanced. The ledger smelled of dust and old mint; when she looked at it, she felt the mild forward-lean that libraries have, as if the shelves themselves were subtle conspirators. She knew this book. Not literally, but in the way scholars know family: it had a tone, and the tone said, If you are going to err, do it cleanly.

The clerk wetted his finger (unnecessarily; the pages were charmed to yield) and leafed to an entry that had inscribed itself while they were sleeping: RA-HETEP, TITLE: VOICE OF AMUN (DISPUTED), CATEGORY: TEMPORARILY ALIVE (PROVISIONAL), CUSTODIAN: C. BLYTHE (AUTHORIZED).

At CUSTODIAN the ink quivered, just a tremor. Cassandra felt it in her teeth, the way she had felt rooms rearrange. The entry wrote on, of its own accord, neat as a scribe listening to a god: OBSERVATIONS: ANOMALOUS HOSPITALITY EFFECT (LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS SELF-CALIBRATE); LEXICAL POLITENESS FIELD (HUMAN BEHAVIOR MODULATION); SIGNATURE: [here the ledger paused, as if clearing its

throat] - and beneath, with ceremonial care, Rahetep's name, newly copied from the boardroom parchment in a hand more perfect than anyone living could manage.

As the name settled, a fine web of ink-lines spread from it into the page - subtle channels, like irrigation shallow in floodplain. Cassandra leaned closer; the hair along her arms stirred. The lines did not go anywhere the eye could follow. They went into interpretation.

"What is it doing," she whispered.

"Considering," Nebu said, too softly for sarcasm. "Ledgers are temples with less music. They have chests for tithes and chests for sighs."

"Look," said the clerk, less reverent now than honest, pointing with a cautious nail. A notation bloomed beside Signature, in the fainter handwriting that meant an enchantment was making a note to itself. ANCILLARY ENCHANTMENT: AWAKENING (LOW HUM). The word HUM shivered minutely, then fell still, like a plucked string finding quiet.

Griphook went rigid. "We do not," he said to the ledger, to the room, to the idea of hierarchy, "record awakenings in house."

"It recorded itself," the clerk said nervously. "The book does that sometimes." He lowered his voice. "Usually in January."

Rahetep had not moved. But the hieroglyph at his throat had warmed again, as if the ledger's ink had breathed across it. He looked at the page with courteous interest, as a man might look at a clever child's drawing and find it both dear and alarming.

"I prefer," he said, "to be written in the perfect tense. It implies nothing about the future."

"Perfect often implies consequences," Cassandra murmured before remembering not to. She straightened. "For the record, the hum is not… malicious. It seems more like - " She groped. " - like a room clearing its throat before speaking."

"Or before laughing," Nebu said.

Griphook dragged a hand down his face and surfaced with professionalism. "We will annotate," he declared. He nodded at the clerk, whose expression said he had brought a ledger and never, ever wanted to do that again. "Ancillary Enchantment: Observed. Context: Stable. Risk: Pending."

The clerk wrote, his pen making the tiny scritch of a conscience signing off.

Another telegram slid in under the door - logistics is a physical art in offices like this. Cassandra bent to pick it up; the paper smelled faintly of cold and exhaust and long-distance authority.

MISS BLYTHE -
CAIRO PRESS INQUIRIES INCOMING STOP
USE PHRASES: "MIRACULOUS ANOMALY UNDER REVIEW," "PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL CULTURAL AUTHORITIES," "NO COMMENT ON RELIGION" STOP

ENSURE COURT DATE SCHEDULED WITHIN 72 HOURS STOP
REITERATE: STORAGE (VOLUNTARY) PREFERRED STOP
- A.V.

Cassandra sighed aloud and instantly regretted letting it escape. “She wants us to call it miraculous and then not to make it religious.”

“Classic trick,” Nebu said. “Name the camel a horse and prohibit humps.”

Rahetep’s attention shifted to the portrait above the head chair. The elderly goblin accountant met his gaze - an act the paint had been perfected for - then, to Cassandra’s astonishment, inclined his head the width of a comma. Respect, not enthrallment. The portrait’s painted quill scratched something onto a painted ledger, and the heaviness of the room lightened by one grain.

Griphook saw it too; his shoulders lowered a quarter inch. “Very well,” he said, gathering the room to his agenda like a shepherd with a stubborn flock. “Points for today. One: classification has been entered. Two: court referral. Three: messaging.”

“Four,” Nebu said, tail as metronome, “biscuits.”

“We are not a tea shop,” Griphook snapped, then visibly controlled himself. “Yet.”

Cassandra raised a hand as if in a seminar and then, annoyed at herself, spoke like a person. “On messaging: it will matter how we talk about him in front of the court and in any… public corridors. If we style him as property, we will lose more than a case. If we style him as a person, we open questions of rights, which London will hate. But also - ” she glanced at Rahetep, who did not glance back, and at the ledger, which was listening - “also that would be correct.”

Griphook gave her the look managers give to points that are both true and prone to set whole buildings on fire. “For the moment we will call him a guest.”

“Host,” Nebu corrected.

“A guest,” Griphook said, with the sternness of a man choosing a manageable hill to die on.

“Very well,” Rahetep said, with the impeccable politeness of a man who has hosted and guest-ed enough to know the costumes change little. “If I am to be a guest, I request a seat on the Heritage Advisory Committee.” He said it lightly, almost idly. The room nevertheless inhaled.

Cassandra’s quill, which had learned drama at the elbow of Nebu, drew a small exclamation mark that she disguised as a quill hair.

Griphook’s mouth opened, shut, performed some mathematics. “The Committee is… internal.”

“I am very nearly internal,” Rahetep said. “I am within your walls and your sentences. If we are to speak of my house, it seems courteous to offer me a chair.”

Nebu looked unbearably pleased. “He has a point. And excellent posture for the chair.”

Griphook lifted his chin to the portrait, which rolled its paint eyes skyward as only paint can and twitched its quill toward a framed document to the left: COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP, HONORARY. It was mostly blank. Two names, centuries apart. A space below that looked as if it had been expecting something for a very long time.

“It would be advisory only,” Griphook said tightly. “Non-voting.”

“Advisory is the only honest power,” Rahetep replied. “Voting pretends to be mathematics.”

Cassandra, against her better instincts, grinned. “I will note the request,” she said, and did, in a hand that had learned to be both neat and a little defiant.

The portrait harrumphed, but the harrumph had the note of a ledger approving of a balance.

The owls on the sill rustled like folded newspapers. Outside, the city put on its day - clatter of carts, the hush of heat coming, a radio coughing a melody somewhere downstairs. The boardroom, which had begun the morning with the air of a creature prepared to devour the unscheduled, seemed, for a breath, to become a place where something might be digested instead.

Griphook closed the ledger with reverence and relief. “Court in seventy-two hours,” he said. “We will proceed under the designation Guest, Temporarily Alive. Miss Blythe will continue as Custodian.” He flicked a look at her. “Discretion.”

“Cardigan,” Nebu murmured.

“And tea,” Rahetep said gently, not as a demand but as the civilizing of an hour.

Cassandra poured. The steam rose - chamomile and a trace of mint. She set the cup before him. The teapot, introduced at last, behaved itself.

“Thank you,” Rahetep said. He did not drink immediately. He simply held the cup, and the ledger’s ink hummed one note and fell quiet again.

On the margin of her minutes, Cassandra wrote without meaning to: All this is happening in sentences. Then, guilty of poetry, she crossed it out. Then, prudent of evidence, she wrote it again smaller.

The meeting dissolved into the logistics of couriers and schedules and hats. But beneath it, like a river under a parade, something older moved and did not object to being named so long as it was named accurately.

When they rose to leave, the portrait of the accountant cleared his painted throat. “Ahem,” he said to Rahetep, with the dignity of ink that refuses to smudge. “Welcome. Mind the decimals.”

“I always have,” Rahetep said, and the ledger, which knew flattery when it sounded like a fact, glowed faintly in its stitches.

“Lantern,” Nebu whispered to Cassandra as they reached the door, as if they had never left their previous argument. “Not a knife.”

“Or a spoon,” she whispered back.

“Never underestimate a spoon,” Nebu said gravely, and flowed out into the corridor’s brightening heat, where the day’s bureaucracy waited in a line that reached the stairs and pretended to be order.

Cassandra’s guestroom at the Gringotts outpost had spent decades learning how to be temporary. The furniture had small, obliging minds; the wardrobe accepted any coat as a visiting dignitary, and the bed pretended every back was famous. A pair of travel trunks sat under the window like two dogs who had learned the command “stay” and were trying to be good about it. The shutters were half-closed against the Cairo night, which smelled of warm stone, distant cumin, and the pearly hush that follows a city’s last argument with itself.

She lit her candle with a match because it was comforting to make fire in the old way - struck, flared, cupped. The flame climbed, found its shape, and steadied. Its light did not reach the wardrobe’s feet, which remained conspiratorial shadows.

Her knees, when she sat on the bed, discovered that the day had been longer than advertised. The meeting had left a taste in her mouth like chalk sweetened with law. She took the journal from her bag and balanced it on her thighs. It was the good one: dragonhide corners, paper that loved ink without becoming sentimental about it, a thin ribbon that believed in chronology. She uncapped her pen. The nib made a pleased noise against the edge of the glass ink bottle - ready, ready - and then decided to be dignified.

Field Journal - Cairo - Day 3, she wrote. If she kept the words dry, they wouldn’t spill. Recap: Tomb opened, mummy polite, cat insolent, London frightened. Guest status (temporary). Court in seventy-two hours. Tea successful.

She paused. The candle’s light stroked the margin. She hated overwriting. She loved overwriting. She wrote a line she knew she would hate later: All this is happening in sentences.

She crossed it out. Then wrote it again smaller.

The page took the sentence without fuss, the way a friend takes a complaint. She wrote more: Rahetep’s signature stabilizes rooms. Rooms behave around him (lamp hum, ledger notes hum). Not enthrallment - courtesy? Hypothesis: a field, like static but polite. Corroborating evidence: wall sconces adjusting themselves; globe decelerating.

She thought of the boardroom ledger inscribing its own note about AWAKENING (LOW HUM) as if even books could hear him breathing. She wrote the word hum and drew a dot over the “u” by accident, which made the “u” look voiceless and faintly disapproving. She tried to tidy the dot into meaning. It refused.

She set the pen down along the journal’s spine and closed her eyes. The city’s night had a pulse to it: distant wheels, a laugh, a radio disguised as a gramophone in the basement, the

soft erasure of wind along stone. Somewhere below, the outpost's kitchen made the nocturnal sigh that kitchens make when they've forgiven everyone who ate thoughtlessly. If she stayed very still she could feel, under it all, the smallest draw: the building breathing in and out; not magic. Or not only magic. Architecture that had decided to be gentle with the living.

A very soft tap at the door.

She stood - her knees disagreeing; she shushed them. The candle threw up the smallest shiver. Cassandra crossed to the door and, by old habit, put her ear to the panel before turning the handle. The wood was warm. The corridor beyond smelled of stone cooled from its day's brashness.

She opened the door.

Rahetep stood in the hallway with the beige shawl gathered neatly over one shoulder like a diplomat arriving out of weather. He did not fill the doorway; he respected doorways. He had learned somewhere, probably long before the Nile learned how to be dramatic, that to be powerful is to measure the shape you make in other people's frames. Nebu wasn't with him. The absence was its own posture: he had come to speak, not to be translated into sarcasm.

"Miss Blythe," he said, inclining his head, and something about the way the hall lamp behind him burnished the edges of his wrappings made the word Miss feel relevant instead of reductive. "Forgive me. I remembered that the living prefer warning before arrival, and only after I arrived."

"It's all right," she said, though she rubbed her fingers against her palm, an old superstition that insisted on trading nervousness for warmth. "Please - would you like to - " She looked over her shoulder at the small room, at the bed that had one knee and the chair that had two wobbles, at the candle that, at this suggestion, straightened its spine in horror. " - come in?"

"If you will allow me to stand," he said, with the courtesy of a man who has met too many chairs with opinions.

She stepped back. He entered, and the room arranged itself around him without moving. The wardrobe's doors exhaled fractionally. The trunks under the window pretended to be more antique. The candle, trying to be stoic, leaned very slightly toward him, then checked itself and resumed being a flame.

She gestured at the tea tray she didn't have. "I could - "

"I have drunk already," he said. "Thank you." He looked at her journal on the bed, the pen laid like a wand, the unstamped line of ink along the rim of the bottle where a careful person had been briefly careless. "You write well."

"I write obsessively," she said, because modesty sounded dishonest. "It helps me believe in sequence."

He nodded. "Sequence is a mercy." He folded his hands - linen over something that was neither bone nor void but an idea with weight - and let silence find its chair in the room. It

did. She waited; he honored that waiting.

“Every curse begins as a conversation,” Rahetep said at last. The words did not fall into the room; they were put down, precisely, in a place where they could be read. “Be careful what answers you invite.”

Cassandra’s first instinct, as always, was to make a joke and thereby buy time. She didn’t. The joke would be good, and the time would be cheap, and both would be theft. She sat on the bed instead. The journal made the faint noise of paper recognizing it was back in the world.

“We didn’t mean to invite - ” she started, and stopped, the way a rider stops a horse that knows every short cut you haven’t learned yet. “We knocked. That much I cannot disguise with nouns. We knocked in a language made of efficiency. I tell myself: the seal was already tampered with, the wards already rethreaded. We would have had to open it to close it correctly. And all that may be true.” She looked up at him. “But it is also true that I love doors.”

“Love,” Rahetep said mildly. “An honorable word that has done terrible favors.”

“I could say curiosity,” she said, wry. “That one at least admits guilt.”

“It admits appetite,” he said. He glanced at the candle. Its flame did not flicker under his attention; it lengthened, fractionally, the way a reed leans toward a voice on the riverbank.

She followed his glance. “Nebu told me to speak Amun like a reed.”

“He was right,” Rahetep said. “The reed is the shape breath takes when it decides to remember itself.”

He took one step closer to the candle and then stopped, as if measuring the distance between the present and a superstition. The flame stretched higher, as if amused. For a heartbeat it grew thin and long and became, unmistakably, the reed-leaf sign. Cassandra’s scalp prickled. The sign wavered, then returned to flame again, the way a throat clears after trying a song.

“The Breath of Amun,” Cassandra said softly, because she needed to say the name to know whether it would break something. The candle did not protest. Her mouth enjoyed the vowels, a little too much. “I should have been more careful saying it.”

“Names do not break rooms,” he said. “They break people who want rooms to be simple.”

She exhaled, tasted wax and heat and something like fennel that had no reason to be there. “London wants to put you in storage.”

“London would benefit from being stored,” he said so gently it only later occurred to her that it had been an insult.

“It terrifies me,” she said, aloud before she could tidy it, and then hurried, “ - the idea of storage. Of being labelled PENDING. Of being a process instead of a person.”

“It is easy to store the dead,” he said. “They cooperate. The living make boxes untidy.”

“Then perhaps - ” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I am meant to be the person who puts the right box around the volatile thing. I am finding that the volatile thing is this job.”

“And your hunger,” he said, the way one names weather to someone who can feel it.

Cassandra’s jaw set before she decided it was going to. “My hunger has done - good. It’s got me here. It’s taught me languages and wards and three kinds of patience I did not inherit.”

“It has,” he agreed, in a tone that did not argue with the sun about heat. “It may yet require that you choose between eating everything and tasting something.”

“I am not fond of choices presented as parables,” she said dryly, and then added, quietly because truth attended better when the voice did not lecture, “But I understand.”

He glanced at the journal. “You have written a sentence you thought better of and wrote again smaller.”

She could have asked how he knew. The answer would have been a metaphor about flame or about fields that ached where they were looked at. She did not ask. “It felt unprofessional.”

“It felt accurate,” he said. “Accuracy is a mercy.”

He moved to the window. The shutter slats threw ladders onto his shawl. The night outside was not black but a low, domed blue, the color of deep breath. A stray dog barked once. A pot somewhere two floors down declared itself empty with a hollow clink.

“My priests loved the Breath, once,” Rahetep said. “Then they loved the idea of it. Then they loved the idea of themselves loving it. That was when it became a weapon.”

Cassandra’s throat worked. “And you?”

“I loved my garden,” he said. “I loved that honey remembers what flowers it ate. I loved a joke about taxes, once, more than anyone should.” A thread of amusement stitched through the last sentence. “I loved breath because we are made of it. And because it leaves.”

He turned from the window. The hieroglyph at his throat made its small, secret pulse. “When we sealed it, I believed we were protecting something sacred from those who would barter it. I did not understand how much of my belief was pride, dressed for temple. I considered myself a good man, Miss Blythe. One should always suspect a man who considers himself good. Especially if he is dead.”

The room felt, briefly, like a confession box into which a cathedral had been poured by mistake. Cassandra sat very straight, because slouching in the presence of someone telling the truth felt profane.

“I can help you,” she said. “Or I can pretend to. I’m not sure which is safer for you. Or for Cairo.” She glanced at the journal’s ribbon and thought ridiculous things about moral bookmarks. “And Gringotts. And me.”

“Help is an honest word if you accept that sometimes it means leaving the garden alone,” he said. “You will be asked - by London, by men who have never dirtied their gloves with a curse, by - cats - to decide what you owe to the living and to the dead. You will be offered heroism like a pastry. You will find that humility is a bowl.”

“Empty?” she asked, her mouth fighting a smile and winning only on points.

“Large enough to hold what arrives,” he said. “Large enough to restrain you from drinking the river because you are thirsty.”

They stood quietly together with the candle, which had committed to flame again and was doing a very good impression of being ordinary. The heat of it lifted a curl at her temple that had gone feral hours ago. The curl tickled her skin; she did not push it back. She wanted to remember this as a discomfort. It would be easy to remember it as glamour.

“I should warn you,” he said, as if they had been talking about this already. “The court will not be a court. It will be a theater that imagines it is a scale. The Order will not be a cult. It will be a mirror that flatters. Your bank will not be a bank. It will be a stomach.”

“And me?” she asked, because sometimes naming is medicine, and sometimes it is a map.

“You will not be a knife,” he said. “Nor a lantern. You are a reed that learned to write.”

That struck some private grove in her ribcage. She stared at him and did not blink because blinking seemed unserious. “That is unfairly kind.”

“It is uncomfortably accurate,” he said.

He stepped back toward the door, as if the conversation had stood up and bowed and prepared to leave the stage. She moved to open it for him and, because manners had saved her from worse mistakes than insolence ever had, she bowed her head a fraction in reply to his earlier courtesy. The shawl made a small whisper when he turned.

“Thank you,” she said, knowing she sounded like a novice in a temple and hating herself only a little for it. “For - warning me.”

“Warnings are cheap,” he said. “You paid for this one by listening.”

His hand, linen over idea, touched the doorframe. The wood was a good listener. The candle brightened once, like a reed considering a wind, and then did nothing else at all. The room held.

He paused on the threshold and looked, not at her, but at the journal on the bed. “Write this,” he said, and waited until she had the pen in her hand and the ribbon elsewhere. “Every answer is an arrival. Not all of them are guests.”

She wrote it. The ink sat on the paper like a word that knew it would be quoted by someone later and had resolved to behave.

He inclined his head. “Good night, Miss Blythe.”

“Good night, my lord.”

When the door closed, the latch made a quiet promise to be opened again. Cassandra stood for a moment with her hand on the wood and counted to five in hieroglyphs because it calmed her: reed (breath), house, arm (boast), vulture (devouring thought), water (change). She let herself breathe on the last one, the way water asks you to.

She turned back to the candle. It had leaned, unmistakably, during Rahetep’s visit. Now it stood straight. But as she watched, the flame elongated once more; a slender tendril stretched up - thin and green in the mind even if the eye saw only gold - and for one heartbeat became a reed again, the glyph you draw when you need to spell a breath.

It stilled. Smoke cupped the air with the ghost of fennel and something like hymn.

She set her pen down along the spine and wrote in the margin in small, stubborn letters that looked like themselves and nothing else: Do not invite answers you cannot house.

In the quiet that followed, the outpost made its night noises - paper settling itself like a well-tucked child, pipes negotiating with mineral ghosts, Nebu somewhere down the hall telling a broom he was not impressed with its bristles. Cassandra blew lightly on the candle, not to extinguish it but to test whether it would waver like a reed or resist like an arm.

It chose the reed. It remembered breath.

She closed the journal on the ribbon and lay back on the bed without undressing - an archaeologist’s compromise with fate. The ceiling had the cracked paint of a country that had been painted by bureaucrats and loved by sun. She watched the crack that looked like a river and thought, with the stubbornness of the sensible, that tomorrow she would be more practical. She would be a cardigan.

The flame, on the table, watched with her, and said nothing, and breathed.

Sleep, when it came, came like a clerk with a checklist: briefly, officiously, and prepared to be overruled. Cassandra drifted under it rather than into it - half-wake, half-watch, the way a curse-breaker learns to rest with her boots by the bed and a spell on the tip of her tongue. The candle on the table had dozed into a steady ember of light. The shutters breathed in the night’s thin blue. She had just reached the comforting fiction that her mind was empty when the mirror across the room caught its breath.

It did not cloud over in the dramatic way that bad theater prefers. The glass simply blurred at the edges, as if someone had fogged a window from the other side and then apologized. The blur gathered itself in the center and became a circle, which became a shape, which became - herself.

Not a trick of reflection. Not the ordinary double of a woman studying herself and finding a stranger. The mirror offered her a Cassandra one degree to the left of this room’s reality: hair tidied by will rather than comb, robes buttoned wrong at the sternum, a quill tucked behind an ear that never consented to keep curls in order. The copy stood in a room almost this one, the way a memory stands in a hallway almost the one it remembers.

Cassandra did not move. Not because she was brave. Because she had, somewhere between childhood and Gringotts, learned the discipline of making stillness look like choice. The candle brightened just enough to decide on shadows.

“Hello,” she said to the other her, because politeness had saved her life and, on one memorable occasion, her eyebrows.

The mirror-Cassandra didn’t speak. She lifted a hand - it made no sound, that hand - and placed it against the inside of the glass. The point of contact was not a point at all; it was a sigh. The surface of the mirror took the idea of a ripple and filed it under “later.”

Cassandra stood. The bed’s coverlet exhaled the breath of someone who had been sat on by too many sensible people. Her bare feet felt the floor, cool and slightly chalk-grained, as if it had saved its softness for this hour. She crossed the short distance and stood before herself.

“Are you here to tell me I look tired?” she asked, because if humor is a lantern, it can also be a signal flare.

Her reflection tilted its head. The movement sent the quill behind the ear tilting, and then - without hands - righting itself. The mouth opened; the throat worked; no sound came. Instead, the surface of the glass darkened as if ink had been mixed into breath. Lines began to write themselves along the bottom edge in a script that was at first hieroglyph - small figures laboring into sense - and then, obedient to her century, English.

YOU UNSEALED MORE THAN A TOMB.

The letters held for a heartbeat like a threat trying out its posture. Then they faded, the ink retreating into glass the way a river retreats into its banks when a cloud decides to be merciful.

“That line’s been very popular tonight,” Cassandra said softly.

The reflection shook its head - not ‘no,’ not yet - more like a reed in a shallow wind. The glass clouded again. More text threaded itself, paler this time, as if coming from farther away:

DOORS REMEMBER WHO KNOCKS.

She had the immediate and irrational urge to apologize to every door she had ever opened as if curiosity were a rude hand and she a child who had forgotten to wipe it. She pressed her palm to the glass, not quite where the other had. Cool, smooth, faintly eager - the way a calm horse can be, if it decides to recognize you. The mirror did not give. The room gave, a fraction: the wardrobe’s hinges eased; the candle’s flame drew up thin and thoughtful; the shutters stilled as if listening to their slats.

“What else?” she asked. “There’s always more where warnings are concerned.”

The mirror’s mouth tried again. This time the voice arrived like breath under a door - soft, impossible, unambiguous. It was her own voice made strange by distance.

“Reed,” it said. “Not arm.”

The flame on the table elongated, obedient as a student hearing her name. It grew thin, then thinner, then - there it was, an unmistakable vertical leaf with a notch: the hieroglyph for a breath drawn and written. The reed quivered, a fine line in golden air, and then snapped back into a flame with excellent posture.

Cassandra’s throat tightened. She could feel, with the sense that is not touch, the presence of a grammar older than her bones standing, briefly, in the room and checking the measurements. She wanted - absurdly - to offer it tea.

“What happens if I don’t listen?” she asked the mirror. She was not sure which ‘I’ she meant.

The reflection’s eyes - which were her eyes, but had spent longer looking at the wrong things - softened. Not pity. Appraisal, kind as a judge who knows your sentence is what you will choose. The glass took ink again:

YOU WILL INVENT A KNIFE AND CALL IT LIGHT.

Cassandra laughed, sharp and small. “Unfair. Unfair and plausible.” She breathed out through her nose. “And if I do listen?”

The mirror held her gaze. In the glass, behind the glass, the shape of the room shifted - just a shade. The window receded; the bed offered fewer angles for sorrow to sit on. It looked, to her sudden annoyance, like a world in which she had tidied herself into virtue.

The mirror spoke without letters this time, the voice a grain rougher, as though pulled through papyrus. “Then doors will open to you that were not meant to be opened at all.”

“Comforting,” she said. “I do love an ethical maze.”

A sound at the shutters - soft, directional. Not wind. The discreet clack of a beak against wood, followed by the impatient rip of claws negotiating incompetently with a latch. Cassandra turned just enough to break the spell without insulting it.

“Hold that thought,” she told herself in the mirror, as if thoughts were courteous enough to wait.

She crossed to the shutters and unhooked the clasp. The panel swung inward. Night shouldered in - heat laid thin over stone, a slice of sky that had decided to be a well instead of a ceiling. An owl, official and furious, stepped from the sill to her forearm without so much as a greeting and thrust out a leg deservedly proud of its ribbon.

“Fine,” Cassandra said to the universe at large, “let’s have bureaucracy,” and untied the message.

The paper had the look of a person who had been rolled tightly and would prefer not to be judged for it. She unscrolled it and let the words teach her their attitude.

MISS BLYTHE -
PROCEED WITH COURT REFERRAL IMMEDIATELY STOP
DELIVER SUBJECT TO WIZARDING COURT AT DAWN STOP
MINIMIZE PUBLIC VIEW STOP
YOU ARE EMPOWERED TO USE DISCRETION (WITHIN REASON) STOP
REMEMBER: GRINGOTTS IS A GUEST IN EGYPT STOP
- A.V.

A second strip followed, fluttering like an afterthought that had been fed and grown bold: REHEARSE STATEMENTS: “TEMPORARY ALIVE,” “HERITAGE PARTNER,” “NO COMMENT ON RELIGION.”

“Honey is not a metaphor,” Cassandra told the strip, and the strip had the grace to be paper.

The owl, having performed its duty, hopped back to the sill and stared at her with the unimaginative judgment of a bird in government. “Yes, yes,” she told it. “Cardigan. Dawn. Quiet.”

She shut the shutters and turned back to the mirror. The other-Cassandra had not moved. Eyes on her. Hand on glass. The letters had faded; the room within the room was neither nearer nor farther. It was just possible to imagine that if she looked away and back, there would be nothing there but herself, and even that would be a rumor.

“You heard?” Cassandra asked. “Of course you did. The future is nosy.”

The mirror answered with a ripple that might have been agreement and might have been a memory leaving.

“Dawn,” she said to the room that had arranged itself around Rahetep graciously and would now need to arrange itself around a departure. “We’ll have to be very clever.”

Nebu’s voice arrived under the door as if it had been waiting there all along, because of course it had. “You,” it said, in a purr that translated into law as contempt, “will have to be very ordinary.” A paw appeared under the door and flexed, each claw emerging like a thesis. “That is how you perform miracles without being fined.”

Cassandra blinked tears she hadn’t ordered. Tiredness does that. Or cats. “You could knock like a person,” she told the door.

“I did,” Nebu said. “With my foot.”

She crossed to the door and opened it. Nebu poured in, gold making a precise shape on the floorboards. He gave the room a look that catalogued its modesty and approved of nothing except the candle, which he ignored to demonstrate independence.

“Walk me through your plan,” he said, leaping onto the chair with the two wobbles and forcing it to choose a side. “I will improve it afterwards.”

“Dawn,” Cassandra said, too weary to defend her dignity from a cat. “Back corridors. Closed carriage. Hat.”

“Hats are lies worn on the head,” Nebu said. “Acceptable. Avoid the main stair; the portrait there is an abolitionist for secrets and will attempt to free them. Take the servants’ passage by the east wall. It smells of onion and admits only the worthy.”

“Worthy?”

“Those who understand that kitchens are temples,” Nebu said absently, grooming one paw with the ferocity of a perfectionist doctoring an essay. He paused. His ears angled toward the mirror. “You’ve been talking to yourself.”

“She talked first,” Cassandra said.

“Trouble,” he said, satisfied.

Cassandra returned to the glass. The other her stood in the other room, faint now, like breath on a pane that has decided to be part of the air. She lifted her hand from the mirror; the mirror did not notice. Cassandra placed her own hand flat against the glass in farewell she refused to romanticize.

“Any last instructions?” she asked. “Before my cat tells me I’m wrong about everything useful.”

The voice came one more time, thinner, kinder. “When you are offered certainty,” it said, “ask for a receipt.”

Cassandra laughed, because humor was how she stored fear without labeling it. “Done.”

The figure in the mirror nodded. Or maybe the candle did. The blurring eased, unwove, invisibly stitched itself back into the ordinary. The glass reflected what it should: a woman with sleep in the corners of her eyes, a candle with ambitions, a cat who looked expensive and was.

Nebu hopped from the chair to the table, inspected the candle, and gave it the compliment of ignoring it again. “Sleep,” he commanded. “You’ll need to look less like a revolution in the morning.”

“I thought I was a reed that learned to write,” she said.

“You are,” he said. “But reeds look their best at dawn.”

He jumped down, glanced at the door as if it owed him rent, and left without saying good night. The latch made a sound that meant the corridor would not misbehave in his absence.

Cassandra stood alone, which is not the same as being lonely, and let the room complete its respiration. She went to the bed, drew back the coverlet, and lay down with her boots still within reach, because theater courts forgive very little. The candle made a final, thoughtful reed of itself and then settled, proper flame, no tricks.

On the table, her journal lay open where Rahetep had instructed it. She reached out without rising and, with the pen that loved dignity, wrote on the ribbon’s page:

Every answer is an arrival. Not all of them are guests.
Dawn: court.

She closed the book. The click of its cover finding the corners of itself sounded like a modest vow. She blew out the candle; smoke rose, did a small, precise hieroglyph for a river, and was gone.

In the brief dark before her eyes learned again how to see, Cairo exhaled - carts, wheels, a prayer that had missed its minaret and decided to be a lullaby anyway. The outpost shifted its weight to the side of the living. Somewhere beyond shutters and ledgers, the Nile rolled a shoulder, remembering rains from a month that had not happened yet. Cassandra let the night lay its cool palm on her forehead.

“You unsealed more than a tomb,” the room suggested, without malice.

“I know,” she said to the ceiling crack that looked like a river.

And, more quietly, to something that was listening and would not forgive imprecision, “I intend to be exact.”

Sleep came back, this time like a clerk who had found the right form. It checked the boxes. It signed where it should. It left the door on the latch, as a courtesy to dawn.

Chapter 5: The Pharaoh’s Pet and the Curse Clause

Chapter 5
The Pharaoh’s Pet and the Curse Clause

Morning arrived in Cairo with the smell of dust and oranges and a kind of light that made everything look slightly enchanted and slightly hungover. The Gringotts Cairo branch, a honey-colored building carved with protective sigils and goblin contracts so small they looked like eyelashes, had the calm of a tomb at sunrise from the street. Inside, it sounded like a symposium of kettles in a thunderstorm.

“Unauthorized re-corporealization in Processing!” someone shouted.

“Not unauthorized - unexpected,” corrected someone else.

“Same column on the ledger,” a third voice barked, over the shriek of a sulking filing cabinet that refused to open unless bribed with oil of clove.

Cassandra stepped into the atrium and was engulfed by fluttering, frantic paper. Memos dived and wheeled like white bats, snapping at ears, their wax seals blinking like irritated eyes. The tallying abacus at the reception desk rattled its beads so fiercely it had to be restrained with a ribbon. Quills, harried beyond reason, scribbled on their own backs and then accused each other of plagiarism. A sign hung crookedly over the public counter: DUE TO STAFFING SHORTAGES, ALL REQUESTS FOR RESURRECTIONS REQUIRE A NUMBER AND PROOF OF DEATH. Someone had amended it in pencil: VERY STRONGLY PREFER THE LATTER.

“Miss Blythe!” cried Griphook al-Azhari, the branch director, appearing from a corridor like a startled hawk in a waistcoat. His tusks gleamed; his spectacles did not. “First of all, this is your fault; second of all, please fix it.”

Cassandra, who had not slept in twenty hours and was fueled entirely by questionable coffee and outrage, offered a smile designed to pass for a plan. “Good morning to you too.”

Griphook propelled her onward with a sweep of one clawed hand. “The minutes refuse to record the words mummy, undead, or tea. This is a bank, not a theatre. We do numbers and liability, not adjectives.”

“Tea is a noun,” Cassandra said mildly.

“So is failure.”

They reached the inner office suite just as another memo burst into polite flames over the carpet, singeing a clerk’s cuffs. Goblins dashed with extinguishing sand; a witch from

Accounts muttered cooling charms that iced the nearest potted palm. The palm grumbled and shook itself, scattering frost and a hidden fan of outdated receipts.

In the center of the chaos, under a skylight in a rectangle of civilized sunshine, Lord Rahetep reclined in a high-backed chair as if presiding over a breakfast room rather than a financial apocalypse. He had been wrapped anew in immaculate bandages that set off the elegant geometry of his features; a thin thread of gold traced a sigil at his temples. His hands, neatly mummified and unreasonably expressive, cradled a porcelain teacup painted with chrysanthemums. Steam curled up and formed, briefly, a falcon's profile before the room's drafts tore it.

"The difficulty," Rahetep was explaining to a semicircle of clerks, "is not that I breathe, which I concede is a contentious subject, but that your ledgers have not been properly initiated into the cult of breath."

A quill attempted to take this down and, apparently embarrassed by its own treachery, stabbed itself into an inkpot.

Nebu sprawled across the blotter in front of him like a sun-warmed question mark, sleek gold fur shining, tail twitching with the brisk authority of a metronome. He was shredding memos into confetti with the careful, meditative air of a monk shelling pistachios. Every few moments he paused to inspect a fragment, snorted, and flicked it aside.

"'Dear Head Office, we regret to inform you that the deceased has opinions,'" Nebu read aloud from a torn scrap, voice rich and faintly posh. "Yes, well. Imagine that. At least one of us has."

Cassandra pressed her knuckles to her brow. The room smelled of parchment, hot sand, frustrated magic, and the lemon polish someone had used in a hopeless gesture on the argument-stained conference table.

"Lord Rahetep," she said as calmly as she could manage, "how's the tea?"

"Absent honey," he said gravely, "it is a meditation on loss. But drinkable."

"Marvelous." She set her satchel down and snapped a command at the quills. "You. You. And you. Minutes. I don't care if you rhyme. Griphook, I need a quiet room and the resurrection forms, all of them, including the ones we pretend don't exist."

"There are no such forms," Griphook said on reflex.

"Then bring me the forms for things that are exactly like them but called something else."

Griphook grimaced but relayed orders to a clerk who sprinted away, skidding on a paperclip as if it were a banana peel. The clerk swore in gobbledegook; the swear drifted down like tinsel and offended a potted basil plant.

"Miss Blythe," Rahetep said, in a tone that suggested he was trying on affection like a new robe and finding it sat surprisingly well. "You have not yet made the morning proper greeting

to my staff.”

“Good morning, Nebu,” Cassandra said. “Please stop eating official correspondence.”

Nebu bared a tiny set of impeccable fangs. “If official correspondence didn’t taste of smugness and panic, I might.”

She rounded the desk, pulled up a chair, and let herself fall into it. A memo grazed her cheek and whispered: ARAMINTA VOSS REQUESTS UPDATE STOP ARE YOU QUITE FINISHED YET STOP DO NOT EMBARRASS THE BANK. Cassandra plucked it from the air, cracked the wax with her thumb, and read the rest. Her mouth tightened.

“News from London?” Rahetep inquired, enjoying himself and trying to pretend he wasn’t.

“Just encouragement,” Cassandra said crisply. “The sort given from a safe distance.”

“Ah,” he murmured. “The kind that builds pyramids.”

Another clerk hurried in with a stack of forms tall enough to qualify as a defensible wall. The top document was bordered with tiny, smug sigils. Cassandra recognized the style - the Ministry of Magic had gotten at it with a ruler and an appetite. She flipped to the first page.

APPLICATION FOR TEMPORARY RECOGNITION OF POST-MORTEM AGENCY (Form 32-B). In smaller script beneath: see also Form 32-B-1 (Nonviolent), 32-B-2 (Violent), and 32-B-3 (Ambiguous Homicidal Tendencies).

“Which box covers ‘Ask for tea and etiquette lessons’?” Cassandra asked.

The clerk’s ears flattened. “We’ve never had to check it.”

“Lucky us.”

She began to fill the forms in, quills hovering anxiously over her shoulder like judgmental hummingbirds. Name of Applicant: Cassandra Blythe. Name of Subject: Lord Rahetep, Voice of Amun (deceased, allegedly). Nature of Reanimation: “Currently under investigation.” Reason for Application: “To avoid a bureaucratic accident resulting in actual one.”

Rahetep watched with fond exasperation. “You are very industrious when the world is ending.”

“It helps me pretend it isn’t,” she said, not looking up. “Hold still while I record your vital signs.”

“I assure you they are all exquisitely vital.”

Nebu rolled to his side and presented a perfect line of belly fur that dared anyone to touch it. Cassandra did not. She had made that mistake once, early, when she’d thought the belly was an invitation rather than a trap; she still had faint scratches like punctuation along her wrist.

A junior goblin in a green visor edged up to the chair, whispering nervously, “Can he… pay the application fee?”

“Absolutely,” Rahetep said, with imperial air. “Charge it to history.”

“We cannot invoice history,” the goblin said.

“Then charge it to Gringotts,” Cassandra said, without blinking.

Griphook made a noise like a teakettle refusing to whistle. “Miss Blythe.”

“Temporarily,” she added. “We’ll reassign costs once we discover whose brilliant idea this was.”

At that, even the disoriented minutes seemed to turn their heads. A dozen quills hesitated mid-scratch. Something deeper than the room’s chaos passed through the air, a filament of attention. Through the skylight the light shifted - only a cloud, probably, skimming the sun - but the temperature changed by a hair, and the hairs along Cassandra’s arms stood up.

She lowered her quill. “Right. I’ll need the tomb’s full curse matrix logs, and the ledger of access seals for the last twelve months.”

Griphook eyed her as if she’d demanded his blood type and bedtime secrets. “On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that I unsealed a posthumous monarch yesterday,” Cassandra said, “and I would very much like to know whether we did it alone.”

The room seemed to breathe in, then go briskly back to business. The abacus rattled, a quill hiccuped ink on its own nib, a clerk sneezed so loudly a jar of sealing wax fainted.

“Miss Blythe.” Rahetep had leaned forward; his bandages rustled, library-soft. “If there is a plot, you will plot back, yes?”

She filled in another box. “If there’s a plot, I’ll file it first.”

Nebu flexed lazily. “Ah, the British impulse: catalogue the apocalypse.”

“Someone has to,” Cassandra said. “It’s always more expensive to clean after.”

A liveried witch from Dispatch materialized beside the desk with a telegram cylinder tucked under her arm. It hummed like a beehive. “International directive,” she announced, grim as a tomb guardian. “Priority: Very.” She angled a look at the mummy and the cat and added, “And peculiar.”

Cassandra took it, cracked the cap, and unrolled the thin strip of enchanted copper inside. Letters raised themselves like welts.

FROM: VOSS, A.
TO: BLYTHE, C.

SUBJECT: SOFT CONTAINMENT AND PUBLIC HARMONIZATION
TEXT: DELIVER SUBJECT TO WIZARDING COURT OF CAIRO FOR DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY FOR RE-CORPOREALIZATION STOP DO NOT ATTEMPT INDEPENDENT ADJUDICATION STOP DO NOT ALARM MINISTRY STOP DO NOT ALARM ANYONE STOP CONTAIN NARRATIVE

“Contain narrative,” Nebu repeated, tasting the phrase. “Delicious.”

Rahetep’s eyes, dark in their painted hollows, flicked to Cassandra’s face. He had a kingdom’s practice at reading people. “My dear curse-breaker,” he said softly, “you do not look contained.”

She rolled the copper back into its cylinder with great care, as if irritated precision might keep her from shouting. “We’re to take you to court.”

“Excellent!” Rahetep brightened. “I adore courts. They have rules. And pillars.”

“Also judges,” Nebu added, “and forms that bite.”

“Inspector Mogrim’s jurisdiction,” Cassandra said, half to herself, as if that name were a geometry proof she could tuck into. “The sphinx benches. Time dilation charms. Wonderful. We’ll pack snacks.”

Griphook rubbed his temples. “We are a bank,” he said to the ceiling, as if appealing to some god of accountants, “and yet here we are, shepherding an ancient head of state to be told whether he may continue to be inconvenient.”

“Consider it brand diversification,” Cassandra said.

In the pause that followed, a tray rattled into the room bearing tea freshened, honey gleaming in a small glass pot like trapped sunlight. The tray wobbled - the charm powering it was overworked, tipsy with too many errands - and Rahetep steadied it with one gracious palm.

“Ah,” he said, happy as a priest at dawn. “Cassandra. We have achieved civilization.”

She poured for him, then for herself. The steam rose fragrant and clean, unafraid of anyone, drawing a temporary veil over her face. When it thinned, her expression had smoothed into something decisive.

“All right,” she said, to the room, to the bank, to the morning, to the gathering shape of the day. “Here’s how we survive this.”

She pointed, rapid as wandwork. “Griphook - authorize a provisional ledger for ‘Post-Mortem Agency, Pending.’ It’s a fiction, yes, but a useful one. Kindi” - to the green-visored junior - “pull the last year’s vault access signatures for any crate labeled with sun, breath, or immortality in the euphemism column. Dispatch - notify Tarek el-Farouk that we’ll require an escort to court and that he is encouraged to roll his eyes only where strictly necessary. Minutes, stop sulking and record. If you must editorialize, do so legibly.”

The quills rose like a flock catching a thermal. The minutes, flattered, fell into an orderly drift. The abacus clicked itself into a steady, soothing tempo.

Nebu watched her with his head cocked, eyes half-lidded. “I haven’t decided if I like you,” he said. “I think I do, but it might be gas.”

“Put it in a memo,” Cassandra said, and sipped her tea.

Rahetep regarded her over the rim of his cup, and a smile, old and surprisingly human, found its way into the bandages. “My lady,” he said, “you remind me of my sister’s steward. He once reorganized a famine.”

“Did it help?”

“No,” Rahetep said cheerfully. “But everyone felt better about it.”

A clerk appeared, pale with accomplishment, carrying a narrow ledger bound in cracked black hide. “Access signatures, Miss Blythe,” he said. “Euphemism column included.”

Cassandra set her cup down and took the ledger. The leather was cool as river stone. The ink crawled lightly when she opened to the first page, as if embarrassed to be read. She scanned the entries - mundane shipments, museum loans, grumbling goblin annotations - until her eye snagged on a line written in a hand that tried too hard to be anonymous.

BREATH PROVISIONS - ARCHIVAL CONSULT. SIGNED: AUTHORIZED BY SPECIAL DISPENSATION.

No names. No departmental seal. A date from six months before the tomb.

“Lovely,” she said, tone gone thin as wire. “Someone has been shopping with our language.”

Nebu’s ears pricked. “And what did they buy?”

“A future court date,” Cassandra said. She closed the ledger decisively and stood. “Finish your tea, Lord Rahetep. We’re going to make some bureaucrats very nervous.”

He rose, too, with the grace of a man who had never forgotten how to be looked at. Nebu lept into his arms without consenting to admit it was affection.

Cassandra shouldered her satchel. The building’s wards thrummed through the soles of her boots. Outside, Cairo sang - barter and bells and the distant, steady stroke of the Nile - while inside, paper lifted like wings, and the bank remembered it had once been a fortress.

“Contain the narrative,” she muttered, mostly for the pleasure of disobeying it. “We’ll see.”

She stepped into the corridor, and the memos parted for her like birds, and the day, such as it was, fell in around her shoulders like a cloak she would pretend she’d chosen.

They gave Cassandra the smallest interview room in the building, which was Gringotts’ way of saying: Don’t get comfortable.

It was a cube of sandstone and stubbornness, windowless, as clean as a conscience in a ledger, lit by an overhead charm that imitated noon with the enthusiastic inaccuracy of a travelling magician. A panel of carved wards framed the door - a tasteful overkill of goblin sigils and Ministry-approved assurances - while a brass grille high on the wall sighed cool air scented faintly with myrrh. Someone had attempted warmth by placing a rug in the center: woven desert-blue with a border of papyrus and little gold beetles. The rug, having seen things, had elected to be patient with them.

Cassandra set up her desk on one side of the rug and transformed a second chair into an approximation of a chaise. Lord Rahetep settled onto it with a courtier's gratitude, bandages whispering. Nebu took possession of the desk itself, as cats do with authority granted by neither law nor god, and arranged himself across her parchment like a gilded paperweight that might bite.

She drew in the room. It smelled of linen and the ghost of incense, of dust warmed by light that wasn't light. There was a faint sweetness under it all, the same note the tomb had exhaled when the lid lifted: honey, or memory.

"All right," she said, pulling her satchel open and coaxing quills into obedient hover. "This is a formal debrief. For the record, I am Cassandra Blythe, curse-breaker, Gringotts Cairo, temporary, unfortunately."

"Noted," Nebu purred, as if he were the record and also the judgment.

"Subject: Lord Rahetep, Voice of Amun, previously deceased."

"Allegedly," Rahetep said with gentle good humor.

"Previously deceased-ish," Cassandra conceded, and took up a quill.

The quill lifted its nib, trembled, and - rather than writing where she directed - tilted its face toward Rahetep, like a sunflower toward a very old sun. Its first line unfurled, slanted, inexplicably dashing:

In linen's library lies a lord of breath, who courted sleep and married not to death -

Cassandra pinched the quill, turned it politely toward the parchment, and whispered, "Minutes, not couplets."

The quill sniffed - she felt it in the tension of the feather - then wrote with injured propriety:

Interview with Subject: LORD RAHETEP. Date: Today, obviously.

She clicked her tongue. "Lord Rahetep - may I ask your full name as you would have styled it in your time?"

Rahetep arranged his hands, the gestures precise even in wrappings. "Rahetep, born under the Third Sun, Son of Keper, Holder of the Second Fan, Inheritor of the Flood, Voice of Amun, who kept bread unbroken in famine and whose boats came home."

The quill lifted, grateful, and wrote it all as if gilding each word.

“Lovely,” Cassandra said. “Do you consent to this interview?”

“I consent to tea,” he said. “The rest is punctuation.”

She poured from the service she’d smuggled in: two cups for decorum, one saucer for Nebu, who wrinkled his nose at the steam and then, by degrees, decided to lap it.

“All right,” she pressed on, businesslike despite the inexplicable coziness. “Please describe, in your own words, the circumstances surrounding your… reanimation.”

Rahetep inclined his head in the thoughtful manner of a man who’d given speeches beneath columns. “I was asleep.”

“Anything prior to waking?”

“A great deal,” he said dryly. “Would you like my childhood? My mother invented a tart made of figs and rain. We thought it hilarious. No? Then hear this: There was darkness. Not absence, but fullness - like the inside of a drum before it sounds. I lay in it as a seed lies in soil. And then - this is the unpleasant part - someone plucked me.”

The quill shivered, then, uninterested in reportage, scratched:

The drum of night. A fingertip of dawn. The pluck that makes a god a man, a pawn.

“Nebu?” Cassandra said, without looking up. “Would you kindly stop encouraging the stationery to be dramatic?”

Nebu licked his paw in a way that said he had never encouraged anything except excellence and occasional murder. “If your tools leap to poetry at the sight of my master, that’s your procurement problem.”

She exhaled through her nose, and turned to Rahetep. “Forgive the question, but did you feel compelled? As if something called to you?”

His gaze, warm brown within the kohl’s hollow, met hers. “Miss Blythe, everything calls to the dead. The trick is what we answer.”

“True,” she said, softer. “Yet you answered now.”

“Someone spoke my name on the other side of the seal.” He watched the steam curl from his cup; it braided, briefly, into a falcon and then unraveled. “Or something like a name.”

Cassandra’s skin tightened, the way it does when a storm remembers you. “What did it sound like?”

“A door pushed open by a tide. A child laughing under water. A clerk clearing his throat.” He smiled at the last, and the room smiled with him. “But the shape of it - ” He lifted one wrapped finger and traced a curve in the air. “ - was yours.”

The charm-light hummed. Cassandra felt the floor tilt half a degree - no motion, just the intimacy of a statement finding its place.

“I didn’t know you,” she said.

“You do not yet,” he returned, not unkindly.

Behind them, the carved ward panel twitched. It was minute, but she caught it - a ripple through the etched strokes of hieroglyphs, a pulse like breath in stone. Her eyes went to Rahetep’s bandages; along the lines at his wrists, the inked glyphs that sealed his wrappings glowed and faded, as if matching a heartbeat that wasn’t his.

“Nebu,” she said, light as you speak to a panther. “Do you see that?”

He did not turn his head, which meant he had seen it all. “I see the tidy courage with which you will pretend you did not,” he murmured.

She made a neat note in the margin for herself - **Glyphs reactive to subject’s name + my voice** - then tucked the margin under another margin as if that would keep it from being real.

“Let’s try a simple chronology,” she said, back in the rhythm of control. “We opened your tomb yesterday - ”

“ - woke me yesterday,” Rahetep corrected gently.

“We woke you yesterday,” Cassandra allowed. “Who else has opened your tomb since your burial?”

He reclined by a fraction that read to the body as dignity rather than retreat. “Thieves. Priests. Children. The wind. Time. But truly opened?” His gaze grew distant, and for a moment his voice held the dryness of old papyrus. “Once, when a cult of scholars begged the door for a word and, hearing none, made one and claimed it was mine.”

Nebu made a sound that might have been a laugh and might have been a warning. “He refers to believers in forever with poor manners.”

“The Order of the Sun’s Shadow,” Cassandra said, carefully neutral. The quill, delighted to be near a proper noun with drama, underlined it gratuitously.

Rahetep looked amused. “You collect their name as if it were a butterfly you might pin. I admire your cruelty.”

“It’s not cruelty,” she said. “It’s method.”

“Method can be the cruelty that dresses well,” Nebu said.

She widened her eyes at him with the universal expression for *noted, later*. “Lord Rahetep, I’ve reviewed the external wards on your tomb. The innermost layer is yours - elegant, rigorous, entirely unlike the… one we parted. The second-to-outer layer shows modern

charm residue. Not British. Not Cairo Gringotts. The signatures were disguised, almost convincingly. Do you recall any - visitations - within the last year?”

He closed his eyes. The light found the high planes of his cheekbones through linen. When he spoke, his voice came from a place that was not this room. “I dream learned - oh, you will say that is not a thing, Miss Blythe, but the dead know it. We do not dream images; we dream conclusions. In one such dream, someone rehearsed the idea of me like an actor in a mirror. I felt the rehearsal against the seal. Months ago, perhaps. Your calendars - and ours - court different suns.”

The quill stopped trying to rhyme and simply wrote, for once, with silence:

Note: Subject reports pre-waking ‘rehearsal’ impressed on seal ~ 6 months prior.

Cassandra’s pulse slipped into a new meter. *Six months.* The line she’d found in the access ledger - BREATH PROVISIONS - glowed in memory. She let the thrill of a thread slip into her, then set it aside. Work first; wonder later.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it. “Next: the hieroglyphs on your wrappings. They respond when I - ” She stopped. Nebu’s ears had angled toward her, a fox hearing a trap reset. “ - when I speak your name.”

Rahetep did not gloat; that was part of why she was beginning, dangerously, to like him. “Names shape breath, which shapes life. The bandages were sealed with mine. In your mouth, it behaves as if remembering itself.”

The notion moved through her like warm water: unreasonable, obvious, terrifying. “Why mine?”

He considered her. The answer he could have given - *because you broke the seal* - would have ended the thought. He chose the harder sentence. “Because you have been listening, Miss Blythe, since before you knew you were.”

Nebu’s eyes thinned to molten amber. “Careful, curse-breaker,” he said lazily. “Names stick.”

Her mouth went dry in a way tea could not fix. She reached for a neutral slope. “Very well. Vital checks.” She drew her wand, murmured diagnostic charms, and watched the pale skeins of light describe Rahetep’s state: a slow, even spiral around the chest; a faint luminescence at the temples where the sigil lay; a delicate lattice across the abdominals where internal organs had been preserved by old magic and better prayer. The lattice quivered when she leaned closer. She stood back.

“Anything?” Rahetep asked, amused.

“Only that you persist,” she said. “It’s very fashionable this season.”

He smiled. “I have always been in poor taste.”

She reached for a fresh sheet. The top of the stack hummed, very faintly. She paused, parted the pages. There - beneath a blank certificate - lay a sliver of parchment, triangular and

slightly singed, with a whispering sheen to it like heat over rock. It glowed along its edge, not bright but insistent, and the glow grew marginally stronger when her fingers came near.

Cassandra looked at the door, then at Nebu, then at Rahetep. She slid the sliver free and turned it over with the care one uses for a spider that may either bless you or sue.

It was inscribed in a cramped hand trying to be tidy: a cluster of modern numericals, a fragment of a sigil whose curve wasn't Egyptian and wasn't goblin and wasn't anything she had a permit for. The edge hummed against her skin, fretful as a bee against glass.

"Found something you weren't meant to?" Nebu asked, very casually, which is to say not at all.

"A bookmark," Cassandra said, just as casually, which is to say not at all.

She tucked the sliver beneath the backboard of her notebook with the swift, unshowy motion of a thief who steals only from mysteries. The hum dulled, but did not die.

Rahetep watched her and nodded once, as though she had passed something without knowing the exam had been set.

"All right," she said again, brisk for both their sakes. "Final questions for this session. Do you intend harm to any person in this building?"

Rahetep held her eyes. "Intention is the leash we throw on the future to make it heel. I intend courtesy. I cannot promise accident."

The quill wrote that down, unembellished.

"Do you claim legal personhood?"

He considered the question from a long way off, then returned with grace. "I claim that I am me," he said, "in whichever grammar displeases the Court least."

"Acceptable answer," Cassandra murmured, surprising herself.

"Do you submit to the judgment of the Wizarding Court of Cairo?"

"At last," he said, delighted. "A place with pillars."

"And sphinxes," Nebu added. "Never forget the sphinxes. They consider puns a form of perjury."

"Noted," Cassandra said. She stacked the papers, ignored their muttering, and lidded her ink. "This concludes the formal debrief of Lord Rahetep at - " she glanced at the wall clock charm, which wore time like a loose scarf - "whatever the Ministry calls this hour. Thank you for your cooperation."

Rahetep rose, a tide gathering itself, and inclined his head. "Miss Blythe," he said, sincere as a contract written on stone, "you interrogate like a hostess. It is very hard to be offended."

“Practice,” she said. “I have interrogated a lot of teapots.”

Nebu jumped down and brushed her calf with his tail in the manner of a blessing disguised as a trip hazard. “You asked the right questions,” he said. “You will hate the answers. Bring honey.”

She almost reached to scratch under his chin. She did not. “I’ll add it to the requisition form.”

When they reached the door, the carved ward panel’s hieroglyphs rippled again - a little swell as if a breath moved through stone. Cassandra placed her palm lightly against it. The glyphs warmed beneath her skin. Not much. Just enough to answer.

“You hear it too?” Rahetep asked, softened by something like pity.

“I hear that the building has an opinion,” she said, removing her hand. “I imagine it prefers its clients not to be ambulatory.”

“The living are the unusual ones,” he said. “We insist on walking with our tombs.”

The corridor outside smelled of ink and ambition. Distantly, the bank clattered and sighed. A memo skimmed past like a nervous fish. Cassandra set her shoulders and stepped out, the parchment fragment a quiet heat against the spine of her notebook, the echo of her name humming in the wrappings of a king.

“Court next,” she said over her shoulder.

“Pillars,” Rahetep replied.

“Sphinxes,” Nebu corrected.

“Forms that bite,” Cassandra finished, and shut the door on the room before it could disagree.

By late afternoon the bank had sweated itself into a fragile order, the way a fever settles without really conceding defeat. The Cairo sun tilted toward evening, turning the atrium’s sigils the color of burnt sugar. Cassandra climbed to the balcony above Dispatch with the slowness of a woman who had spent the day arguing with nouns. Stone steps exhaled cool breath; carved lilies on the banister cast oval shadows like little pools she wanted to put her face in.

The balcony overlooked the inner courtyard where couriers alighted and leapt like punctuation in a frantic telegram. Brass cages rang. Owls in Ministry livery - the pompous, pin-neat kind that knew how to look down on a room from any height - sat on the perches like magistrates between cases. Local owls were less ceremonial and more honest: sandy plumage, clever eyes, bits of alley in their feathers. A hawk with a Gringotts seal preened as if sharpening itself.

Cassandra found the one patch of shade that smelled faintly of dust and lemon oil, leaned on the parapet, and let Cairo arrive. From here the city spoke in layers: donkey hooves and carpet bells, the muezzin’s call sifted through with market laughter, the hush of wards woven into alleyways like invisible rugs. Farther off, the river made the sound of someone turning a

heavy page. The sky was a silk of diluted gold, and the light came at an angle that made the world appear annotated.

A clerk from Dispatch slipped up beside her with the brisk gait of a messenger who had learned to dodge both birds and questions. She held a tube of hammered copper etched with the smug geometry of London. The cap bore a wax V impressed so hard the letter looked self-harmed.

“Priority owl from Headquarters,” the clerk said, not quite disguising the way she looked relieved to be rid of it. “It bit Mr. Rahman. Twice.”

“Perhaps Mr. Rahman is delicious,” Cassandra said, and took the tube.

The metal was warm as a living wrist. When she turned it in her hands, the engravings caught late sunlight and returned it as a thin, officious glitter. The cap had been sealed, then resealed, as if the message itself had changed its mind and wanted to be different when it arrived.

She cracked the wax, eased the cap, and shook the tube. The strip of copper inside slithered out like a lizard and unrolled in the evening air with well-bred disdain. Words rose on its surface, swelling in neat relief: a letter that could be read with fingers in the dark.

FROM: VOSS, ARAMINTA (DIR. FIELD OPERATIONS, CURSE DIVISION, LONDON)
TO: BLYTHE, CASSANDRA (TEMP. ASSIGN., CAIRO)
SUBJECT: SOFT CONTAINMENT AND PUBLIC HARMONIZATION (URGENT)

TEXT: DELIVER SUBJECT TO WIZARDING COURT OF CAIRO FOR DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY FOR RE-CORPOREALIZATION UNDER CURSE CONTAINMENT AND RESUSCITATION CLAUSE (§17c; see also Annexes I–IV). STOP. DO NOT ATTEMPT INDEPENDENT ADJUDICATION. STOP. COORDINATE WITH MINISTRY OBSERVERS (BRITISH & EGYPTIAN). STOP. MINIMIZE NARRATIVE VOLATILITY. STOP. AVOID LANGUAGE “MUMMY,” “UNDEAD,” “TOMB-RAIDING.” SUBSTITUTE “LEGACY CLIENT,” “POST-MORTEM AGENCY,” “ARCHIVAL ACCESS.” STOP. ALL COMMUNICATIONS TO BE CLEARED BY THIS OFFICE UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. STOP. CONTAIN.

Cassandra read it twice and then the line of her mouth decided things on its own.

“Bad news?” said a voice that could have been mistaken for polite if one didn’t know how to hear the seams.

She turned. Tarek el-Farouk stood in the doorway to the balcony as if the air had invited him. He had traded his scholar’s robe for something cut to move, linen a shade between sand and smoke. A notebook was tucked at his hip, a fountain pen slanted behind one ear like a sword that told the truth slowly. There was a nick on his jaw she didn’t remember from yesterday; perhaps he’d shaved in a hurry or argued with a razor.

“Only if you like language,” she said, and handed him the copper strip.

He read with the careful annoyance of a man who respected words and therefore loathed them when they were abused. “Public harmonization,” he recited. “Narrative volatility. They’ve turned the truth into weather.”

“That would be convenient,” Cassandra admitted. “You could blame the barometer for the scandal.”

Tarek returned the strip. “The *Curse Containment and Resuscitation Clause* is Ministry talk for ‘We didn’t foresee this, but we know how to write it down.’”

“What does §17c really say?” Cassandra asked, because she loved the ugly beauty of laws: the way they tried to knit human panic into geometry.

“That any entity exceeding thirty percent organic coherence post-mortem must be presented before a recognized tribunal to determine personhood and rights of movement,” he said, as one quotes a nursery rhyme remembered from law lectures. “Also that the entity’s assets - material, magical, and narrative - shall be managed by a provisional custodial body, pending judgment.”

“Assets,” Cassandra repeated. The balcony spun very slightly, or her opinion of the Ministry did. “So Rahetep is a man, a case, and a portfolio.”

“In that order if he’s lucky,” Tarek said.

Down in the courtyard, an owl swooped to a landing with a scroll tied twice around its body, in case the first tie forgot its job. A clerk wrestled the scroll free and looked as though he’d rather be handling snakes. The owl bit him anyway, in solidarity with its London cousin.

Cassandra turned the copper over. The last word - CONTAIN - glowed with the faint heat of a command that had been repeated so often it believed itself holy.

“Araminta wants plausible deniability,” she said.

Tarek leaned on the stone near her. “London wants not to be caught wanting what it wants. There’s a difference.”

“She wants us to avoid certain words,” Cassandra said, counting them off with an index finger that had held too many quills today. “Mummy. Undead. Tomb-raiding.”

“Ah, yes,” Tarek said, considering the sky. “And to replace them with ‘legacy client,’ ‘post-mortem agency,’ and ‘archival access.’ You see it? They’ve made the dead into a library and themselves into librarians.”

Cassandra smiled despite the dull weight behind her eyes. “Be fair, I’ve wanted to be a librarian since I was seven.”

“And now you can, with a crowbar,” Tarek said dryly. “Do you mean to obey?”

“I mean to deliver Rahetep to court,” she said. “And to tell the truth using whichever words cause the fewest fires. Which may be none.”

He studied her the way people study horizons - measuring weather, not distance. “You could refuse this, you know. Many before you have taken the boat downriver when the paperwork rose like a flood.”

“I am not many before me,” she said lightly, and then let the lightness go. “Also, London has my pay and my passport.”

“Practical,” he approved. “I suspected Ravenclaw. You have the gaze of someone who argues with staircases.”

She laughed, once. A courier passed so close the wind lifted the little hairs along her arm. The day exhaled; the sun slipped, and the city took on its evening grammar: sentences of shadow, clauses of copper light.

“I found something,” she said, low enough that the stone would have to lean in to hear. “In the paperwork. A fragment - modern sigil work, not British, not goblin. Six months old.”

Tarek’s mouth nodded, barely. “I have heard, in the most hypothetical sense, that such sigils exist.”

“In a less hypothetical sense, they were on a scrap beneath my forms,” she said. “I think we were invited to open that tomb. Not by Araminta. Not by Gringotts. By someone who doesn’t want their name on anything but a door.”

He tilted his head, acknowledging the shape of the thought without reaching to touch it. “The Order has many hands,” he said.

“And some of them wear our gloves,” she said, and Araminta’s tidy V glowed again in her mind’s eye like a candle that smoked. “I won’t accuse without fact. But I will look.”

“I would encourage you to do so with your eyes open and your heart armored,” Tarek said. “Facts here are like jars without labels. Take off the lid and they insist on being perfume. Or poison.”

From the courtyard, a quartet of goblin clerks began an argument so precise it sounded like a string quartet tuning. Somewhere a kettle screamed and was soothed. The air thickened with the smell of heat leaving stone; it’s a smell found only in cities that know how to survive.

Cassandra flattened her palms on the railing. “Will you come with us to Court?”

Tarek made a face that would have been called a smile if it had not been so tired of being reasonable. “If I refused, Nebu would sit outside my door at dawn and recite etymologies.”

“He would,” she agreed. “With footnotes.”

“Then yes,” he said. “I will come and stand beside you, and when you tread on the Ministry’s gown, I will attempt to look surprised.”

“Thank you,” she said. Gratitude made her throat ache. “Inspector Mogrim will be presiding?”

“He will be pretending not to,” Tarek replied. “The sphinxes preside. Mogrim interprets. He is a good man if one can call a man good who has memorized a building’s veins.”

“I like good men who know their buildings,” she said. “They tend to notice when the stone starts breathing.”

He cut her a look. “Has it?”

“Once or twice,” she said, because saying *yes* put too much weight on the word. “It’s nothing. Or it’s something that prefers to be polite.”

“Then it will fit in at court,” Tarek said.

Another owl arrived - this one a great gray, soft as an apology - bearing a ribboned notice. The ribbon was Ministry blue, and the notice had that anxious hum of documents that will get quoted tomorrow by people who were not in the room today. The clerk who unrolled it grew paler the farther his eyes slid.

Cassandra flexed her fingers. The copper strip lay against her palm like a patient snake. Contain, contain, contain. The evening breeze toyed with its edge, made it whisper on the stone.

“Araminta will expect a reply,” she said, though the strip did not give the impression that replies were something one *sent* rather than *complied with*.

“Tell her you will deliver the subject to court,” Tarek said, “and that you will harmonize the narrative to the extent that the narrative consents to being hummed at.”

Cassandra laughed this time. “You make everything sound like an instrument that bites.”

“Because it is,” he said. Then, softer: “Be careful, Cassandra. They will try to transpose you, too.”

It was the first time he’d used her given name. It surprised a warmth out of her she hadn’t expected to have any of today. She folded it away neatly, like a spare handkerchief, and disobeyed it by smiling.

“I am very difficult to transpose,” she said. “I only ever learned one key and I refuse to admit it.”

She uncapped the pen she carried for letters that did not deserve quills and wrote on the back of the copper with the small, surgical handwriting of a woman who has learned to say dangerous things in a small space:

TO: VOSS, A. - RECEIVED. WILL PRESENT SUBJECT TO WIZARDING COURT OF CAIRO UNDER §17c. WILL COORDINATE WITH OBSERVERS. CURRENT VOCABULARY ADJUSTED AS REQUESTED, SUBJECT TO TRUTH. PREPARING MATERIAL EVIDENCE. - BLYTHE.

The letters sunk into the metal like seeds. The strip shivered; the word CONTAIN warmed in an approving way that made her want to fling it into the Nile. She slid it back into its tube and sealed it with the bank's crest: scales, a key, an eye trying to be calm.

Across the courtyard, the hawk lifted; its shadow crossed her hands and the stone.

"Tomorrow?" Tarek asked.

"Dawn," she said. "Rahetep adores pillars. Nebu warned me about puns."

"The sphinxes will love you," he said, very dry, which meant he did not mean it. "Wear something you can run in."

"I always do," she said. She straightened, and the day slid into evening all at once, as if it had been waiting for her spine to remember it had a job.

They stood a moment longer, two shapes in a gold rectangle above a roomful of flight, and watched the owls swap burdens as if the sky were a ledger and time owed everyone interest. When they went back inside, the light followed them only as far as it could bear to, and then let them go.

Cassandra's guesthouse room wore evening the way Cairo does when it is tired of being magnificent. The shutters were half-closed against the heat, lamplight pooled in the corners, and the rest of the light came in thin as thread through the slats, drawing bars across the writing desk, the brass bed, the trunk with one hinge that sighed like an old professor. Somewhere nearby, a radio crackled through a dance tune, then surrendered to static. From farther off, the Nile kept turning pages.

She dropped her satchel on the bed. Dust drifted up in a little gold gasp. The door's ward - a sensible thing of her own making - hummed a note of greeting that was also a complaint. She set her wand on the desk, set the copper telegram tube beside it with unnecessary care, and, after a moment in which her spine discovered how to be vertebrae again, went to put the kettle on the small spirit stove. The guesthouse provided a blue enamel teapot with a chipped spout and a bowl of sugar that had taken to impersonating sandstone. Someone had left a sprig of mint in a glass; it fainted when she touched it.

When the kettle began its thin whistle, Cassandra poured water over the tea leaves and watched the steam rise. In London she had called tea a habit; in Cairo it had become a ritual, and rituals were just instructions for survival spoken politely.

She carried the pot and cup to the desk and emptied her satchel onto the wood: a clutch of forms with their little legal teeth; her field journal full of sketches that had started out tidy and devolved into obsession; a roll of tracing parchment; the triangular scrap she'd palmed during the interview, wrapped now in the corner of her handkerchief. It pulsed against her palm like a moth.

She set the scrap on the desk and did not touch it. It hummed anyway, as if appreciative of her restraint.

“Very well,” she said to the room, which had the courtesy to pretend not to answer. “We will be methodical.”

She opened the journal to a fresh page and, with a little, private ceremony, titled it: **Temple Case - Residuals, Hypotheses, Unwelcome Poetry.** Then she drew a square and labeled its corners with questions the Ministry preferred to avoid: **Who? Why? How? When?** She drew arrows like footpaths between them. *The Order*, she wrote in the margin. Then, smaller: *And us?*

Her wand felt familiar in her hand - the particular weight of wood that remembered her grip and the nick near the handle where a basilisk tooth had thought better of her once. She flicked a steadying charm toward the forms so they stopped rustling opinions. The room quieted. She set the end of the wand against the page, breathed in the scent of old paper and mint and Cairo dust and something else - the faint sweetness of linen warmed in sun - and whispered, “Ritus Revelare.”

The tip lit with a clean blue, not showy, and the page breathed in the light like skin taking water. Lines she hadn’t drawn resolved themselves in the margins: ghost-notes in pale ink, the way a palimpsest whispers its original when a trick of light remembers its first life. She turned a page. On the back of yesterday’s sketch of the sarcophagus she found a thumbprint in residue she recognized as her own - resurrection dust, from where she’d steadied the lid in reflex - and, laid over it, a ribbon of magic whose weave was too smooth to be goblin and too careful to be accident.

Modern. Hidden under older spells like a rumor that had learned a church voice.

Cassandra leaned closer. The ribbon flared faintly where it crossed her notes about the outer seal. Not British. Too elegant. A little disdainful of being seen. It smelled - there’s no other word - of myrrh and ink and whatever perfume is made of secrecy. She tracked it with the wand-light across the page and onto the tracing parchment and then onto the desk itself, where it went thin and skittish and vanished near the copper tube.

“Of course,” she said softly. “You like orders.”

She dipped a quill, coaxed the residue to show itself again, and drew what she saw - a curved sigil that wasn’t quite hieratic and wasn’t quite anything else. She labeled it with a question mark and then an exclamation point and then struck the exclamation point out for being unprofessional.

The kettle clicked as the spirit stove ran low. Tea had gone strong and handsome. Cassandra poured a cup and let the first mouthful sit on her tongue. The leaves had settled in the bottom and, noticed or remembering, arranged themselves into a shape that was either a bird or a mouth. She set the cup down too quickly and it said *ah* against the saucer.

“Coincidences may be classified as evidence,” she told the room, “only when they admit to conspiracy.”

The mirror above the desk had been hung too high for a woman who did not spend her life in heels. It had a nick in the bottom corner like a broken promise and reflected the room in a

long, thin slice: yellow lamplight, her cheekbone, the top of her left ear, a slant of shuttered twilight that looked like someone had drawn night with a ruler. As she watched herself not-watch it, a little draft came through the shutters - nothing more than Cairo breathing - and the mirror fogged with a delicate film of steam.

She did not have a kettle near it. Her tea was on the desk. The glass clouded anyway, as if the room had exhaled in the wrong direction.

Cassandra set her cup down and, very gently, did not move.

At first it was only mist. Then the mist gathered itself, like a thought deciding to be a sentence. Lines drew in the fog, quick and certain - curves and angles she knew by the feel of them in her mouth: hieroglyphs, a small suite of them, written by a hand that remembered bone. They shone pearl-grey on the glass, perfect for two heartbeats, and then the shapes reassembled themselves, as clever things do when they are being polite to the uneducated.

ENGLISH, the mirror said, as it rethreaded the lines. And then: **THE DEAD HAVE OPINIONS.**

Cassandra laughed once, aloud, for fear's sake. It came out like a hiccup and tried to be a cough. She set her quill down and it rolled into the inkwell and came up wearing a drop like a jewel.

"Do they?" she asked the mirror, because she could not help herself. "How fortunate. The living have so few."

The words did not change. The fog thinned at the edges with a patient, evaporative certainty. The message stayed until it was done being a message and then blurred into ordinary glass that showed a woman with ink on her cheek and Cairo in her hair.

"Right," she said to the ordinary glass, as if she had won an argument about definitions. "We are not sleeping, and we are not hallucinating, because if we were either of those things there would be better jokes."

She turned to the journal, sketched the mirror's phrase in a box with an arrow: **Mirror manifestation; language shift; declarative tone; audience specific?** The box looked smug. She added, **Ask Court: precedent?** She added, **No, do not.**

The shutters ticked. The scrap of parchment on the desk - her triangular thief - thrummed like a fingertip on glass. The hum answered a hum beneath the floor. The room had opinions too.

She unwrapped the scrap. Up close it felt wrong in the hand like a coin from a country that has not been invented yet. The inked curve on it - half a sigil, interrupted by a tear - grew faintly brighter when she tilted it toward the lamplight and a little brighter still when she tilted it toward her own shadow. It had numbers on its edge, modern numericals, arranged in a sequence that pretended to be random and fell just short of the effort.

"Where did you want to go," she asked it, "before you ended up under my paperwork?"

It made no attempt to be helpful.

She set it on the journal and drew around it, copied the curve, compared it to the ribbon she'd tracked through her notes. The two shapes were cousins: similar wrist, different schooling. She scribbled: **Order? Subset? Local adoption?** She wrote **Araminta?** and immediately circled it and then crossed it out and then drew a line to the word **motive** and left that empty because she was not ready to write down *ambition* or *piety* or *both*.

Wind, uninvited, shouldered the shutters again. The lamplight guttered. The wards in the door hummed a tone lower. In the mirror, for a breath, she saw not her face but the desk as if she were standing behind herself. Tea cup, journal, wand, scrap, the little spoon with a lion on the end that had decided it represented Britain and sulked accordingly. Over it all, a thin brightness like breath catching on gold.

"Fine," she said to the air. "If you have opinions, you may sign them."

She dipped the quill and, on a fresh page, wrote at the top, very matter-of-fact: **For any Present Party of a Non-Breathing Nature: Comments Welcome.** She underlined *welcome* because manners cost nothing. Then she waited.

One does not expect answers. That is a rule learned by curse-breakers and people who write to childhood friends and even, sometimes, by priests. Waiting is only ever permission to hear yourself. The room made its small noises: the stove settling, a cart in the street, a soft complaint from the trunk hinge, the distant rattle of the tram. She felt silly. She felt less silly. She felt very tired. She looked at the page again, and a dot of ink had appeared under *Comments* where none had been before.

She bent close. The dot lengthened, uncertainly, like a tadpole deciding whether to be. It took on a stem, then a hook. It formed a single sign, old as promises: the hieroglyph for a mouth.

Cassandra's breath stuttered. The sign wavered at the edges, then clarified, then, as if embarrassed by its boldness, thinned back into a dot and disappeared.

"Hello to you as well," she said, because what else do you say to a mouth.

Her ward on the door sighed, then bristled, then went back to a neutral hum. The room no longer felt empty. It felt occupied by the kind of quiet a library keeps when the book you need is here and paging itself open.

"Don't," said a voice from the window.

Nebu had not so much entered as condensed on the sill out of cat. He was framed by shutters and night, eyes lit from inside like coins under water. His tail hung down the outside of the building in a straight line that declared gravity a rumor. He did not jump down. He hovered, making an aesthetic of refusal.

"If you're here to scold," Cassandra said without turning, "there's a queue."

“I’m here to save you time,” Nebu said. He slid inside at last, stepped onto the dressing table as if blessing it and then forgiving it for existing, and landed on the desk with such soundless certainty that the scrap of parchment flinched. He sniffed it and did not quite bare his teeth.

“You dislike my bookmark,” Cassandra observed.

“I dislike people who hide knives in dictionaries,” he said.

“It hid under a Ministry form,” she said. “So perhaps it lacks subtlety.”

Nebu’s whiskers made a displeased equation. “You called,” he said.

“I wrote an invitation,” she said. “In neutral ink.”

“Invitations are doors,” he replied. “Doors are appetites.”

“And opinions?” she asked, glancing at the mirror.

“Are the napkins at a banquet you do not yet realize you are hosting.” He sat and, in an insult to physics, took up three-quarters of the desk. “Tell me you did not sign your name.”

She had the decency to look faintly guilty. “Only in the heading.”

“Names stick,” Nebu said, in the tone of someone who has spent a thousand years extracting burrs from people who didn’t listen. “Yours especially. You pronounce yourself too clearly.”

“That has been said,” she admitted, and tucked a curl behind her ear with fingers that tipped ink. “Do you know this sigil?” She turned the scrap so it faced him. The curve glimmered, as if relieved to be seen.

Nebu regarded it for a long, incorrect moment, and then said, “No.”

“Liar,” Cassandra said, without heat.

“Professional,” Nebu corrected. He transferred his gaze to her notebook, to the sketch of the ribbon residue, to the circle around *Araminta?*, and his expression did something small and complicated that would have been called sympathy if he had been less proud. “You are building a bridge of string.”

“Do you recommend better materials?”

“I recommend not crossing until you know what’s on the other side,” he said. “I recommend not waving to anyone you see smiling there.”

Cassandra rubbed her thumb along the edge of the page. “Do you believe,” she said, not sure whether she was asking a cat or a confessional, “that we invited this? Not we the three of us, but we the bank, the Ministry, the century with its fast shoes and louder clocks.”

Nebu considered the question with the seriousness he reserved for sunlight and death. “The living are always inviting,” he said at last. “You are a door with warm hinges. The dead are

drafts.”

“That’s very comforting,” she said dryly.

“I am not here to be comforting,” he said. “I am here to be correct.”

He leaned and sniffed her cup. The leaves had rearranged themselves into a new pattern - the line of a bird again, or the curve of a hieroglyph that meant *breath*. Nebu’s ears tilted. “Do not drink when the cup tries to talk.”

“It’s less argumentative than the quills,” she said, and pushed the cup away.

Outside, a motorcar gnawed past, and beyond that, a man laughed like a door hinge. The house settled, or rose slightly to see better. Cassandra picked up her wand again and, after a moment’s consideration, drew a protective circle on the desk with the tip - a thin, invisible ring around the scrap, the journal, the place where the ink had tried to be a mouth. The circle hummed, accepted the role, and made its little vow.

“Temporary,” she told Nebu, or herself, or the room. “We go to court at dawn. I don’t want to arrive haunted.”

Nebu’s eyes softened. “You are already haunted,” he said, but so gently that it landed like kindness. “By questions. By the idea that you are responsible for every hinge in the world.”

“Perhaps,” she allowed. “But some doors are mine.”

“Choose carefully which you close,” he said. “Shutting a door can be a summoning.”

She snorted, and then put the laughter away where it couldn’t be knocked off a shelf. “You are unhelpful and oracular,” she told him. “It’s an attractive combination.”

“Yes,” he said.

She turned down the lamp a fraction. The room withdrew to a smaller radius - desk, bed, wardrobe, the shadow of the chair where no one would sit. The mirror reflected less, which made it friendlier. She tucked the scrap into the back of the journal and laced it there with a charm like a ribbon. It resisted, begrudged the knot, and submitted. She wrote one last line on the page addressed to nobody: **Bring honey.** She added, in smaller script, **Bring humility.** She underlined neither.

Nebu sprang to the windowsill again and melted into the rectangle of night. “Dawn,” he said over his shoulder, which was also his whole body. “He will want to bow to pillars.”

“And you to insult sphinxes,” she said.

“I would never. I only imply.”

He was gone before the shutters could decide whether to creak. The room felt larger without him and less safe, like a stage after the lead exits.

Cassandra washed the cup, because that is what you do when the world is unreasonable. She hung the towel on the back of the chair. She swept the desk with her palm and found three grains of sand that had stowed away from the tomb. She let them fall onto the windowsill and felt foolish when that felt meaningful.

She undid her collar button, which had been biting her all day, and sat on the edge of the bed to take off her boots. The leather had learned Cairo already; it yielded, then remembered London and stiffened out of sheer habit. She lined the boots up parallel to each other and parallel to tomorrow.

When she lay down, the ceiling considered her. A tram clanged, a street dog barked, and someone on the roof above shook a blanket full of day into the evening. The ward at the door gave a small, satisfied click and settled. The mirror stayed a mirror. The journal on the desk breathed like a tiny animal.

From the shutter slats, a last ribbon of air slipped across her face, smelling of river and diesel and the thin metal tang of words. She closed her eyes and thought, not a prayer, but a thesis: *If the dead have opinions, let them be recorded. And let the living have the courage to read them.*

Sleep came in like an archivist: with soft shoes and a list.

Dawn slipped a pale ribbon under Cairo’s eyelids and the city pretended to be surprised to wake up. The guesthouse breathed out the night. Somewhere in the courtyard a faucet coughed itself into a fountain; somewhere on the roof a woman shook a rug and yesterday fell out in a soft red dust.

Cassandra dressed like someone arguing politely with the morning. She chose field robes over something more ceremonial - ink-stained, heat-seasoned, the kind that acknowledged both pillars and sprinting. She buttoned a collar that had already begun to regret being a collar and slid her wand into its holster - a gesture that always felt like putting a thought back where it belonged. Into her satchel went the field journal, the copper tube with Araminta’s insistences, a sheaf of forms clipped so sharply they could be used as weapons, and, because wisdom sometimes arrived in jars, a small glass of honey tucked into a sock.

The street wore dawn’s first grammar: broom-bristle, the hiss of tea sellers over charcoal braziers, the quiet feet of bread deliveries. Wardings over door lintels looked sleepy and then decided against it. Cats wrote their opinions in the dust, edited them, then approved the final draft with a yawn.

The Gringotts carriage waited by the curb like a sensible myth. It was a low, lacquered thing with stubborn wheels and a yoke carved with ibises in the act of remembering they were birds. The real ibises - two of them, long-legged, winged by enchantment and insult - preened beneath the harness and watched the street with priestly disdain. Their feathers were a scholar’s white; the eyes were the exact color of old coins.

“Careful,” called the driver, a goblin with a leather cap and the weathered dignity of a lighthouse. “They like to nip bureaucrats.”

“I brought honey,” Cassandra said, and the nearer ibis unbent its neck in a gesture she could only describe as ‘perhaps we have misjudged you.’

Rahetep emerged from the guesthouse as if he were being introduced by trumpets only he could hear. His bandages were immaculate again - a librarian’s notion of formalwear - and over them he wore a borrowed robe in midnight blue with a collar embroidered in a pattern that kept trying to become a river. On his head he had placed a crown that was either a particularly confident circlet or a faintly embarrassed diadem. It did not fit the era and refused to apologize for it.

“Miss Blythe,” he said, delighted by the morning. “Observe: I am appropriately pillar-facing.”

“You look like a legal argument,” she said, which pleased him.

Nebu strolled behind like a thought that took its time arriving. His tail drew a straight serif through the dust. He did not so much leap into the carriage as appear arranged on its front bench, paws together, whiskers aligned, eyes half-closed in a sliver of contempt that might have been affection in better lighting.

“Shotgun,” he announced.

“You do not have a shotgun,” Cassandra said.

“I have a personality,” he returned, and the driver, to his credit, only adjusted his cap.

Tarek el-Farouk came up the street with his hands in his pockets and the expression of a man who had reached an agreement with dawn that involved not frightening it. He wore linen the color of the soft part of stone and a jacket that could be both formal and breathable. A notebook rode his hip; his pen had elected to be dignified this morning and did not stick out behind his ear.

“Good,” he said, taking in the carriage, the ibis, the crown, the cat, and the woman's eyes that had not slept. “We are either going to court or the opera.”

“Why not both?” Rahetep asked, climbing aboard with the grace of old court training and good ankles.

Tarek offered his hand without making it a question. Cassandra took it because practical kindness was her favorite sub-species of help. He smelled like sandalwood and careful choices.

“Do you have everything?” he asked.

“Forms. Wand. Honey. Cat. Newly awakened monarch,” she said, counting on fingers that preferred quills. “Yes.”

“Courage?” he asked, lighter than the question deserved.

“It’s in the sock with the honey,” she said, and he smiled, which improved the morning by a measurable percentage.

The carriage groaned as they settled - the kind of groan made by furniture that knows it’s in a story - and the driver clucked to the ibises. Wings unfolded. Feathers whispered in a harmony that had known younger rivers. The carriage rose a handspan on enchantment and began to glide.

They moved through Cairo’s first light as if the city were obligingly making a corridor for them. Shopkeepers heaved up half-doors; bakers slid trays of bread from ovens; curses on doorways rearranged themselves to look polite; children invented a game of pointing at the ibis and then running alongside until their parents reeled them back by the syllables of their names. A boy waved with both hands. Rahetep returned the wave with such solemnity that the boy went quiet as prophecy and then laughed as if he had gotten away with something important.

“Your public adores you,” Cassandra said.

“They have taste,” Rahetep replied. “Also curiosity. It is my finest constituency.”

Nebu held himself like an idol in a small temple and surveyed the morning with imperial sloth. “They cheer now,” he said. “Wait until you discuss legal personhood. Nothing dims adoration like a tax bracket.”

“We should have brought the tea cart,” Cassandra murmured, eyes on the forms she could recite by heart now, sixty-seven clauses of them, the way a soldier knows a song about home. “Serve refreshment with ideology.”

Tarek leaned forward slightly to read the top document. “*Application for Temporary Recognition of Post-Mortem Agency.*”

“Form 32-B,” she said. “Subsections Nonviolent, Violent, and Ambiguous Homicidal Tendencies.”

“I ticked ‘Dramatically Polite,’” Rahetep offered.

“I made a new box,” Cassandra said. “The minutes fainted.”

They crossed a square where pigeons held a committee meeting and a man with a radio balanced on a stool tried to make jazz happen at seven in the morning. The music was tin and shimmer; a trumpet thought about becoming a bird and decided against it. The ibises succumbed to it anyway, stepping in time with a grave, clerical syncopation.

“Look,” Tarek said, nodding ahead.

The wizarding quarter peeled back its human face and smiled. Glamours unfurled like awnings: shop signs that had been in Arabic a moment ago now blinked in hieroglyphs, witch-writing, careful English. A broom mender pushed a cart whose spokes were wands reciting multiplication tables under their breath. A scent stall trafficked in more than perfume

- pinches of bottled river, vials of yesterday’s weather. A queue formed outside a scribe’s: ghosts, in neatly folded lines, waiting to have letters written to people who would dream them. The queue was very patient. It had time.

“Are we early or late?” Cassandra asked.

“Yes,” Tarek said.

A trio of Ministry observers appeared at a corner like mushrooms after rain: British robes cut to impress softness onto law, Egyptian robes cut to make dignity practical. They saw the carriage and straightened into positions learned from posture books and judgment. One raised a hand, not to stop them but to direct them, as if the air were theirs to pour.

“Observers,” Cassandra said under her breath. “The human form of footnotes.”

“Wave,” Nebu counseled, “and offer them nothing with a name.”

Cassandra’s hand lifted automatically. The observer’s mouth did an unfortunate thing that might have been a smile. She could already hear Araminta’s voice in that mouth if needed: contain, harmonize, avoid volatile nouns.

They turned onto a road that remembered chariots. The ibises lifted them a little higher over the seams. The street ran a straight line drawn by someone who loved geometry and believed it could persuade people to behave. At the end of the line, catching the early sun with professional grace, rose the Wizarding Court of Cairo.

It was less a building than an argument with time. A sandstone ziggurat climbed the sky in clean, implacable terraces; every tier was carved with hieroglyphs that watched, listened, amended. Pillars marched along the base like a sentence with perfect grammar. A pair of sphinxes flanked the stairs, each with a face that suggested it knew the answer to questions it would not permit an uninteresting person to ask.

Rahetep made a sound that was nearly reverence. He put his hand to his chest; the bandages at his wrist glimmered, just once, replying to an architecture that remembered him. “Ah,” he said, and there was a cup of morning in the syllable. “This is a place that likes to be looked at.”

Cassandra felt the banked air around the ziggurat - a coolness made of old magic and older patience. It smelled of limestone and the sap of papyrus, of ink that had dried on a thousand verdicts and the breath of twenty thousand arguments. The wards around the stairs hummed a low chord like tenors clearing their throats.

“The pillars,” Rahetep said, delighted. “They are excellent.”

“The sphinxes,” Nebu corrected, tail indicating their names in an alphabet no one admitted to reading. “They are not.”

Tarek’s eyes narrowed with fond dislike. “Inspector Mogrim will have been here since before the sun decided whether to rise. He likes to listen to the wards while the city is quiet.”

“Then we will bring him noise,” Cassandra said, and the thought steadied her. She looked at her satchel - the forms, the journal, the socked honey jar clinking like a tiny bell from a very polite church - and then at the stairs, which did not care for anyone’s anxieties and yet had supported them for generations.

The carriage floated to a halt in the dusty crescent at the base of the great steps. The ibises shook out their wings as if folding opinions. The driver secured lines that only pretended to be necessary.

“Best behavior,” Cassandra said, and tipped the honey into the ibis’s beak. It accepted the offering with a sober nod that implied a contract. The second ibis, not to be thought less professional, tapped the jar with its bill. She obliged. Honey sunlighted their tongues; their eyes softened by an increment that only a court stenographer would have recorded.

Rahetep stood with help he didn’t need and offered Cassandra his hand while pretending not to. She took it while pretending she needed it. Nebu leapt lightly to the carriage step, paused, and then sprang to the first stair as if he had invented gravity and was now demonstrating it.

“Do not make puns,” he warned over his shoulder. “They count as lying.”

“I will be extraordinarily sincere,” Cassandra said, gathering the satchel strap, the copper tube, the spine of her will. The Court stood up the stairs like an idea that would not sit down. She looked up, and the morning looked back, and for a second all the noise of Cairo sank away until there was only stone and breath and the problem of names.

Tarek adjusted his jacket, his pen having decided it would, after all, be seen. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” Cassandra said, because courage needed verbs, and stepped forward into the geometry.

The Wizarding Court of Cairo did not merely stand upon the city; it edited it. Each terrace of the ziggurat annotated dawn with sandstone footnotes, and the great stair lifted the street into a sentence that expected to be parsed correctly. By the time Cassandra set her boot on the first step, she could taste the difference in the air: cooler, cleaner, threaded with the dry sweetness of papyrus and the metallic edge of ink. The wards hummed their throat-clearing chord, and the hum traveled up her bones like a reminder to be specific.

The steps were wide enough to carry armies and matters of state, though this morning they carried a crowd that looked like the minutes of an argument - clerks in careful linen with ink on their fingers; Ministry observers wearing authority like a pressed flower; witches with court-basket lunches because trials, like tragedies, are always longer than they ought to be; a smattering of ghosts hovering just high enough to be untrippable; and, sprinkled among them like punctuation that refused to be silent, children. Someone sold sesame pastries from a tray that tried to levitate out of responsibility. Someone else hawked little paper sphinxes that snapped when you touched their ears and then apologized in very decent Arabic.

Nebu, three stairs above Cassandra, moved as if the stone had been laid to flatter him personally. His tail kept impeccable time with the ward-hum. When a clockwork beetle -

evidence that had escaped from a solicitor’s pocket - skittered past, Nebu lifted a paw and allowed it to pass on the condition it never be seen again. The beetle agreed, loudly.

Rahetep paused where the stair opened into a shallow landing and breathed as if drawing the building into himself. His bandages tightened, then eased, listening. The sun lit the temple-sheen on the linen; it made the gold thread at his temples a thin ring of dawn. Around them the murmurs changed key. He was spectacle, yes, but also grammar: the crowd unconsciously adjusted to him, inventing a respectful perimeter without being told. Some bowed and seemed surprised to find their heads had done it. A young court scribe, fist full of quills, brought his fingers to his lips and then, embarrassed by his own piety, fumbled the pens; they scattered; one dove for freedom. Cassandra caught it without looking and returned it with the brusque kindness that becomes legend because people want their stories to be tidy.

“Thank you,” the scribe stammered, then, realizing to whom he had said it, said it again in a softer tense: “Thank you.”

“Write legibly,” Cassandra told him, which he would someday quote as courage.

At the foot of the lion-colored pillars stood the sphinxes, as if an architect had asked the idea of judgment to pose for a sculpture. They were not identical. The sphinx on the left had the weary benevolence of a schoolmaster who knows you are cleverer than your exam; the one on the right had the amused malice of a poet who will cheerfully eat you for a pun. Their manes caught the light in the grooves the chisel had left; their eyes were polished to a depth that reflected people smaller than they were.

As Rahetep came within bowing distance, the left sphinx opened one eye, then the other, like shutters on a very old house.

“Lord Rahetep, Voice of Amun,” it said, and the vowels tasted of sand and water and oaths. “You bring company this time.”

Rahetep placed a hand over his linen-wrapped chest and bowed just enough. “I am brought, venerable one,” he said, court voice ringing effortlessly beneath the pillars. “By law, and by good tea.”

The right sphinx’s lips - stone lips that had no business doing anything but existing - curled a fraction. “Good tea is admissible,” it allowed. “Puns are not.”

Nebu sat, swept his tail over his paws, and arranged his disdain in ascending order. “I have brought neither,” he announced. “I am merely decorative.”

Cassandra bowed her head to the left sphinx the way one greets a librarian who can have you arrested. “Cassandra Blythe, Gringotts. Temporary. Unfortunately.” She held the copper tube behind her back because she did not want to see the way the word CONTAIN would glimmer in that light.

The right sphinx narrowed its eyes as if reading her footnotes. “Miss Blythe,” it said, the *Miss* a precise instrument. “Curiosity precedes you.”

“Curiosity precedes everything,” Cassandra said before she could stop herself. “It’s how verbs happen.”

A soft exhalation went through the crowd - the inhale before a laugh, the sigh after a scolding. The sphinx regarded her for a very long half-second. “We will see,” it said, which is what oracles say when they are being polite.

“Blythe,” said a human voice, thinner than stone and therefore, for the moment, louder.

Inspector Mogrim descended three steps from a side entrance with the careful speed of a man used to moving through rules. He was as Tarek had promised: a lean wizard with a bureaucrat’s neatness made severe by Cairo sun, a monocle that held itself at an angle suggesting it took better notes than its owner allowed, and a suit whose pockets bulged with protractors and procedural bookmarks. He had a cup of something that might have been coffee if you judged by color and the way the air around it refused to admit it existed.

“Inspector,” Cassandra said, and heard herself be less sardonic than habit. Respect is merely accuracy when encountering competence.

“Miss Blythe,” he returned. He flicked a glance over her shoulder; the monocle glinted, pronounced itself satisfied by Rahetep’s posture, and returned to its orbit. “You’ve chosen an hour that will offend the Ministry least.”

“That felt wise,” Cassandra said.

“It is,” Mogrim said. “Come.”

He turned without the ceremonial invitation, which in this court was the ceremonial invitation. Cassandra moved to follow, but the right sphinx spoke again, very softly, and the sound slid cold as a coin under her skin.

“Leave your puns.”

“I’ll try,” Cassandra said.

“Try is a plea,” the sphinx replied. “Do or do not, Miss Blythe.”

“Oh, that’s not fair,” she said - and then wisely shut her mouth as a flake of laughter - Tarek’s - escaped somewhere behind her.

Mogrim led them beneath the eaves of the pillars into a vestibule carved with a history of judgments. Reliefs climbed the walls: scales, keys, feathers, hearts; a procession of defendants, petitioners, supplicants; a goblin magistrate writing on water; a witch weaving time into an evidentiary chain; a merman testifying by way of a bowl. The ward-song changed key. Time adjusted its cuffs.

“Be aware,” Mogrim said without looking back, “that proceedings within the Court observe Dilatory Equilibrium. You may feel… stretched.”

“Like a violin string?” Cassandra asked.

“Like patience,” he said.

Beyond the vestibule, a wide chamber opened, colonnaded like the inside of a breath. Benches banked upward in tiers, populated by assorted law: scribes who could take down a conversation three rooms away; clerks who wore their pens like epaulettes; a battery of Ministry observers, British and Egyptian, who had arranged themselves into a spectrum of disapproval; and at the far left, the press - two wizards with notebooks that already knew what the story would be and a witch whose camera blinked and then pretended not to. At the very front, under a frieze of feathered truths, sat the bench proper: the left sphinx’s twin, larger by the thickness of seriousness, their eyes shut in the particular way that meant they saw more. Between them, an empty dais with the impression of a chair on it. Time would supply the chair once it agreed to.

Tarek slid to Cassandra’s side as if they had rehearsed it. “Breathe,” he murmured.

“I am,” she murmured back. “Unfortunately audibly.”

A clerk in green with a voice like properly sharpened shears rapped the docket slate. “In re: Petition for Temporary Recognition of Post-Mortem Agency, Case Three Two - B.”

“Form,” Cassandra whispered, reflexively.

“Subsection Nonviolent,” the clerk added, without glancing up, as if reading her mind and correcting it to the letter of the law.

“Thank you,” Cassandra whispered to no one, which in a court is the correct addressee.

Mogrim inclined his head toward her, then toward Rahetep, who stepped forward with the nimble grace of someone who had long ago learned how to be seen without being devoured by it. Nebu took the right-hand place like fate uninvited. Cassandra moved to the lectern; it smelled of cedar oil and the worry of a thousand arguments. She set her folder upon it and, with a small, untheatrical motion, slid her journal beside the folder, letting the corner of the hidden fragment of sigil kiss the wood. The fragment hummed once, as if the room had greeted it and then remembered its manners.

“Identity and intent,” the left sphinx said, eyes still closed, voice like water asking a rock for directions.

Rahetep bowed. “I am Rahetep, born under the Third Sun, Son of Keper, Holder of the Second Fan, Inheritor of the Flood, Voice of Amun - ” He hesitated, and the silence caught him like a net and let him down gently. “ - formerly, if you prefer. I intend courtesy.”

A ripple in the back benches tried to be a laugh, reconsidered, and registered itself as admiration to avoid contempt of court.

“Representation,” said the right sphinx.

Mogrim placed his coffee on a ledge that looked very much like it had been designed for that purpose. “The Court recognizes Inspector Mogrim as Counsel for Order,” he said, and then

looked at Cassandra. “And Miss Blythe, temporarily, for… circumstance.”

“Very good,” said the left sphinx, grave as wet stone.

Cassandra cleared her throat, which felt like announcing a war. “For the record, Cassandra Blythe, Curse Division, Gringotts Cairo. I place before the Court application Form Thirty-Two - B, Subsection Nonviolent; supporting attestations from the Cairo Branch Director; preliminary diagnostics under Wand Test Protocol Twelve; and - ” She glanced up at the press and saw, with a small internal hiss of air, that one of the wizards was already headlining this as *THE POLITE MUMMY SEEKS RIGHTS.* The camera blinked again, guilty. “ - and the subject’s own testimony,” she finished, the *subject* tasting like a treason she’d been taught to swallow.

Mogrim stepped to the lectern’s twin and set his fingertips to its edge as if taking a pulse. “The Court will also consider conditions of public order, Ministry statutes concerning the management of volatile narratives - ”

“Language,” murmured the right sphinx.

“ - and community welfare,” Mogrim amended, the monocle approving.

The time-charm tightened. Cassandra felt a minute reach its hands into her pockets and riffle through her coins for the fun of the clink. She breathed into the stretch. The wards bristled, then smoothed, like a cat remembering it is in society.

In the second tier, a British observer cleared his ceremonial throat. “The Ministry would prefer to avoid the term - ”

“Undead,” the right sphinx said, without moving its mouth. The word fell into the room like a law you don’t have to like. “We prefer *breathing-adjacent.* Continue.”

Cassandra bit the inside of her cheeks to keep from smiling. Tarek’s shoulder brushed hers; she did not know whether it was support or a reminder that the ground continued politely to exist.

“The Court will hear testimony,” the left sphinx declared. “Then it will eat lunch. Then it will render preliminary judgment.”

“Efficient,” Rahetep murmured.

“We are old,” said the sphinx. “We learned.” Its eyes opened at last, and the room stepped a fraction closer to what it had always been: a place where words changed how air behaved. “Miss Blythe. Begin.”

The lectern warmed under Cassandra’s palms. She had spent a professional life making sense of the dead without asking permission. She had unpicked wards with kindness because brute force was boring. She had, in London, perfected the art of sounding apologetic while disobeying. Here, beneath pillars that wanted her to mean it, she chose a narrower kind of courage: to be exact.

She spoke the story of the tomb as a sequence of verifiable events, only letting texture in when it behaved. She named dates, signatures, witnesses. She acknowledged Gringotts' custody without pretending it was ownership. She said *resurrection* once, plainly, and let the word sit between the pillars like a chair everyone could see. She did not mention the mirror's breath, the ink that tried to be a mouth, the way the building had opinions; those she wrote instead into the angle of her voice, a notation for anyone listening in more than one direction. When she reached the part about tampered wards and modern sigils disguised as piety, she felt Mogrim's attention change from official to interested. The monocle dilated, thinking.

"Do you have this signature," he asked, not unkindly, "or only the rumor of it?"

Cassandra let herself inhale. She placed one palm on the journal, as if steadying a small creature. "I have a fragment. The rest was spirited away in bank commotion. The fragment was spirited toward me."

"And why toward you," the right sphinx asked, amused.

"Because I am a door," she said, before she could lie. "With warm hinges."

The left sphinx inclined its head by the angle of one feather carved in its mane. "Do not let anyone enter who will not take off their shoes."

"I won't," she promised, and meant anyone, including herself.

A rill of motion moved through the benches. The press scribbled the wrong line. Tarek's pen made a note she would ask about later. Mogrim's mouth did a private thing that might have been agreement.

"Enough," the left sphinx said, and the word closed one stanza and opened another. "Inspector Mogrim, the Court will hear the state of order. Then the subject." Its eyes slid to Rahetep. "And his cat, if he insists."

"His cat contradicts," the right sphinx muttered, with unfeigned respect.

Nebu yawned in a manner that could have emptied shelves. "If the Court wishes."

"Later, then," said the left sphinx, like a promise the room would keep.

They set the rhythm: Mogrim recited law that sounded clean when he said it; the room accepted it the way bodies accept first water. He made space, to Cassandra's surprise, for the possibility that a thing could be both dangerous and deserving. He was not a zealot; he was a custodian. The monocle clicked once, almost approvingly, when he said *community welfare* without irony.

By the time the light in the high windows had moved from white to the gentler brass of almost-lunch, the Court paused. The docket clerk folded his green sleeve, tapped the slate, and the bench's eyes shuttered.

"Adjourned for forty heartbeats," the left sphinx said. "Eat."

It was, for the moment, not up for argument. The room breathed out - rustle of paper, unstoppering of flasks, the small joy of sesame pastries deciding to be eaten. Tarek handed Cassandra half of a date, and she discovered her mouth was capable of sweetness. Mogrim sipped the coffee that had, miraculously, not cooled; perhaps it was afraid of him. Rahetep stood very still and let a patch of sun find his bandages. Nebu stared at the camera until it forgot how to blink.

Cassandra leaned back from the lectern and looked up through the density of the court to the slice of sky framed by the high cornice. It was a perfect, unnecessary blue. She thought of the mirror's fog, of the ward's hum through her bones, of the way the word *contain* had warmed under her thumb. She imagined her name as a small, bright burr and resolved not to leave it in anyone else's thread.

Tarek nudged her with a shoulder. "Still breathing?"

"I always am," she said. "It's tiresome, but I persist."

He almost smiled. "After lunch, they will ask the harder questions."

"Good," she said. "I am tired of the easy ones."

The docket slate rapped again; the bench unshuttered; the room remembered what it was. Mogrim nodded once, functional blessing. Nebu's tail tapped her ankle, which in his language was a vow, an insult, or both.

The left sphinx said, "Proceed."

Rahetep stepped forward into the geometry of judgment, and Cassandra, who had always treated the past like a puzzle and the present like something she could file, set her palms flat on the cedar and said, mostly to herself but also to the building and the day, "I can do this."

The chamber listened as if the word *can* were a key.

Outside, the stair kept its watch. The crowd adjusted its grammar. Lunch retreated to memory. The city, having offered them up to law, went about the business of being Cairo. And Cassandra, with her folder of forms and her socked jar of honey and the burr of her name, lifted her chin to meet the questions that would carry her, whether she wished it or not, out of comedy and into the moral labyrinth that was waiting with very good pillars.

"I've handled worse forms," she added under her breath, and then, because this was a place that required sincerity, she smiled without irony and began.

Chapter 6: The Bureaucratic Afterlife

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The Bureaucratic Afterlife

The ziggurat didn’t so much sit on Cairo as lean over it, like a bureaucrat bending to correct a child’s handwriting. Sandstone terraces rose into the haze, each tier etched with glimmering glyphs that shuffled themselves when you weren’t looking - clauses migrating to more advantageous positions. The heat came in reasonable, stamped sheets; the wind delivered dust by appointment only.

Cassandra tightened her grip on her satchel and tried not to stare as a procession of floating scrolls drifted past like particularly self-satisfied jellyfish. Each wore a red ribbon seal and a tiny monocle. One paused to adjust its own script with a sniff.

“Charming,” she muttered. “The paper here files itself.”

Inspector Mogrim, striding a pace ahead, did not turn. He was all angles and understatement, a man carved to an office specification, his black robe pressed into geometries of disapproval. “Do try to keep up, Miss Blythe. Petitioners who dawdle are rearranged to a more efficient corridor.”

“Rearranged how?”

“Alphabetically, usually.” He flashed the barest ghost of a smile. “By temperament if they resist.”

Behind her, linen rustled like a sigh from a well-bred eternity. Lord Rahetep lifted his bandaged chin to the sun and made a pleased little sound. “Ah. Administration. I knew civilization would not abandon me.”

Nebu padded alongside, tail high, golden fur collecting sunlight as if it belonged to him. “Of course you’re delighted. It smells like dust and authority. Your two favorite things.”

They reached the main stair, wide as a boulevard. As Cassandra set her boot on the first step, the stair rearranged itself with the lazy dignity of a cat turning over. The risers lengthened, the stone softened to a honeyed glow, and an engraved line appeared beneath their feet: APPEALS AND ANOMALIES, PLEASE ASCEND WITH PURPOSE.

“Don’t stop,” Mogrim said, already moving. “If you hesitate, it becomes a spiral. They’re terribly proud of the metaphor.”

Cassandra climbed. Heat radiated from the sandstone into the soles of her boots, and through it a thrum, faint but unmistakable - magic, old and officious, like a heartbeat wrapped in parchment. Every landing held a small ritual. A bronze basin released a puff of steam that

smelled of ink and mint when they passed. A frieze of jackal-headed clerks flickered to life, comparing ledgers and glancing down with the benevolent impatience of gods who once loved paperwork and still felt it had a future.

On the second terrace, a clerk in a fez - no, not a clerk, a hieroglyph of a clerk - stepped cleanly off the wall and bowed. His outlines were strokes of light held together by grammar. “Petitioners for Re-corporealization: present your documentation, your documentation’s documentation, and any living witnesses accustomed to telling the truth.”

“That last requirement will thin the crowd,” Nebu said.

Cassandra reached into her satchel and produced a sheaf of forms embossed with the Cairo branch’s seal and, more questionably, Araminta Voss’s elegant signature. She kept her expression neutral as the glyph-man skimmed them, his eyes ticking through lines at an inhuman clip. At the bottom of the stack, a smaller form - one of Cassandra’s own - hummed under his touch. She’d written it in careful runic shorthand at three in the morning, the ink still smelling faintly of insomnia.

“Acceptable,” the glyph declared. He stamped the air; a neat mark appeared on the topmost page: a tiny cat paw. Nebu preened.

“Is that - ” Cassandra began.

Mogrim cleared his throat. “The Court recognizes felines as officers emeritus. Do try not to antagonize them.”

“I antagonize only amateurs,” Nebu said, and leapt lightly onto the bronze rail to ride it as if he’d ordered it installed.

They passed beneath an arch where words formed a veil. Cassandra felt them brush her skin - definitions of witness, of person, of soul - each a soft pressure like a teacher’s fingertip guiding a line. Her freckles prickled. Beyond, the corridor opened into a hall full of waiting.

The waiting had architecture. Benches arranged themselves according to precedent. People shuffled into categories: spectral, corporeal, administratively complicated. A chandelier of quills rotated gently overhead, shedding a silver dust that settled into hair and sleeves and the edges of doubt. Ghost scribes drifted along the aisles, courteous as midwives.

Cassandra sat where a discreet glowing arrow nudged her. Rahetep took the space beside her with the stately economy of someone who had always been the tallest story in the room. His wrappings were immaculate; she suspected he ironed them with the force of his own self-respect. He adjusted a cuff and murmured, “The hum of this place - do you hear it?”

She did. Beneath the murmur of voices and the scratch of quills, beneath the shuffling of benches self-sorting into a more persuasive arrangement, there was the steady, formal music of enchantments that believed in rules. It soothed and unnerved in equal measure, like a lullaby sung by a judge.

A bell rang. It didn’t sound; it decided. The hall stood at once. A procession entered: robed magistrates with sashes woven from sentences, their collars clipped with brass book-spines. At their center walked a sphinx, her paws silent on the stone, her eyes the color of old amber and the secrets it keeps. She did not look at Cassandra. Cassandra felt looked at anyway - measured, weighed, asked and answered.

“Chief Justice Sekhmet-Re,” Mogrim murmured, inclining his head. “Do not attempt to charm her.”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Cassandra said, too quickly. She could feel Araminta’s signature in the papers at her elbow like a perfume - cool, stainless confidence.

A smaller bell - a decision in miniature - tinked. A handheld lectern floated into Cassandra’s lap, all polished wood and carved margins. A quill slid into her fingers. It fit too well, as if it already knew the speed of her thought.

“State your names for the record,” said a voice that belonged to everyone who had ever read a rule aloud.

Mogrim spoke first. “Inspector Karim Mogrim, Department of Magical Order and Compliance.”

“Cassandra Blythe,” she said. Her voice, amplified, returned to her with a tiny polite cough as the hall wrote it down. “Gringotts Curse-Breaker, London branch, temporary counsel to - ”

“Lord Rahetep,” the mummy said, standing with a grace that shrank the room around him to audience. He bowed to the sphinx with the exact depth owed to the old gods and the modern state. “Former Voice of Amun, presently a citizen of your patience. I am most grateful for the hospitality of my continued existence.”

A ripple went through the hall - amusement, curiosity. A ghost scribe lost his place and had to scratch the air backward to catch up. The sphinx’s whiskers twitched.

“And I,” Nebu said from the rail, not bothering to rise, “am Nebu ben Nefer, registered familiar and auditor of tea quality. I also conduct independent research into human folly.”

“Your credentials are noted,” the everywhere-voice said, with the tone of someone who had seen worse and chose mercy.

Cassandra exhaled. The quill in her hand twitched toward a blank line titled ADMISSIONS AGAINST INTEREST; she pretended not to notice and locked her wrist.

“Petition for Re-corporealization,” Mogrim announced. “The State seeks determination on whether the entity styling himself Lord Rahetep is a person under law with attendant rights, responsibilities, and limitations, or a magical anomaly subject to containment and study.”

“Containment?” Rahetep echoed, lips quirking beneath the linen. “How bracingly modern.”

Cassandra felt the old, familiar heat rise - indignation sharpened into something like courage. She half stood, then forced herself to ease back down. The hall didn’t need speeches yet. It

needed exactness.

A clerk drifted forward bearing a tray of glass cups, each full of an amber liquid that smelled of mint and bureaucracy. The cups circled the room, pausing with flawless courtesy in front of each petitioner. When one reached Nebu, he sniffed it, gave the clerk a look of bleak pity, and batted the cup gently toward Cassandra. “You’ll need it more.”

She lifted it. The first sip tasted like cool stone and fresh ink; behind it, a whisper of sugar. Order, bottled. It steadied her hands.

“Miss Blythe,” Mogrim said, not unkindly, “do you have anything to add before we proceed to preliminary tests?”

“Only this,” Cassandra said, surprised at the evenness of her voice. “He asked for tea before he asked for anything else.”

“That is not probative,” said the everywhere-voice.

“No,” Cassandra said. “It’s human.”

A pause. The chandelier of quills turned once, a slow, thoughtful constellation. Somewhere, one of the migrating clauses on the facade outside settled into place with a contented click.

The bell decided again. Doors at the front drifted open on invisible hinges, and cool air flowed out smelling faintly of papyrus and lightning. The court proper lay within: a theatre for truth, or at least for its best impression.

Mogrim gestured. “With purpose, Miss Blythe.”

Cassandra rose. The lectern followed like a well-trained hound. Rahetep offered her his arm as if they were attending a gala. She took it, because dignity is contagious and she needed the inoculation. Nebu leapt to her shoulder, warm weight and rumbling disdain.

They stepped through the threshold together, into the place where definitions made law and law made either mercy or disaster, and the stone under Cassandra’s boots thrummed its quiet, orderly heartbeat - one-two, one-two - as if to say: speak clearly, and be measured.

The courtroom unfolded like a fan, tiers of stone spreading into a half-circle around a dais engraved with scales and suns. The air was cool as a library at midnight. Enchanted glyphs drifted above the benches and settled where they pleased, as if precedent itself were choosing its seat.

Chief Justice Sekhmet-Re reclined upon the central bench, a sphinx whose mane seemed combed by the desert wind. Her gaze slid over the assembly - the clerks constructed of grammar, the quills orbiting in a slow, judicial constellation, the line of petitioners trailed by their paperwork like bridal trains that suspected annulment.

A whisper rustled the room without moving it. The everywhere-voice - court reporter and chorus - intoned, “Session called. Witnesses of the living and the once-living, be orderly.”

Rahetep inclined his head with the precise courtesy one gave to a god who charged interest. Cassandra felt his arm tense under her hand, not with fear, but with memory. She let go, and her floating lectern settled at her hip like a wooden dog prepared to heel or bite upon command.

Mogrim stepped to a speaking plinth etched with neat boxes, each labeled with a virtue. He placed his hands on “Temperance” and “Relevance.” They glowed politely.

“For the State,” he said, voice dry as a bookmark, “we note the presence of an entity styling himself Lord Rahetep, resurrected from a tomb in the Valley of Kings under circumstances suggesting modern interference. We seek determination as to the entity’s legal personhood or status as an anomalous object. We further seek interim protections to prevent civic panic, cult formation, or unregulated memoir publication.”

A ripple of restrained laughter. The Chief Justice’s tail flicked once - amused, perhaps, or merely reminding the room that she possessed a tail.

Cassandra’s quill twitched in her hand, eager to annotate the air. She placed it in the groove on her lectern to stop it from writing “He asked for tea first” three times in a row.

“Noted,” said the everywhere-voice. “Counsel for the resurrected?”

Cassandra swallowed a mouthful of court tea - order, mint, ink - and stepped forward to a second plinth. Its virtues included “Candor” and “Boundaries.” She rested her fingers on “Candor,” and tried not to think about boundary failures involving ancient gods.

“For the petitioner,” she said, “Cassandra Blythe, Gringotts Curse-Breaker and - temporarily - advocate. We contend that the entity is a person under law, with a coherent identity, memory, and capacity for tea, which we would argue is the most reliable test for civilization. We further submit that his resurrection, while irregular, occurred within a matrix of wards whose modern interference appears aimed not at chaos but at design - someone wanted him awake.”

“Objection,” Mogrim said in the tone of a man who liked a tidy objection before breakfast. “Speculation.”

“Sustained,” said the sphinx, her voice velvet on stone. “You will both confine yourselves to what can be measured and, when necessary, weighed.”

Rahetep stepped without prompting to a third plinth inlaid with lapis lines forming the word TESTIMONY. His hands, immaculate in linen, touched nothing. His voice reached everywhere.

“I am Rahetep,” he said, “who was once the Voice of Amun and now is merely his whisper. My mother named me for the copper light on the river at dawn. My barber knew my secrets. I preferred figs to dates, because dates have ambitions. I remember the last day of my first life: a procession of olive oil, sand, and honey. I remember telling my priests to lock the door and throw away the sun.”

A murmur. One of the ghost scribes paused, then scribbled faster to catch up, ink hissing like rain.

Mogrim’s monocle - no, not a monocle, a truth-lens - clicked softly. “If the petitioner would be so good as to answer a few questions.”

Rahetep turned to him with the patience of a man accustomed to being asked his opinions on eternity and dinner. “Of course.”

“Please state your date of death.”

“Forty-seven years into my reign,” Rahetep said, “on the day the north wind forgot my name.” He glanced at the sphinx. “We called it Shemu - the harvest season. Our accountants marked it with red ink and gratitude.”

“Translate into standard calendar,” the everywhere-voice requested, without malice.

Rahetep inclined his head. “Your clerks have the conversion from the stela in my funerary chapel. If I attempt it aloud I will offend mathematics.”

Cassandra’s lectern obligingly projected a neat overlay of dates and dynastic counting; the court quills took the correction with prim satisfaction.

“Thank you,” Mogrim said. “During your reign, did you sanction the crafting of a spell known as the Breath of Amun?”

A change in the room’s glue. Cassandra felt it in the fine hairs on her arms, the way paper feels a storm. The sphinx’s eyes dimmed and brightened as if she had blinked a constellation.

Rahetep did not look away. “I sanctioned the sealing of it. I do not deny the arrogance of my youth; I embraced it as a sport. But that day I learned to fear a kind of light.”

“Fear,” Mogrim repeated, mild. “From a monarch who claims to have dismissed the sun.”

“I did not dismiss it,” Rahetep said, “I gave it a day off.”

A faint cough of laughter in the benches, quickly swallowed. Nebu, draped along Cassandra’s shoulders like living gold trim, yawned.

Mogrim’s hands shifted to touch “Accuracy.” “Did you intend your preservation to result in resurrection upon the breaking of your tomb’s wards?”

“No,” Rahetep said. “I intended my body to be an archive for scholars of the afterlife. I am, as it happens, an excellent archive.”

“Self-assessment is not evidence,” Mogrim said dryly.

“It is, in monarchs,” Rahetep replied. “We were our own metadata.”

“Answer stands, with a note,” the sphinx said, a purr under her words.

Mogrim turned a page that wrote itself as he read from it. “Records from the unsealing indicate that when Miss Blythe addressed you, the hieroglyphs on your wrappings pulsed responsively to her voice. Explain that.”

Cassandra felt the room angle toward her. She held her breath until she realized holding her breath would be recorded under “Suspicious.”

Rahetep’s eyes, dark as old resin, softened. “Language recognizes the hand that holds it. The witch speaks Runes as if they were a first instrument. My wards - my body’s walls - recognized a familiar musician.”

“That is not an answer,” Mogrim said.

“It is the answer you have,” Rahetep said, courteous as a blade.

“Allow me,” Cassandra said, stepping in before the tone could stiffen to breakage. “The wards were layered with phoneme triggers keyed to ancient pronunciations. When I spoke certain root-forms, they interacted. It’s less mystery than mechanics. Although” - she glanced at Rahetep - “I’ll concede the musician metaphor is prettier.”

Nebu’s whiskers tickled her jaw. “You see what I endure,” he stage-whispered to the nearest clerk. “They flirt with etymology.”

“Order,” the everywhere-voice said, managing to sound entertained by the concept.

Mogrim made a small mark that smelled like approval held at arm’s length. “Very well. The Court will now administer preliminary verity measures.”

A clerk as thin as a bookmark floated forward bearing a bowl of water so clear it recast the world into truths. Beneath the surface, letters formed and unformed: names of laws, names of people, the delicate calligraphy of consequence. The clerk offered the bowl to Rahetep.

“Please place your hand,” Mogrim said. “Speak your name and purpose. The water reveals inconsistency.”

Rahetep did not hesitate. He unwrapped a palm with the gravitas of a high priest and laid it upon the surface. The water did not ripple; it inhaled. Letters swam toward his skin as if to be chosen.

“I am Rahetep,” he said, “once Pharaoh, now petitioning for the right to be a person and not a problem.”

The bowl glowed with a quiet, domestic light - the color of honey in late afternoon. Glyphs aligned into a neat line that translated itself politely for the living: CONSISTENT ENOUGH TO PROCEED.

The court murmured. A spectral scribe lost his quill and found it again in the nick of time, and in that brief chaos a teacart - self-propelled, bustling with civic zeal - trundled in from a side door. It had opinions about saucers. It delivered them liberally.

“Refreshment is not yet scheduled,” the everywhere-voice said, scandalized.

“I respect an independent institution,” Nebu said, hopping lightly to the cart’s handle and riding it for a dignified meter before alighting. The cart poured him a cup anyway. He sniffed. “Acceptable. Barely.”

The sphinx regarded the teacart. Her mouth might have smiled, which for a cat is a philosophical concession.

Mogrim gestured for the bowl to be presented to Cassandra. She blinked. “I’m not the petitioner.”

“You are a witness,” he said, and this time there was nothing of bureaucracy in his voice - only a man’s interest in whether another person would tell the truth when it mattered. “Name and purpose.”

Cassandra’s fingers were damp before they touched water. She set her palm to the surface. It was cold with attentiveness.

“I am Cassandra Blythe,” she said. “I’m here to ensure that being extraordinary doesn’t mean being property.”

The bowl flashed, not bright, but clear, the way a window cleaned after years of smoke surprises you with the rest of the world. The glyphs assembled with almost indecent efficiency: HONEST. OVER-INVESTED. WATCH HER.

“Rude,” Cassandra muttered.

“Accurate,” Nebu purred.

“Proceed,” said the sphinx, amusement now unhidden.

The bowl turned toward Mogrim. He laid two fingers on the surface as if acknowledging an old colleague. “Karim Mogrim. I am here to prevent the law from becoming theater.”

The bowl’s answer slid together like a well-argued motion: HONEST. LIKES THEATER SECRETLY. PRETENDS OTHERWISE.

A visible almost-laugh crossed his mouth. “Strike the addendum,” he said.

“Denied,” the sphinx said, and her tail flicked again, lazy lightning.

The verity bowl retreated. The court felt different now - less a room full of strangers, more a table where everyone had admitted a little of themselves and found the table remained. The anywhere-voice, softened despite itself, announced, “Preliminaries complete. The Court will hear opening positions.”

Mogrim bowed an angle. “The State maintains that resurrection destabilizes precedent, tempts the unwary to dangerous magic, and invites opportunists. We request a temporary

confinement order pending full examination of the tomb wards and any third-party tampering."

Cassandra stepped forward. Her lectern leaned in like a friend. "The petitioner is a person. He remembers, chooses, learns, and refuses to weaponize his own allure. Confinement would treat a citizen as an artifact. That's not order - that's theft with paperwork."

She felt the room listening, not because she was loud, but because she had said the word artifact and meant it with disgust. A goblin observer two rows up nodded, once.

Rahetep did not grandstand. He only said, "If you must confine me, choose a cell with a window. The last time I was trapped without a view, a civilization appeared and vanished outside and I missed the joke."

"Enough," the sphinx said gently, which is how a mountain tells a river to curve. "We are not gods today. We are careful. Inspector, Miss Blythe - you may call your first witness."

Mogrim adjusted his files. "The State calls the unsealer: Miss Blythe."

"Oh, splendid," Nebu said. "We get to cross-examine our own hubris."

Cassandra stepped to the circle of testimony, the court's breath cool on her cheek. The quills stilled, awaiting her first word. Outside, far above, clauses slid across sandstone and clicked into grammar as the day turned. Inside, she filled her lungs with mint and ink, and began.

The circle of testimony warmed under Cassandra's boots as if the stone liked participants who said interesting things. Her lectern hovered shoulder-high, angled obligingly; the groove for the quill glinted like a small expectant mouth.

Mogrim began without malice, which somehow felt worse. "Miss Blythe, describe the moment of unsealing in your own words. Spare us the romance; keep the runes."

Cassandra nodded. The court loosened around her, a theater prepared to become a lab. "At dawn we opened the outer wards with standard Gringotts redundancies - counter-curses woven in threes. The tomb's primary seal was an age-set matrix keyed to a calendrical engine - solar, not lunar - which is unusual for that region and period. There were also phoneme triggers - hieratic roots masked as decorative script. When I spoke the second counterphrase, the lid slid open on its own. Lord Rahetep sat up and asked for tea."

A murmur - smile-shaped, mostly. Rahetep inclined his head in acknowledgment of the record.

"Resultant magic?" Mogrim prompted.

"No blast. No miasma, no wail. The wards changed state rather than discharged. They… listened." Cassandra's hands drew shapes in the air that only people who loved grammar would recognize: stems, branches, vowels folding into baskets. "The glyphs responded to my pronunciation. Some of them retranslated along my accent lines."

"Which accent, precisely?" Mogrim's eyebrow tilted.

“Academy Received, tempered by Cairo field usage. Mostly mine.”

“And is ‘mostly mine’ a technical term?”

“It is now,” Cassandra said, and caught herself, and added, “I can provide my notation if the Court prefers… fewer adverbs.”

A ghost scribe released a sigh of ink that could have been fondness. The sphinx’s eyes narrowed in a way that meant she’d enjoyed something against her will.

Mogrim’s truth-lens clicked. “At what point did you suspect tampering?”

“On first inspection of the sarcophagus lip. There were micro-etchings on the underside - too regular for hand-cut. Goblin work or someone imitating goblin precision badly.”

“Speculation,” Mogrim said.

“Observation,” Cassandra replied, heat rising, but not the hot-headed kind; the kind that came from the friction of two minds who would both rather be right than be liked. “The etchings had a repeat interval of exactly seven breaths. Goblin smiths calibrate to breath when they can’t get a pendulum in - less interference. Humans are sloppier. Present company excepted.”

A goblin in the gallery coughed, which for a goblin was applause.

“Noted,” the everywhere-voice said, with a hint of dry relish. “Proceed, Inspector.”

Mogrim paced the edge of the circle, never stepping inside. “Did you, at any point, place or authorize the placement of modern runes within the tomb?”

“No.”

“Did any Gringotts agent?”

“I can’t answer for the entire bank.”

“That is both true and convenient,” Mogrim said, but not unkindly. He tapped his plinth’s “Relevance.” “Describe the moment the petitioner first spoke.”

Cassandra looked at Rahetep, whose linen-wrapped profile was as calm as good handwriting. “He sat up and said, ‘Would someone kindly explain why my nap has been interrupted?’ Then he asked for tea. Then he apologized to a collapsing tent.”

“Tone?” Mogrim asked.

“Civil. Dry. Disorientingly articulate.” She glanced at the sphinx. “He presented as a person, not a phenomenon.”

“The Court will draw its own conclusions,” the sphinx said, though her tail made a small concession curve.

Mogrim’s lens clicked again. “Miss Blythe, when you say the glyphs responded to your accent, do you mean the wards were keyed to you?”

She hesitated, not at the thought, but at the weight of the room leaning toward it. “I mean that my voice was a fit for their key. Mine, or any voice trained similarly. The tomb wanted understanding, not ownership.”

“Poetry,” Mogrim said.

“Mechanics,” Cassandra said.

“Very pretty mechanics,” Nebu observed, rearranging himself across her shoulders so that his chin balanced on the lectern, a brass bookend come to life. “She’s avoiding saying the thing everyone’s avoiding.”

Mogrim’s gaze did not quite leave Cassandra’s, but his next words were for the room. “Let us say it, then. If Gringotts - or an agent thereof - tampered with the wards, then the resurrection is not natural consequence but engineered event. And engineered events tend to come with invoices.”

Cassandra exhaled. “If my employer did this - if - then I was not informed. I am not in the habit of lying to sphinxes.”

“Good,” the Chief Justice said, almost lazily, which in a cat is a benediction.

Mogrim inclined his head. “No further questions for this witness at present.”

The anywhere-voice turned the page of the air. “Cross-examination? By counsel for the petitioner?”

Cassandra blinked. “I’m… cross-examining myself?”

“You could,” Nebu said, “but you’d only win on points.” He tapped the lectern with a velvet paw. “Ask him.”

Cassandra looked to Rahetep. The court did, too, the way a flock looks when one bird rises. He stepped into the circle without waiting to be called, which should have been improper, and somehow wasn’t. The circle liked him.

Mogrim did not object. He simply slid his plinth half a degree, aligning virtues like mirrors.

“Lord Rahetep,” Cassandra said, and heard her voice steady into the timbre she used for recitations and goodbyes. “When you woke, what did you feel first?”

“Dry,” Rahetep said. Laughter, small and relieved, and then he continued, and the room quieted. “And then - measured. As if a very polite universe had counted my atoms and found them acceptable.”

“Did you expect to wake?”

“I expected to be preserved,” he said. “I expected scholars and thieves and arguments. I did not expect mint tea.”

“Did you know the wards would respond to my voice?”

“No,” he said, and there was not a ripple in the verity of it. “But I knew they would respond to meaning. We made them to prefer understanding. In my arrogance I thought that would keep fools out.” He inclined his head to Cassandra. “We did not account for a scholar who is not a fool.”

“Flattery is not evidence,” Mogrim murmured.

“It oils the hinges,” Rahetep said.

Cassandra leaned into the question that had been tapping her ribs since dawn. “Who designed the phoneme triggers?”

“I did,” Rahetep said simply. “With my priests. We bound them to names that were already old when I was new.”

“So when I spoke - ”

“You spoke with respect,” he said, and if there was a softness there, it belonged to the record now. “Respect is the oldest spell.”

The everywhere-voice cleared its throat into a paragraph. “The Court will note the petitioner’s aphorism and not be swayed by it.”

“Noted,” said the sphinx, with half a smile.

A clerk drifted forward with a tray of rune-etched shards - thin flakes of gold leaf, each inscribed so fine the writing looked like a shimmer rather than script. “Exhibit A,” Mogrim said. “Recovered from the sarcophagus lip.”

The clerk tipped the tray and a shard slid into the circle, catching the light like a caught breath. Cassandra’s hands prickled. The etching wasn’t merely precise; it was layered, lines of meaning stacked like pastry. And under the old work… there, a second signature, faint as a rumor.

“May I?” Cassandra asked.

“Carefully,” said the sphinx.

She crouched, the court’s cool air brushing her neck. The shard smelled of metal and old honey. She didn’t touch it - she hovered her fingertips over the surface and let her magic warm, the way one warms hands above a fire. Lines rose, responsive to attention. The top layer spoke Rahetep’s dynasty in crisp, conservative strokes. Beneath, thread-thin, a modern weave: a stabilizing lattice and - oh -

“Something?” Mogrim asked.

“Someone added a resonance scaffold,” Cassandra said slowly. “A net to catch a returning soul if the main wards were breached. But it’s not a necromancer’s weave; it’s logistical. Calibrated to hold a state, not create it. Whoever did this wanted continuity, not chaos.”

“Or control,” Mogrim said.

“Those are cousins,” Nebu purred.

Cassandra’s breath fogged the gold. Letters - no, not letters, intention - flickered between scripts, momentarily undecided what language would best be believed. Old Kingdom formal. Coptic. Goblin counting marks. Then, briefly, English, thin as a whisper: INVESTMENT.

The shard went still, innocent as coin.

Cassandra rocked back on her heels. “Did anyone else see that?”

“I saw your face,” Mogrim said, and his monocle made a small, interested sound.

“Miss Blythe?” the everywhere-voice prompted like a butler who has found contraband on the salad.

“An English word appeared,” Cassandra said. “Investment.”

A rustle moved through the benches; even the quills paused, feather-tips quivering.

Mogrim did not look at her when he asked, which made it kinder. “Your superior’s name, again?”

“Araminta Voss,” Cassandra said, and she heard the tremor she hadn’t heard earlier, the tremor she would rather have swallowed. “But an English word in a ward isn’t proof of - ”

“It’s proof of intention,” Mogrim said. “And institutions. They love investments.”

A sound like rain distracted them - the gentle patter of liquid against parchment. All eyes turned. The teacart had returned with a zeal that would have impressed armies. Something had gone wrong with its spout; the little metal mouth had decided to interpret “pour” as “baptize.” A thin amber river cascaded from it, pattering across the State’s bench, sluicing over Mogrim’s neatly stacked filings.

“By all that is docketed,” the everywhere-voice breathed, scandalized.

Mogrim stepped back with the reflexes of a man who has practiced keeping his shoes dry at chaos scenes. “Who requisitioned this… appliance?”

“It requisitioned itself,” Nebu said, delighted. “A unionized teacart. I approve.”

Cassandra flicked her wand. A sibilant charm turned the worst of the flood into harmless steam, which rose with a scent like candied ink. The rest pooled in a dignified puddle shaped, unfortunately, like a question mark at the foot of the State’s plinth.

“Apologies,” she said, because sorry was a lubricant in rooms like this. “May I?”

“Do,” Mogrim said, grim because the papers were damp and because something else had just become wet: the thin barrier between comedy and suspicion. He lifted a dripping page and a line of runes bled sideways, changing meaning as the ink found new neighbors.

The court gasped, a low human sound under all the magic.

“Freeze,” the sphinx said, and the room obeyed. Not metaphorically. Time stopped like a breath caught. Steam hung mid-curl, a bead of tea paused mid-tip from saucer edge. Cassandra felt her heart continue because it belonged to her and not to the room. She looked up into the clean stillness and saw the glyphs on the exhibit shard light, just for her, just long enough to make a promise she did not want.

The promise that language itself had been tampered with.

When the sphinx released them, the world resumed with exquisite politeness. Tea finished falling. Steam continued curling. The everywhere-voice coughed up its composure. “Chief Justice?”

“Clerks,” the sphinx said, voice like velvet over a sword, “fetch the resurrection record. We will read the tomb’s own minutes.”

A door in the dais opened. Two ghost scribes floated out bearing a scroll the size of thrift. It unrolled of its own accord, pages breathing like a sleeping creature. The writing didn’t sit; it moved - columns of hieroglyphs translating themselves as they were read.

The sphinx lowered her head and began: “Record of Binding, Record of Sleep, Record of - ” She stopped. The script beneath her eyes wavered, then slid with quick, guilty grace into a different set of signs. Not random. Selected. The court watched language decide to be something else.

Old Egyptian. Demotic. Goblin ledger marks. English. Back again. The scroll was a diplomat, flattering each authority in turn.

Mogrim’s jaw tightened. “Miss Blythe?”

Cassandra’s mouth had gone dry. “It’s not only the shard. The record is wearing layers.”

“Who wears layers?” Nebu breathed, and for once there was nothing of jest in him. “Those who wish to be loved by everyone.”

“Or obeyed,” Mogrim said.

The sphinx’s eyes glowed from within, a heat that belonged to deserts and editors. “Enough.” The word leashed the scroll. The letters stilled, then shuddered, then held like soldiers caught in a lie.

“Explanation,” she said, not to Mogrim, not to Cassandra, but to the room, to the idea of manipulation itself. “Now.”

Silence, and then the smallest drip from the last teacart spill.

Cassandra swallowed. Her mind wanted to run in six directions; she chose one and made it a road. “Someone built a second language into the tomb’s record,” she said. “A palimpsest designed to be legible to whichever authority reads it - priest, accountant, banker. It isn’t just translation; it’s persuasion.”

“Who benefits?” Mogrim asked.

“Those who convince others that resurrection is orderly,” she said. “Those who sell it that way.”

The word hung: sell. It did not quite echo. It did not need to.

The sphinx’s tail cut the air once, with a sound no human ear should have been able to hear. The everywhere-voice whispered, “The Court acknowledges evidence of linguistic interference of modern design.”

Rahetep had been very still, a statue remembering breath. He looked, not at the sphinx, not at the clerk, but at Cassandra. “Be careful,” he said, quite softly. “Language is a mirror with one side silvered. If you look too long you begin to reflect yourself instead of truth.”

Cassandra nodded, and the nod turned into something that might one day be a bow. Her quill, in the lectern groove, twitched and wrote two words of its own accord, as if all instruments in this room were tired of waiting for the living:

WHO’S INVESTED?

Ink glistened. The Court saw. And comedy, which had charmed the morning, took a dignified step backward to make room for the larger animal entering the room: consequence.

The bell decided again.

Its note went out over the courtroom like an instruction to behave, and the magic that regulated the place - tidy as accounts, invisible as a habit - shook itself and missed a step. Time did not stop. It forgot, briefly, who went first.

Cassandra felt it as a stagger in the air, like a dancer miscounting and then brazening through. The quills in the chandelier slowed to a stately waltz; the steam from the teacart streaked into quicksilver threads; one clerk’s blink took a thoughtful minute. Somewhere a cough expanded into a paragraph.

“Hold,” said Chief Justice Sekhmet-Re, but the command reached different people at different speeds. A wizard in the third row froze with his mouth open around the word objection, which crawled out of him syllable by syllable, shy as a tortoise. Meanwhile a ghost scribe finished three pages’ worth of minutes in what, to his own sense of self, was an efficient second.

Mogrim checked his pocket watch. The hands spun, considered the matter, and wrote “soon” where the minutes should have been.

“Time-dilation wards are misaligned,” he said, voice steady in the wobble. “No panic.”

“It wasn’t on my calendar,” Nebu observed, grooming his shoulder at a leisurely century per lick. Then, brightly, in a staccato that sliced through the syrup, “Apologies. Couldn’t resist a different cadence.”

The sphinx’s eyes narrowed. She pressed her paw on a sigil carved into the dais. The court’s breath shortened and found a rhythm again, mostly. The air still lagged at the corners, like a curtain refusing to settle.

“Proceed,” she said. “But carefully.”

Mogrim touched “Temperance” and “Precision” on his plinth at once, as if belting himself in. “The State would like the record to show that the resurrection record - ” he nodded at the enormous scroll - “has already exhibited active linguistic adaptation under unknown authority. The temporal misalignment may be related.”

Cassandra’s lectern hummed. Her quill, which had written WHO’S INVESTED?, now trembled with an impulse to undercut the universe with clarifying footnotes. She kept it in its groove.

“The Court will note the correlation,” said the everywhere-voice, recovering dignity with the air of a cat standing up as if it meant to fall off that windowsill all along.

Rahetep stepped to the edge of the testimony circle by instinct - he had the instincts of a person who had practiced being observed. His linen lay in immaculate lines. When he breathed, one could almost imagine that he needed to.

“Lord Rahetep,” Mogrim said, “with the Court’s indulgence, a question of framing.”

“Frame away,” Rahetep said, and behind the silk of his voice there was iron. He knew the weight of frames.

“In your first statement,” Mogrim went on, “you described your resurrection as a ‘clerical error’ - ”

Rahetep inclined his head a degree. “A modest jibe.”

“ - yet the evidence suggests that modern agents designed reinforcement to guide that error toward continuation. How do you reconcile the jest with the architecture?”

Rahetep’s eyes, dark as dried ink, warmed. “By calling it what it is. I did not crawl out of the earth because a clerk mislaid a form. I was pulled, gently, by a net designed for catching souls without bruising them.” He looked toward the shard on the tray, its gold still faintly perfumed with honey. “Your net smells of coin.”

The chuckle that moved through the benches carried less humor than agreement. Cassandra felt heat rise in her chest - anger on behalf of him, on behalf of anyone turned into a ledger entry.

“Inspector.” She turned toward Mogrim, not combative now, only exact. “You said earlier you dislike the law becoming theater.”

“I did,” he said.

“Then allow me to give you the least theatrical sentence I can: If we call this a ‘clerical error,’ we will obscure a design. If we call it ‘destiny,’ we will sanctify a purchase. We cannot permit either.”

Mogrim’s mouth ticked. Respect and irritation are cousins; both visited. “Concur in principle.”

“In practice?” Cassandra asked.

“Practice requires we separate person from plan,” he said. “I will not let stagecraft make a citizen, nor a citizen excuse stagecraft.”

“Inspector,” the sphinx said, “you may sit in my chair when you tire of yours.”

“I am perfectly content where I am,” Mogrim said, which meant he had been flattered and was resisting the itch to purr.

The time-dilation wards hiccuped again. A rustle of pages became a waterfall, then an eddy, then a page simply reversed itself halfway and sat there, half right, half left. The resurrection scroll’s columns, as if emboldened by the room’s uneven pulse, shifted. Glyphs slid into English, into Gobbledegook ledger marks, into a neat set of modern runes that would have been very comprehensible to a Gringotts auditor. One heading flashed in all the scripts, a coy curtsey to clarity:

VERDICT DRAFT.

The word draft was not reassuring.

“Who authorized the record to propose outcomes?” the everywhere-voice demanded, his composure wounded in its best suit.

“No one sane,” Nebu said.

“Clerks,” the sphinx said, velvet cut with command. “Pin it.”

Ghost scribes darted like minnows. They pinned the scroll’s edges with needles made of grammar. The letters shivered and tried to look innocent. The heading held, faintly smug.

Cassandra stepped closer, ignoring the way the air at the edge of the dais went slow, and read aloud as the scripts rotated under her eyes.

“‘Provisional determination: Entity exhibits person-like traits; recommend containment with privileges; review asset potential.’” Her voice thinned on the last two words. “Asset potential.”

A goblin in the gallery made a low sound that might have been the opposite of laughter. Mogrim’s lenses flashed.

“The Court does not accept recommendations from records,” the sphinx said, and the quiet threat of it moved through the room like the shadow of a hawk over a field.

“Records are supposed to preserve,” Cassandra said, unable to help herself, “not propose.”

“They propose when bribed,” Nebu murmured.

“Who bribes a scroll?” someone in the benches whispered.

“Everyone who has ever wanted history to be kinder,” Nebu said.

Mogrim gestured, and the verity bowl glided to the edge of the dais. “If the record will not stay still,” he said, “we will ask the room.”

He dipped two fingers into the water. “Is there external magic currently acting to bias the Court’s instruments toward a predetermined outcome?”

The water thought, which to watching eyes looked like light deciding. Then a line formed, plain as a posted notice: YES.

“What is the source?” Cassandra asked, knowing the bowl would not give her a name - but maybe it would give a direction.

The glyphs reorganized: NON-LOCAL. MULTI-SIGIL. INSTITUTIONAL.

Mogrim breathed out through his nose. “That’s polite for ‘more than one party, none of them small.’”

The time wards steadied a fraction, as if grateful to have been asked a sensible question. Cassandra turned to the Chief Justice. “Your Honor, I move that we treat the record as tainted. That we rely on live testimony and independent measures, not anything compiled by the tomb or its handlers.”

“Granted,” said the sphinx, without delay. Her tail curved lazily, a signature under a decree. “We will not hear verdicts from parchment.”

The heading VERDICT DRAFT smudged, sulked, and finally blurred into a neutral line of dots.

“Very well,” Mogrim said, gathering himself. “Then the State will return to what we can know.”

He faced Rahetep. “Petitioner, state for the Court, in unadorned terms, why you wish to be considered a person under law.”

Rahetep did not look at the scroll. He looked at Cassandra, then at the sphinx, then at the balcony where the goblin scowled with the dignity of labor. He folded his hands in front of

him and spoke without tremor.

“Because I learn,” he said. “Because I can be persuaded. Because I change when someone I respect says a true thing. Because I ask for tea and not conquest. Because I am embarrassed by my younger self, praise my elders, and worry about my cat.” His linen crinkled at the corners of his eyes; humor without gloss. “Because when I see suffering, I do not calculate its asset potential.”

No quill moved. Even the chandelier admired that.

Mogrim, to his credit, did not flinch. “And if the Court determines that your continued presence increases the likelihood that others will attempt dangerous resurrections?”

“Then the Court should regulate resurrections,” Rahetep said, “not rename me an object.”

Cassandra’s throat tightened. She had not known how much she needed him to be that simple and that exact.

The sphinx’s gaze had sharpened during the speech - not hostile, but keen, as if she had found a vein of ore and was testing it for purity. “Inspector,” she said, “your interim request?”

Mogrim straightened a stack of damp papers that weren’t truly there anymore, just habits laying their hands on his fingers. “The State requests a temporary order of supervised movement for the petitioner within Cairo’s magical quarter, nightly curfew, and prohibition against engaging in public spectacle - ”

Rahetep inclined his head in a manner that translated to both gracious and I will do as I please. “Define spectacle.”

“Anything that attracts more than twelve onlookers,” Mogrim said, and the room couldn’t help it; it laughed.

Cassandra raised her hand, caught the sphinx’s nod. “Your Honor, I counter-propose supervised movement without curfew. The petitioner is not a hazard of his own will. He is a hazard in the hands of those who would monetize him. Locking him away increases that value.”

“Miss Blythe,” Mogrim said, “you are arguing that transparency protects him.”

“I am arguing that sunlight is safer than vaults,” she said, and swallowed what it tasted like to say it in front of a goblin.

The time wards slipped again - only a step, a sway. In that tilt, the light on the stone shifted, and Cassandra saw it: a hairline of script along the dais base, so fine it had hidden as decoration. Modern runes dressed as lotus petals. She scanned, heart punching once.

“Mogrim,” she said, low. “There.”

He followed her gaze, then moved with deceptive laziness to the dais’s edge. He crouched, palm hovering over the stone. “Affixed within the last year,” he murmured. “Elegant little

liars.”

“Clerks,” the sphinx said without being told what had been seen. “Scalpel.”

A ghost scribe floated down with a letter-opener shaped like a scrap of night. Mogrim slid it under the line of runes and levered, gently. The dais made a sound like a swallowed laugh. The strip peeled up, revealing the clean stone beneath - old, unadorned, true.

The air evened. The chandelier’s quills resumed their quiet circle. The steam curled at a sensible rate. Time remembered the steps.

“Remove all such additions,” the sphinx said, and the clerks moved - now, properly, beautifully - at the speed of competent outrage.

The everywhere-voice cleared his throat. “Given the discovery of external influencing sigils and the tainting of the record, this Court will adjourn for recalibration and cleansing of chambers.”

A low exhale moved through the room, relief spiced with the bite of unfinished business.

“Before we adjourn,” the sphinx said, soft enough to make everyone listen harder, “the Court will note one thing.”

She looked at Rahetep. “You asked for tea before you asked for anything else.”

“It is a civilizing ritual,” he said.

“It is,” she agreed. “We are civilized. We will be careful.” Her gaze cut to Cassandra, then to Mogrim. “You will both return at sundown with your proposed safeguards. Between now and then, speak to each other rather than around.”

“Understood,” Mogrim said.

“Yes, Your Honor,” Cassandra said, and glanced at him, a hand’s breadth of something like alliance between them. He tipped his head; they had found a thin bridge.

The bell decided for the last time, today. Doors unlatched. The benches rearranged themselves into exits. The quills drifted up into a turnkey constellation and dimmed.

Nebu stretched, a sinuous filament of gold. “Sundown, then,” he said. “I suggest a nap. For justice.”

Rahetep offered Cassandra his arm with the ritual elegance of a man who had once been ceremony. She took it, because her knees liked the idea, and because to be dignified together was an argument of its own.

They stepped into the corridor where the air smelled of mint and ink and the stone’s heart beat at an even, reasonable pace. Behind them, the clerks went at the dais with grammar scalpels and offended efficiency. Ahead, Cairo waited with its brass and noise and sunlight.

“Miss Blythe,” Mogrim said, falling into step. His tone had the sanded edge of respect. “Whatever we disagree on, we agree on this: the record will not write our verdict for us.”

“Good,” she said. “I am tired of being footnoted.”

“Impossible,” Nebu said, and butted his head against her shoulder. “You’re the main text. Try to act like it.”

She snorted, abruptly lighter. “I’ll make an effort.”

Outside, the city gleamed. The day had not been fixed. But it was, at least, running on time again. And somewhere between the sphinx’s promise and the strip of false runes in Mogrim’s pocket, Cassandra felt a shift inside herself: from the itch to solve to the determination to protect.

Small difference. Large consequence.

The court dissolved into purposeful bustle: clerks gliding like punctuation through air grown busy with verbs; quills settling into their roosts; the great scroll mummified under grammar pins. The adjournment bell left a taste of metal on the tongue. Cassandra, Rahetep, and Nebu stepped into the corridor where the walls wore inscriptions like a library wearing jewelry.

“Two hours,” Mogrim said, falling into step. “Sundown convening. Do not leave the building without signing the intention log.”

“I always declare my intentions,” Rahetep said. “It saves time for the poets later.”

“You, I will believe,” Mogrim replied. To Cassandra: “We’re cleansing the chamber. Independent sigil sweep will take the first hour. The second is yours if you want it.”

“For…?” Cassandra asked, though her bones already knew.

“Records,” he said. “You’re a curse-breaker. Break whichever administrative curse you find - without breaking the administration.”

His mouth twitched. It was almost a smile and almost a warning. He handed her a laminated token etched with the court’s seal - a stylized eye balanced on a set of scales - and a folded slip stamped TEMPORARY ARCHIVAL PRIVILEGES, which in Cairo might as well have been a love letter.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Miss Blythe,” he added, softer, “if you happen upon anything that throws light on who is… invested - share it.”

The word steepled itself between them. It didn’t need italics. She nodded. “If I find anything that burns, you can have half the ashes.”

“Good girl,” Nebu said, and resettled himself over her shoulders like an arrogant shawl. “Lead on, scholar.”

The archival corridors ran cool and unhurried behind the public chambers, a spine of stone rooms with doors labeled in elegant scripts: TESTIMONY TRANSFER; PETITIONS (SENTIMENTAL); EVIDENCE INDECISIVE; TEA (CONFISCATED). The air smelled of papyrus and old magic - a dry, respectable smell, like a librarian who wore perfume only to court.

A ghost scribe glided past pushing a trolley piled high with rolled minutes, their ends tied with red ribbon that tied itself tighter when she looked. Cassandra flashed her token. The scribe peered at it with the wary politeness of someone who had seen many tokens and was not impressed by any, then gestured toward a side door with a quill-tip that had written entire quarrels in its day.

Inside: the Adjudicator’s Loom.

It was not a loom for cloth. It was a loom for stories. Threads of light - the testimonies of other cases, the weft of law - ran through its frame, rearranging when a clerk hummed a certain tune. In the corner, a brass sorter quietly ate irregularities and excreted them as footnotes. A sign above it read FEED ME ONLY WHAT YOU ARE PREPARED TO EXPLAIN TO A SPHINX.

The vault beyond the loom housed boxed records. Each box bore a polite plaque: CASE TITLE, DATE, WHO TRIED TO LIE. Cassandra ran her fingers over a row and felt the boxes vibrate - remembering. One label pinged in her palm: UNSEALING RA HETEPH - scribal fault. Someone had punched the second A out of his name and replaced it with uncertainty.

A clerk made of hieroglyphs detached from the wall, his strokes slightly smudged in the middle where life had rubbed him thin. “Assistance, petitioner-counsel?”

“I need access to the initial transcript of the unsealing,” Cassandra said. “The first minutes taken in the field, before the court cleaned them. And any attached artifacts that were judged ‘quarrelsome.’”

The clerk considered her token, then her face, then the cat, who arranged his whiskers in a manner that implied union membership. “Follow,” he said, and the door to a narrow annex sighed open.

The annex had the feel of a secret someone had meant to declare and then forgotten to. Shelves leaned in amiably. The floor sloped barely - toward the truth, or toward a drain, it was hard to tell. At the back stood a glass case like a reliquary. Inside lay fragments: runic slivers, torn parchment edges, a bent clasp in the shape of a lotus, all arranged on black velvet. Their labels were crisp and pained.

DISPUTED.

CASUISTRY, ATTEMPTED.

EVIDENCE, SELF-EDITING.

Cassandra’s breath went thin. She recognized the handwriting on one of the labels - the neat, elegant tilt of Araminta’s e’s, a hand that made even cruelty look orderly. The label did not sign itself. Araminta never wrote where writing might become evidence.

“May I open it?” Cassandra asked the clerk.

“Not with that tone,” he said. Then - after a pause too brief to be petty - “Use the handle. It dislikes impatience.”

She used the handle. The case hissed approval. The air inside was cooler, smelling faintly of honey and something like iron filings warmed in the hand: goblin alchemical ink. Her stomach tightened, recognition and nausea sharing a handshake.

A triangular parchment fragment lay half-hidden under a curl of gold leaf. The gold had folded itself into the shape of a comma: a pause with ambitions. Cassandra lifted the leaf with two fingers. Beneath, the parchment pulsed faintly - as if a tiny heart beat slowly there, one beat for every century it had been buried.

“Hello,” she murmured, because everything in this country responded better if you remembered it was someone’s descendant.

The fragment was thick, vellum aged to a color halfway between tea and old teeth. At its edge, a hairline of black script ran as neat as the margin in a schoolbook. The letters weren’t Egyptian. They weren’t anything she’d call ancestral to this room. They had the clarity and cheer of a bank statement.

She angled it toward the light. The ink shimmered, reconsidered, settled.

INVESTMENT - RETURNS ANTICIPATED Q3.

Her heart did an impolite thing. Nebu hissed low, not at her but at the word.

“Goblin ink,” she said, because saying it aloud made it less like a fever dream. “But not goblin penmanship. Humans can learn the recipe. Some do. They like what it does to numbers.”

“What does it do?” Rahetep asked, voice a thread; he had come up beside her without a sound, a courtesy he saved for rooms full of the dead.

“Makes them obedient,” Cassandra said.

“And persuasive,” Nebu added. “Don’t forget persuasive.”

She turned the fragment over. On the back, a smear of gold - tongue of leaf - clung to a pair of runes like a child who’d fallen asleep on a book. The runes were old. The gold was not. Bridging them, in a sludge-brown ink that pretended to be ancient, a modern sigil: a holding weave. The same lattice she’d felt on the shard in court, written here in a haste careful enough to lie.

The label under the glass said: FROM FIELD MINUTES BOX A; ORIGIN UNCERTAIN; ATTITUDE - SNIDE.

“How did this get here?” she asked.

“Submitted by an officer,” the clerk said. “Anonymous. The case file called it ‘miscellany with opinions.’ We quarantined it. It scolded the other evidence.”

“Of course it did,” Nebu sighed. “The scolding kind always find work.”

Cassandra held the fragment closer to her mouth, breathed on it. Warmth woke ink. The English wording blurred, then rewrote itself with flirtatious exactness:

RETURNS ASSURED.

ASSURANCES BACKED BY - and a blank, a coy gesture, an invitation to fill in a guarantor.

“By what?” Rahetep asked softly.

“By whom,” Cassandra said.

Her wrist prickled. She felt along the edge with her thumbnail. A second layer lifted - not of paper; of enchantment, thin as the skin on milk. Underneath, smaller script, crabbed and precise, scuttled into the candlelight and froze when it knew it had been seen. The letters were goblin, but the grammar had learned its manners at Gringotts.

Voss. Initials only. AV.

The room tilted. The feeling was not surprise. It was the sensation of a suspicion acquiring a skeleton.

“Miss Blythe?” The clerk’s hieroglyphic brow furrowed. “If the fragment makes you ill, there is a receptacle for professional retching.”

“I’m fine,” Cassandra said, and it wasn’t a lie; it just wasn’t about her stomach. She slid the fragment lower in the case as if merely adjusting it, then brought her satchel up against the glass and let the mouth of it gape. A nudge. A slip. The parchment made the tiniest sigh as it slid into the dark with her field journal and her spare quill and the stub of a biscuit she’d forgotten to finish at breakfast.

The clerk made a small noise like a comma clearing its throat.

“Chain of custody,” he said.

“Consider me a link,” she said. “I’ll sign the log.”

“Do,” he said, and looked deliberately away at a smudge on the wall. “Smudges are terribly needy.”

Nebu’s claws flexed gently against her shoulder. “Stealing evidence from the afterlife. At last, we return to form.”

“Borrowing,” Cassandra said. “To prevent theft.”

She reached back into the case for the curled strip of gold leaf. It clung to her fingertip like a guilty thought and then, when she whispered a cantrip for courtesy, came free. She pressed it into her journal, where it stuck to a blank page and lay there like a small sun. When she closed the book, the gold hummed - a contented sound, or a purr, or a warning. With gold it could be all three.

“Miss Blythe.” Mogrim stood in the doorway, not surprised to find her where truth went to hide, not smug at having tracked her there. His gaze flicked to the open case, the clerk’s studious inattention, the satchel he undoubtedly knew weighed more now. “Find anything?”

“A fragment,” she said. “Goblin ink in human grammar. A holding weave pretending to be heritage. And - ” she hesitated, then let the rest out in a breath, because truth told slowly becomes poison - “initials that match my superior’s.”

Mogrim’s face did the small, expensive movements of a man redoing the math. “Letters can lie,” he said. “But they very often tell the truth when they think they’re flattering you.”

“She does like to flatter me,” Cassandra said, and surprised herself by hearing both earlier years in the bank and the child she’d been before that, easily dazzled by intellect packaged like approval. The thought scalded and cauterized.

“Bring it to the evening session,” Mogrim said. “If you’re asked, you found it in the annex. If you’re not asked - prepare to be asked anyway.”

He turned, then paused. “And, Miss Blythe - ” his voice dropped, not tender, but precise - “don’t become this evidence. Useful, pliant, and anonymous.”

“Noted,” she said, and for a second the word felt like a spell that might keep her human.

They left the annex by a corridor thinner than patience. The building hummed around them, ancient and busy. As they passed the Adjudicator’s Loom, a clerk plucked a thread and a tapestry rearranged itself, replacing a scene of a dragon bowing to a ledger with one of a ledger bowing to a dragon. The clerk pretended not to enjoy it.

“Will you be all right?” Rahetep asked, once they were back among the public halls. He had that way of asking - like a king asking a river if it preferred to flow north or south.

“Yes,” Cassandra said, and meant it for the first time that day. Something inside her had shifted from the appetite to solve to the appetite to guard. Smaller. Stronger.

Nebu flicked an ear toward the high windows where sun slanted in and turned dust into civilization. “You’ve pocketed leverage. How very adult.”

“I’ve pocketed a piece of the lie,” she said. “Now I need the rest of the sentence.”

They paused at the intention log - a broad book supervised by an elderly quill who disapproved of verbs in the future tense. Cassandra signed in neat strokes that betrayed none of the tremor in her hand. INTEND: TO RETURN. TO PRESENT EVIDENCE. TO DRINK TEA IF OFFERED.

The quill made a sniff but did not strike anything out.

They stepped into a balcony gallery that looked down into the main hall. The sphinx presided over the cleansing with the cool ferocity of a patron saint of editors. Clerks peeled off runic stickers from cornices and chair legs and the underside of the dais; the room brightened by half a tone, as if someone had opened a window in the language.

Cassandra leaned on the rail and let the sight anchor her. Mogrim took up position at the far end, already drafting his motion in the air with two fingers, words assembling like modest soldiers. Rahetep rested his hands on the stone and watched the little industry with the look of a man seeing a city built correctly for once.

“Drink?” Nebu suggested, nodding at a discreet alcove where a sanctioned teacart waited under the supervision of a clerk who had seen things and preferred them mild from now on.

They went. The sanctioned cart poured with precision. The tea smelled like ink and mint and a touch of lemon - an improved recipe. Cassandra held the cup and looked at its surface. Her reflection wobbled. Behind it, a glyph formed, faint as a memory of a word: TRUST.

She huffed a laugh. “Very fashionable.”

“It’s an old style,” Rahetep murmured. “We wore it when the gods were young.”

They drank. The tea steadied her like a sensible sentence.

In the shade of the alcove, with the court’s heartbeat thudding quietly through the stone, Cassandra opened her journal and slid the fragment out. It lay on the page humming with a smug, institutional certainty.

“Investment,” Nebu read, and made the word sound tired. “Returns.”

“We’ll see about that,” Cassandra said.

She wrote beneath it - not in court ink, not in goblin recipe, but in her own hand, the one the sorting hat had called incorrigible - one line:

All profits paid to the dead.

The fragment pulsed, affronted, then settled, perhaps for the first time since it had been cut from its parent document, into a shape that looked less like a command and more like evidence.

Somewhere, the adjournment bell rehearsed its next decision.

Sundown wasn’t far.

Sunset put a lacquer of copper on the ziggurat, each terrace catching fire and handing it politely to the next. The court's outer plaza breathed out a day's worth of dust and verdicts; charmed lanterns sparked one by one along the colonnade like thoughts occurring belatedly to a clever man.

Cassandra stepped into the heat falling off the stone and let the world be wider than parchment again. Cairo unscrolled below: streets stitched with brass, alleys bright with lamps and voices, the Nile a dark ribbon remembering the sky. The air was busy with bargaining - of oranges, of gossip, of opinions on the weather. The court's door sighed closed behind them with the satisfaction of a well-argued paragraph.

Nebu leapt down, flowed into his own shadow, and stretched until his body was a line, then a question mark, then a smug exclamation point. "We survived jurisprudence," he said. "I require fish."

"Tea first," Rahetep replied, because some hierarchies extended to eternity, "then fish."

"Your priorities," Nebu said, "are embalmed."

"And improved by it," Rahetep answered, and turned his face to the last light as if to take measurements he didn't intend to tell anyone.

A figure peeled off the arcade and approached, hands in the pockets of a linen jacket that had seen more classrooms than deserts. Tarek el-Farouk wore the look of a man who had expected the worst and been given, instead, bureaucracy - his jaw less tight than usual, his eyebrows reserving judgment.

"You made it through," he said to Cassandra. "The court kept its head. I was afraid it would eat its own tail."

"It tried," Cassandra said. "We confiscated the teeth."

His mouth tugged toward a smile. "Word reaches the bazaar quickly. Half of Cairo now believes the court's chandeliers are possessed by bankers."

"They're possessed by grammar," Nebu said. "An allied species."

Tarek's eyes slid to Rahetep and held. The moment did not bother with ceremony; it shook hands with respect and got on with things.

"My lord," Tarek said, and it was neither mockery nor worship - only the courtesy a scholar gives a subject who has asked for tea before deification.

Rahetep inclined his head. "Scholar." Then, with the delicacy of a host offering wine in a stranger's house: "Thank you for not demanding a miracle."

"I've seen miracles," Tarek said, and glanced toward the court. "They shed paperwork like old skin." He turned to Cassandra. "You look… right on the edge of furious."

“I found a fragment,” she said. “Goblin ink. Human grammar. My superior’s initials. If I scowl any harder my face will write libel.”

He absorbed it without flinching, as if her words were stones he had expected to carry. “Do you have it?”

“In here.” She touched her satchel. The weight sat against her hip like a sleeping animal that knew its own teeth.

“Careful,” Tarek said, automatic and earnest.

“She has been careful,” Nebu drawled. “It’s why we haven’t died today. Yet.”

The court’s bell made its rehearsal sound from within - two notes trying not to be a warning. Clerks ghosted along the margins of the plaza, climbing cornices, scraping away discreet sigils with knives shaped like punctuation. Where the false runes lifted, the stone brightened. Where a stubborn patch remained, a clerk pressed a palm to it and hummed, and the deceit came up like an old sticker surrendering with a sigh.

Mogrim joined them, slipping from shadow to lamplight with the agility of a man who had practiced moving between inconvenient truths. His robe had acquired a streak of dust in the shape of an apology.

“Evening,” he said, as if they were four acquaintances meeting at a café after a day in different kinds of trouble. “The cleansing proceeds. Your fragment - do not wave it about. The walls here have better memories than people.”

“We’re going to the bazaar,” Tarek said. “There’s a stall that sells mistakes. The owner buys them back at a very reasonable markup.”

“Romantic,” Mogrim said. “Return before the sun forgets itself. The Court opens again at the first star.”

“An administrative star,” Nebu said.

“The finest kind,” Mogrim replied, and gave Cassandra a practical nod: You are the knife I need; try not to cut yourself.

They took the steps down from the terrace into evening. The stone had stored the day’s heat and released it now in generous breaths. The city had turned itself into theater: lamps strung like notes above stalls, cats practicing philosophy on ledges, vendors summoning customers with the accuracy of conjurers and the shamelessness of saints. Magic flickered discreetly - no longer the brass band of daytime bravado but a string quartet in a courtyard: soft, precise, irresistible to those who listened.

The Wizarding Bazaar - roped to the city by thick, enchanted hawsers - bobbed lazily above the square. Ramps sloped up to it like sentences that had not decided yet whether they were questions. Cassandra climbed with the other night-shoppers, feeling her boots learn the old rhythm: no hurry, no dawdle; a procession at the speed of appetite.

“Where?” she asked over the thin river of conversation and hawking and laughter.

Tarek pointed with his chin. “Between bottled moonlight and counterfeit apologies.”

“That narrows it,” Nebu said.

Stalls drifted past: piles of carpets in colors that had arguments with each other; jars of puffed stars with caution labels in three languages; a woman selling umbrellas that refused to get wet unless asked nicely. Cassandra glanced up at a rack of physician’s masks - beaks like tidy oaths - and then down at her hands to make sure she hadn’t put one on without noticing. The bazaar had a way of rearranging your face if you let it.

The mistakes stall looked like an ordinary table until you saw it, and then it looked like a confession disguised as retail. On its planks lay an array of items whose edges didn’t agree with their middles: a contract whose last clause kept walking off; a book that apologized for its own grammar and then relapsed; a string of coins that didn’t add up to the same sum twice. The proprietor was a woman in a velvet jacket, her hair coiled as if she had wound it on a spindle and then thought better of continuing. She had the kind eyes of a person who knows the uses of cruelty.

“Evening,” she said. “What would you like to return to the world properly?”

“A piece of a lie,” Cassandra said, and set the fragment on the table.

The woman did not touch it. The air above it undulated like heat over stone.

“Oho,” she breathed, not theatrical but pleased to see a specimen complete its own sentence at last. “This one has been muzzled and isn’t used to it.”

Tarek leaned in. “Goblin ink,” he said.

“Human grammar,” the woman added. “A recipe stolen from a friend and cooked with too much confidence.”

“Can you read it?” Cassandra asked.

“I can listen,” the woman said, as if correcting a child who’d asked about hearing ghosts. “Reading is for cooperative text.”

She bent until her nose almost touched the parchment. Her eyes narrowed, then softened, then went flat. “This once said INVESTMENT RETURNS GUARANTEED,” she murmured. “Then someone with initials and authority cut the guarantee away and replaced it with assurances. Guarantees are legally binding. Assurances are their cowardly cousins.”

“Can you pull the cut edge?” Cassandra asked.

“If it wants to show,” the woman said. She ran a nail along the blank line where the guarantor had been. The ink quivered, like a dog that knows its name but distrusts the whistle. “It doesn’t want to tell you who paid. It does want to be admired.”

Nebu snorted. “It will enjoy Cassandra, then.”

“What do you charge,” Cassandra said, “to persuade a document to remember it’s evidence?”

“For you?” the woman asked, head tilting, weighing. “One thing you don’t want to know.”

Cassandra waited for the punch of fear and found, instead, a steadiness, as if some inner weather had settled on a useful season. “I can pay in tea,” she said, “in gold leaf, in lies I’ve told myself about where my loyalties end - ”

“Keep those,” the woman said gently. “You’ll need them by the end of the month. I’ll take half a name.”

“No,” Tarek said reflexively.

“Not yours,” the woman said. “Not even hers. The document’s. I want the pet name it gave the hand that wrote it.”

Cassandra glanced at Nebu. He shrugged. “There are worse prices.”

“Done,” Cassandra said, and the woman’s smile had the satisfaction of well-folded linen.

She set three small brass bells in a triangle around the fragment and tapped them in a sequence that made the air wince. The bells shook until their handles blurred. The parchment wriggled, trying to escape dignity. The ink lifted and fell like breathing. A little line of letters ghosted up where the blank had been, and then another, like a heartbeat trying to spell itself.

The woman bent close. “Say it,” she coaxed, with a patience that would have made a stubborn cat consider compliance. “Say the name you were told. The one only you would know.”

A murmur rose from the paper like steam from a cup set down in a quiet room. Not English. Not Gobbledegook. A private abbreviation, a stupid office joke, a cruelty dressed as fondness. The woman nodded, almost pitying, and spoke the word aloud.

“Minty.”

Cassandra’s breath left her as if struck lightly by the back of a friendly hand. Rahetep’s linen creased at the eyes. Tarek said something under his breath that would have embarrassed the polite parts of the Nile. Nebu’s tail went rigid.

“Thank you,” Cassandra said, and had to set her palm flat on the table to keep her hand from shaking. Araminta Voss had once laughed and said, You mustn’t think me minty; I’m iron and ice, dear. But in the halls among the junior curse-breakers, she had been Minty - the name she hated, the name she had allowed because it useful to be loved by people you meant to use.

“Now,” the woman said, more brisk. “Your payment.”

She placed a glass thimble over the fragment. The ink condensed under it like a trapped breath. The bells gave one last chime and went still. The woman lifted the thimble and held it

to Cassandra’s ear.

The whisper that slid out was not word but flavor. A taste of peppermint cut with metal. A desk drawer opening on late afternoon light. The snap of a glove. A paperclip biting cleanly through flesh because the flesh had been careless. An office’s affection startled into obedience.

“Keep that,” the woman said. “It will help you hear her before she speaks.”

Cassandra nodded, throat tight with the taste of old gullibility and new clarity. She slid the fragment back into her journal. The ink lay flatter now, less coy. The line where the guarantor name had been no longer flaunted its blankness; it was bruised, and honest about it.

“Your stall’s name?” Rahetep asked, because kings liked to be able to thank someone properly in the afterlife.

“Corrections,” the woman said. “We sell mercy, we buy pride.”

He bowed. She inclined her head, as to an equal in the only currency that mattered there: admission.

They walked back along the floating planks, the night leaning in to listen. The bazaar’s ropes creaked softly, old ships remembering storms. Somewhere, a fiddler teased a tune into being that was mostly law with enough mischief to keep it from dying on the page.

“Minty,” Nebu repeated, tasting the word like something he would bury out of kindness. “How perfectly detestable.”

Cassandra laughed once - sharp, clean - and felt a weight shift in her chest as if a shelf had finally been put up with the right nails.

They reached the ramp and descended with the rest of the city’s evening appetites. Back at ground level, the court towered ahead, its lamps now steady and uncompromised. Clerks were folding away ladders; a final, obstinate sigil scraped free from a cornice and fluttered down like a guilty moth. Mogrim caught it in the air without looking and tucked it into his pocket with the absent competence of a man collecting receipts.

At the foot of the steps, Cassandra paused. The court’s façade, neat now, gleamed. The glyphs no longer migrated. The stone hummed something like contentment: a system briefly less corrupt than before.

“You could run,” Nebu murmured, not unkindly. “Find a ship, go home, take up a position cataloguing hexed teaspoons.”

“I could,” Cassandra said. She watched a group of junior clerks argue in whispers over whether to align the benches with the east wall or with precedent. She watched Mogrim finish a sentence in the air and replace it with a better one. She watched Rahetep look at the people and not at the building and know exactly what he was losing and why it mattered. “I won’t.”

Tarek studied her profile as one examines a map that has just drawn in the sea. “Then we go in together.”

“All of us,” Rahetep said, and offered Cassandra his arm. She took it, because her legs wanted the dignity and because his presence arranged the air into something like resolve.

They mounted the steps. The first star punctured the lid of the sky, small and correct. The bell inside decided with a clarity that had been earned.

At the threshold, Cassandra paused long enough to set her journal on the low balm of the stone balustrade and write in neat, incorrigible script, as if pinning a moth where it could be admired and forgiven:

The runes lie. Someone wants the dead talking.

She blew the ink dry. The letters held. The cat breathed. The mummy smiled without triumph. The scholar squared his shoulders. The inspector opened the door.

They went back in.

Chapter 7: The Curse Breaker’s Dilemma

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The Curse Breaker’s Dilemma

Morning bled into the room through the slats of the shutters in thin bars, dust dancing in the light like the court’s quills still scratching their eternal minutes. Cairo had the decency to wake slowly; Cassandra did not. She sat cross-legged on the woven carpet with her tea cooling at her knee and an archipelago of parchment around her, each island rimmed with frantic notes and crumbs of lemon biscuit.

The courtroom transcript stacked highest-ghost-scribe sheets that shimmered faintly as though still remembering the argument. Someone had been very proud of binding sound into ink; the lines carried echoes when she ran her finger along them. Inspector Mogrim’s monotone; the judge’s measured purr. And, to Cassandra’s lasting embarrassment, her own voice announcing that she refused to answer questions from a bewitched teapot on principle.

Nebu yawned on the windowsill with the luxury of the morally untroubled and the eternally furry. He had found the single square of sunshine and conquered it. “If you’d treated the teapot with respect,” he said without opening his eyes, “it would have poured for you. Appliances remember slights.”

“I’m not being cross-examined by crockery,” Cassandra murmured, eyes skimming a page. “There are lines I refuse to cross.”

“Your lines appear to be drawn in chalk and promptly stepped over. How many hours have you been at this?”

“Since the tea was hot.” She lifted the cup, grimaced, and put it down again. “So, approximately one eternal bureaucratic epoch.”

She had woken with that tight feeling behind her ribs-the sensation of a clue just out of reach, like a word you could hum but not name. It had gnawed through sleep and sent her straight to the pile of legal magic. The transcript sheets themselves were a triumph of administrative sorcery: each statement printed in the speaker’s own voice-color, each objection annotated by a polite cough in the margin. The hieroglyphic seals the sphinx had carved at the verdict glowed faintly at the bottom, tidy as a signature.

Cassandra took up her rune lens, its brass setting nicked from years of fieldwork, and lowered it over the seals. “All right, show me where you’re clever.”

Through the lens the ink’s surface shifted, depth where there should have been none, layers upon layers like sedimentary rock. She loved this part of the job: the slow excavation not of sand but of intention. Even the most hidebound scribe left fingerprints. An extra flourish. A favorite stroke.

“Charming,” she said under her breath, “that they still teach the triple-stroke of balance. Antiquated but elegant.”

“Speaking of antiquated and elegant,” Nebu said, rearranging himself so that his head now faced exactly away from her, “Rahetep has decided he prefers honey from the south markets. Do fetch a jar later. He says the north tastes of accounting.”

Cassandra made a noncommittal noise. Her wand-still whole, still obedient-sang a soft line when she touched it to the ink. Runes answered runes, the court’s seal briefly lifting a veil to let her hear the spellwork underneath. She muttered translation, caught the rhythm, and nodded: Justice invoked through Measure, Mercy restrained by Truth, the usual balance of ideals wrapped around a case more farcical than criminal. The sphinx had been scrupulous, almost tender. It should have been clean.

Except-there. A pulse. A hair-thin line that ran counter to the script’s weave, not in the sphinx’s elegant, sand-slow cadence but in something else: modern, brisk, as if punctuation had grown teeth and bitten through.

Her heart pricked, a needle of interest. Cassandra adjusted the lens, brought the seal closer until the glyphs became shapes and then only strokes, and there in the negative space she found a hook. It did not belong. The trick with tampering was that you could hide anything in the positive, the mark that showed-but the space between strokes remembered. No one thought to rewrite absence.

“Nebu,” she said, hungry despite herself, “come look.”

“I can see from here,” Nebu lied, then slid boneless off the sill and padded over with the air of a magistrate humoring a child. He leapt to the table, sniffed theatrically at her tea, and peered at the seal. His whiskers trembled. “Mm. Lines.”

“Lines that disagree with each other.” She lifted the lens so he could see the shimmer beneath. “The verdict glyphs are correct. But something else is threaded through them. Not court work.”

“Not goblin work, either,” he said, offended on behalf of the entire profession of people he disliked. “Goblins would never be so-” his paw traced the margin “-so… eager.”

“Brisk,” Cassandra supplied. “Like shorthand charms.”

Nebu’s ear flicked. “Or like someone accustomed to signing for deliveries.”

She thought of Araminta’s immaculate glove drawing her initials with the cold certainty of a ledger line. She set the thought aside before it could shape her face. “We don’t accuse without evidence.”

“That’s new,” Nebu said.

“I’m growing.”

“Yes,” he said, “moss grows too, in dark damp places.”

She smiled despite herself and placed the transcript in a fresh pool of sun. The hook vanished unless coaxed. She touched her wandtip to the corner, breathed out, and let a feather-light charm seep through the trapwork of court magic, not to tear it but to ring it like a glass. If there was a foreign metal in the alloy, it would sing a different note.

The room filled with quiet sound: a resonance like wet crystal. The court seals hummed consonance-Justice, Measure, Mercy-and underneath, faint, the foreign thread answered in a tinny, almost cheerful chirp. A flourish at the end of the hook. A clerk's habits. She heard it once more for certain, then let the charm go.

"Not the sphinx," she said, breathless with the satisfaction of good work. "Not in the court at all. Added afterward. Which means our tamperer had access to the transcript between scribing and filing."

"The tea service," Nebu suggested. "Or the janitor."

"Or someone with official standing." She riffled the pages, looking for other points of contact. There-on a deposition from the afternoon session, a different case entirely, a minor curse on counterfeit amulets. A faint twin of the same hook in the margin where the clerk had noted a recess.

"Oh," she breathed. "You've been busy, haven't you."

Nebu stretched one long foreleg and looked as if he'd solved the case by existing. "It's almost touching, your delight at being hunted."

"I'm delighted at being right." She pulled a fresh sheet toward her and began copying the hook in a neat hand, diagramming the points where the foreign charm kissed the court's script. "If this is shorthand magic, I can match the stroke order. Every bureaucrat has a signature. Even the invisible ones."

Outside, a seller of dates sang to the street in a tune that wandered from minor to laughing major and back again. A tram bell chimed from somewhere far below. She loved Cairo for this: its insistence on sound, on life at all hours, as if the city had decided that silence might be mistaken for surrender.

Her mind made a new pattern. She took the parchment fragment from last night's pocket-the one she had palmed when the court's runes had flickered between languages-and laid it beside the transcript. It had been a nothing scrap then, a curiosity: court vellum with an errant glow like a memory of someone else's spell. Now, under the lens, she saw the same cheerful hook winking at her from the edge, as coy as a signature on a love letter.

"Got you," she whispered, then, because the hook felt like a person, "Hello."

"Introduce me," Nebu said, grooming his shoulder. "I have questions about their taste."

Cassandra's hand hovered. The line that separated discovery from accusation was a thin thing and easily blurred by triumph. She turned the page, ran through a quick catalog of who had touched the papers: the judge, the ghost scribes, the clerks, the bailiff with the kind eyes and

the bony hands, the teapot-blast the teapot-the inspector, herself. Araminta had not been in the room. But Araminta didn't need to be anywhere to be everywhere. Power traveled.

She stood, faced the window, and breathed the city in until the need to leap two conclusions at once steadied. "Next step: archives," she said to the room, to the cat, to herself. "I need the filing schedule. Who handled these after scribing. Who had authority to countersign. If the hook is their hand, it'll be in a half-dozen other places too."

"How diligent," Nebu said. "Do skip lunch. Diligence tastes better on an empty stomach."

She gathered the papers into the order only she understood, tucking the copied hook into her field journal. Her journal had grown fat these last weeks-runes jostling teacup sketches, moral quandaries elbowing grocery lists. In the margin of the morning's page she wrote, brisk as any clerk: foreign charm threaded through justice; cheerful stroke; search for duplicates; do not tell Rahetep yet.

Nebu hopped from the table and wound once around her legs, as if she were a chair deserving to be claimed. "You are aware," he said into her calf, "that the last time you followed a cheerful line into a dark place, you opened a tomb."

"And found a gentleman," she said. "Who wanted tea."

"And a great deal of trouble," he said, but there was affection in the reprimand. He leapt back onto the sill, reclaimed his square of sun, and arranged himself like an oracle.

Cassandra lifted the transcript one last time. With the lens removed, the hook became simply ink again, the court's seal serene and whole. It would be easy to let it be, to pretend you hadn't seen the wrong note in the choir. But she had and could not unknow it.

"All right," she said to the paper, to the lens, to the dust motes that made constellations of her room. "Let's see who thinks they can doodle on justice and get away with it."

The light had shifted by the time she closed the journal. The tea was cold enough to taste of metal; she drank it anyway, for the caffeine and the penance. Down in the street, the date seller changed his song. In the room, the quiet pulsed with the knowledge that there was a hand at work somewhere, brisk and cheerful and precise.

Cassandra smiled, the way a puzzle smiles when it realizes it is about to be solved. Then she gathered her papers, pinned up her hair, and went to find the person whose handwriting had just become her favorite enemy.

The Gringotts Cairo archives did not believe in welcoming anyone. Even the door had an attitude: a slab of carved basalt embossed with a relief of a ledger, which eyed visitors with contempt before sliding aside with the sound of a very final column being totaled. Air hit Cassandra like a damp quilt-papyrus, ink, a faint tang of preservation salts-and under it all the bureaucratic spice of old rules. Lamps guttered behind warded glass, and an enchanted fan overhead moved just enough warm air to make it clear that more could have been done, but wouldn't be.

A narrow desk confronted her immediately, as if to ask why she thought she could proceed. Behind it, a goblin with parchment-gray skin and spectacles perched on the very tip of his nose read a scroll with such concentrated scorn that Cassandra felt personally reprimanded for being alive. A brass nameplate spelled out, in three languages and a rasp of tiny teeth, KHERET, ARCHIVIST.

“Miss Blythe,” he said without looking up. “You are late.”

“I wasn’t expected,” Cassandra replied brightly.

“Gringotts expects everything. That is our business model.”

He slid a ledger toward her. It was the size of a paving stone and twice as friendly. When she put a hand on it, the page lifted like the lip of a sulking cat. The column headings rearranged with a hiss: Name; Purpose of Research; Authorization Level; Sacrificial Preferences. She blinked.

“You can leave the last one blank,” Kheret said, still reading. “We rarely indulge preferences.”

“Lovely.” Cassandra filled the first three columns in her neat, battle-tested hand. Under Purpose, she wrote: Review of expedition documentation, Rahetep tomb, chain-of-custody audit. Under Authorization Level, she wrote: Field Operative, London; temporary Cairo clearance by Director al-Azhari. The ink settled with a sigh.

“And your offering?” Kheret asked, at last looking up. His spectacles magnified his pupils to disks of disdain.

Cassandra smiled and lifted the paper-wrapped parcel she’d tucked under her arm. “Imported lemon shortbreads,” she said. “Not the chalky ones. The ones that melt.”

The archivist’s ears twitched. The scroll in his claw paused mid-judgment. “Hmm.”

“I also have,” she went on, unwrapping the paper an inch so that perfume drifted out-real butter, sugar, lemon rind-“a jar of very fine south-market honey. For… cataloging morale.”

Kheret drew himself up, as if establishing that morale, like hope, had no place here. “We are not bribed,” he said.

“Perish the thought,” Cassandra said. “We are merely… nourished for speed.”

“Speed is suspicious.”

“Slowness is a conspiracy,” she returned.

A corner of his mouth made the smallest possible concession to amusement. He slid the ledger back, stamped it with a seal that bit the paper gently, and pushed a slate across the desk. “Your request?”

She wrote: Transcript chain, case file: Rahetep, Voice of Amun, evidentiary custody timeline; Expedition authorization ledgers, Valley of Kings; Seal registry for authorizing officers past twelve months.

“Ambitious,” he murmured. “The custody timeline is restricted to Court Liaison.” He tapped a notice pinned to the desk: NO ACCESS WITHOUT FORM FIFTEEN-B. Beneath, in smaller letters: NO ACCESS TO FORM FIFTEEN-B WITHOUT FORM FIFTEEN-A. Beneath that: FORM FIFTEEN-A IS OUT OF PRINT.

Cassandra lifted the biscuits a fraction higher. “What if I asked for sample pages? Names of handlers only; no content.”

“De-identified.”

“Of course.”

Kheret considered the air above Cassandra’s shoulder, where perhaps he saw the specter of a precedent. Then, with the crisp resignation of someone deciding to allow a storm to pass through because the humidity was already unbearable, he nodded. “Two de-identified pages,” he said. “And the seal registry. Honey now; biscuits after.”

She swapped parcels with the ritual solemnity these things required. The jar chimed as it changed hands. Kheret’s clerk-an anemic quill with a bad temper-took the slate and skittered back into the stacks in a sulk, trailing a ribbon of ink.

The archives opened behind the desk like a canyon of paper. Shelves climbed to a ceiling lost in haze, ladders drifted of their own accord to wherever one was about to need them (and then deliberately drifted a foot out of reach), and the aisles hummed with warding spells that made the hairs on Cassandra’s arms lift in appreciative fear. Every shelf end bore a brass plaque in Gobbledegook, Egyptian hieratic, and the hasty shorthand of modern Gringotts: LEDGERS: AUTHORIZATION – PROVINCIAL; COURT–LIAISON: MINOR; COURT–LIAISON: MAJOR; EXPEDITIONS-FOREIGN; EXPEDITIONS-DOMESTIC; FORMS (VENOMOUS). Something growled gently behind the Forms section.

“Do I wait?” she asked.

“You hover,” Kheret said. “Waiting is for the unprepared.” He took a long, slow sniff of the honey, then set it aside with the dignity of a priest placing an offering on a temple step.

Cassandra hovered. She drifted to a display case where historical seals lounged like jewelry: ovals and disks of wax and metal, each impressed with the authority of someone too powerful to sign their name with ink alone. A plaque explained that every authorizing officer had a registered signet and a registered hand, the latter more important than the former: seals could be borrowed; handwriting, never. She thought of her cheerful hook and felt the thread pull inside her again.

The clerk quill returned, pushed by a junior goblin who looked like a half-grown thundercloud. Without looking at her, he slid a folder across the desk and a heavy book the size of a loaf of bread.

“De-identified handler log,” Kheret said, rotating the folder to face her. Names had been replaced by glyphs: circles, triangles, an officious little square. Dates remained. “And the Seal Registry, Cairo branch, Year of Sun 1926.”

Cassandra laid the handler log open, took out her lens, and pretended not to notice Kheret pretending not to watch her. The log listed each time the Rahetep case file had changed hands between scribing and vaulting: Ghost Scribe → Clerk ▢; Clerk ▢ → Liaison △; Liaison △ → Vault Officer ○; Vault Officer ○ → Court (return). The symbols repeated across days, reassuring as a metronome.

Then, on the day of the verdict: Ghost Scribe → Clerk ▢; Clerk ▢ → Liaison △; Liaison △ → **Clerk ▢**; Clerk ▢ → Vault Officer ○.

A loop where there should have been a straight line.

“Clerk Square,” Cassandra murmured. “You doubled back.”

Kheret’s ears did not move. “De-identified,” he said, as a warning and an apology.

“That’s fine,” she said, equally softly. “I’m only interested in the geometry.”

She opened the Seal Registry. Inside, samples of registered hands occupied folios like botanical specimens: each officer had penned a standard paragraph in three inks, then inscribed their personal flourish. Cassandra felt a small, private thrill. Every clerk’s signature, every habitual hook, every end-of-stroke chirp-pressed and preserved. The cheerful modernity of it-a bank’s faith in handwriting-felt almost romantic.

She began to turn pages, steady as a metronome, humming under her breath the chord she’d rung from the court seal: Justice, Measure, Mercy, Chirp. After the third folio, Kheret slid a magnifying pane toward her and feigned interest in a memo. After the fifth, the clerk quill-despite itself-leaned in.

On the eighth folio, Cassandra stopped.

CLERK, THIRD CLASS - AMINA BAT-HASSAN, read the label. The exemplar paragraph marched neatly, brisk and small, a clerk who did not waste space. At the end of the pen-stroke on the word therefore, a tiny upward flick-cheerful as a wave. On consequently, the same chirp. It wasn’t affectation; it was muscle memory wearing a flourish like a favorite brooch.

Cassandra let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She turned back to the handler log. Clerk ▢. Third class. Amina bat-Hassan.

“Do not say it aloud,” Kheret murmured, not looking up.

“I wasn’t planning to,” Cassandra said. She copied the hook into her field journal beside AMINA (?), placing a question mark so large it looked like a promise.

“Next,” Kheret said, “you will ask me for a cross-branch authorization ledger.”

“I will,” she said, pleased and annoyed to be predictable.

“And I will remind you that cross-branch authorizations require Director approval and three business days.”

“How fortunate,” she said, and placed the white-paper packet of biscuits on the desk, “that I have brought you three days of biscuits.”

Kheret blinked. The clerk quill made an involuntary appreciative scratch, like a purr in ink. The archivist steepled his claws. “It is possible,” he said, “that the ledger might be temporarily mis-shelved into the domestic expeditions aisle for routine dusting.”

“And it is possible,” Cassandra said, “that I am very competent at dusting.”

“Tragically,” Kheret said, “no one is competent at dusting. But you may try.”

He snapped his fingers, and a ladder drifted toward a distant row with theatrical reluctance. Cassandra gathered the Seal Registry and her journal, bowed to the biscuits with due reverence, and set off into the canyon.

The Domestic Expeditions aisle smelled of old linen and older weather. Boxes wore labels like old wounds-ASSIUT, CANAL-PORT SAID, FAYOUM-and were stacked with that particular precision that shouted do not touch. She touched-gently. A drawer hissed; a file nipped her thumb in protest. “Yes, yes,” she said. “Consent obtained.” The hiss abated.

Halfway down the row, a ledger sat at the wrong angle, like a button done up through the wrong hole. Cassandra slid it free. The cover read AUTHORIZATIONS-EXTERNAL LIAISONS. Inside: a river of clean lines, dates, seals stamped in wax that had gone opaque with age in a mere six months. Field Operative Requests; Liaison Confirmations; Director Countersignatures.

She flipped to the month six months before the dig. There: a request form requesting early access to the Valley site for “preliminary curse-structure assessment,” ostensibly from Cairo Gringotts to London. It bore the tidy signet of the Cairo Director…but the countersignature line glistened slightly under the lens, and the flourish at the end of the word therefore chirped.

Her pulse beat in her fingertips. The line wasn’t the Director’s hand. It was Clerk, Third Class: Amina bat-Hassan-mimicking her superior’s signet, then blessing it with her own unconscious chirp. An authorization sent to London, forged in Cairo.

Cassandra snapped the book shut, then opened it immediately-it would sulk if treated with that kind of melodrama. On the inner cover, a notation in red ink: DUPLICATE HELD: LONDON LEDGER ROOM, VAULT B-2. Of course it was. She could almost feel the path unfurling ahead of her like a red carpet with teeth.

She slid the ledger back, careful to mis-shelve it to its exact, wrong angle, and returned through the aisles. Kheret pretended to be engrossed in a memo titled GUIDELINES FOR THE ETHICAL STORAGE OF QUESTIONABLE ETHICS.

“Well?” he asked, precisely as if he did not care.

“I dusted,” Cassandra said. “It was enlightening.”

“Terrible habit,” Kheret said. He pushed a small brass token toward her-the kind that opened and closed doors not yet convinced they should. “For your return. Archives are offended by spontaneity.”

“Understood.” She tucked the token into her pocket alongside the journal, where the word AMINA (?) sat like a newly unearthed shard asking to become a vase.

As she turned to go, the clerk quill, having wrestled itself into magnanimity, scratched a note in the margin of her research slate and shoved it back toward her. It read, in a spidery hand: **AMINA ON LEAVE. NO FORWARDING.**

Cassandra met Kheret’s gaze. His ears lay very still. “Leave?” she said lightly. “How restful.”

“The modern workforce is enthusiastic about rest,” he said. “Please convey to Director al-Azhari that our morale has improved.”

“With biscuits?”

“With progress,” Kheret said, and allowed himself, just once, a grin that showed the fine, terrifying array of his teeth. “Bring better tea next time.”

Outside the basalt door, Cairo’s light struck her like a cymbal. The street smelled of hot stone and oranges; carts rattled; a boy sold newspapers in both Arabic and a confident English that invented its own headlines between editions. Cassandra stood in the heat and let herself feel the shape of the problem: a cheerful hook; a clerk who signed for eternity like it was a delivery; an authorization slid across a desk half a year early; a loop in the chain of custody where there should have been no loop at all.

She pulled her journal and wrote without thinking: Amina bat-Hassan (Clerk, Third Class) → forged Director countersignature on pre-dig liaison. Six months prior. Why? On whose order? Cross-check London duplicate. Find Amina.

She underlined Find Amina twice, then added a third line, because some promises needed the thickness of three.

Across the street, a cat napped on a teashop awning, golden fur bright as coin. For a moment she imagined Nebu there, judging her choice of verbs, and felt the usual mix of irritation and affection. “Progress,” she murmured, and set off toward the tram with the brass token warm in her pocket and the lemon-sugar of a bribe lingering on the air like the aftertaste of a good decision that knew it would turn complicated.

Rahetep’s borrowed villa had that half-furnished elegance of a place that expected to be photographed more than lived in. Sun pooled on the tiled floor like spilled gold; the shutters were thrown wide so the jasmine on the courtyard wall could lean in and gossip with the curtains. A gramophone sulked under a lace scarf as though embarrassed to be modern. On the low table, a tea service glittered, incongruously English among alabaster vases and a bronze figure of a falcon giving everything a disapproving eye.

There were flowers - lilies in a tall blue jar - and there were people, which Rahetep treated as the same sort of decoration. Cairo society had sniffed the air, smelled novelty and a whisper of blasphemy, and come calling. Witches in linen frocks with magic in the seams; wizards with club ties charmed to remain precisely at a gentlemanly angle despite desert heat; a poet who had come to write about the undead and was instead scribbling down Rahetep's recipe for mint tea. On an ottoman near the window, Nebu lounged with a stack of linen scraps and a pen, selling autographs in a paw so elegant it might as well have been wearing a glove.

"Two beetles for the small signature," he told a besotted young witch, "and five if you want the flourish where I draw the dot above my name in the shape of your future disappointment."

"Don't do flourishes," Cassandra called, stepping around a cluster of guests to reach the tea. "They go to your head."

"They go to my purse," Nebu said. "Which is attached to my head by affection."

Rahetep rose when he saw her, precise and courtly, every movement edited for dignity. Clean bandages wrapped him like a bespoke suit; a silk sash the color of pomegranate rind crossed his chest in a diagonal that flattered the geometry of resurrection. He had recently discovered cologne. It smelled like cedar and the idea of cleanliness. When he inclined his head, the amulets at his throat chimed very softly, a polite sound, the dead nodding hello.

"Miss Blythe," he said, "you are late, and I am inundated with admirers. Save me."

"You look perfectly saved," she said, accepting the saucer he handed her. "I've never seen a man enjoy being legally ambiguous this much."

"A statesman does not enjoy ambiguity," he said. "He recognizes it for the territory in which diplomacy grows." His voice had that smooth Nile cadence that made every sentence feel like a maxim. He gestured to the nearest guests and made introductions designed to flatter all parties. Cassandra had no idea how he'd learned everyone's names in a morning. Likely the names had told him themselves.

She endured compliments on her "bravery in the tomb" with polite noises, drank tea that tasted of mint and honey and the effort not to sweat, and watched Rahetep perform. He was good at it - deploying a joke here, a perfectly weighted pause there, letting silence be the straight man. When someone asked whether embalming made one more patient, he said, with a small smile, "Only with fools," and everyone laughed as if he'd complimented them by implication. When a journalist asked whether he found the modern world shocking, he lifted an eyebrow and said, "It is not the world's fault that it insists on existing."

Cassandra let the chatter wash over her and studied him the way she might study a glyph: for repetitions, tiny variations, the place where a pattern bent. The hieroglyphs embroidered along the edge of his bandages were rare work - spell-stitching so fine it made her fingers itch with professional admiration. In certain lights, when someone spoke a word too close to the old tongue - truth, death, king, breathe - the stitches pulsed like a heartbeat under cloth. The first time she'd seen it she told herself it was a trick of sun. Today, as the poet murmured

a line about immortal longing into his notebook, she saw the ancient word for longing twitch at Rahetep's wrist.

She angled her body so that her voice would carry to him without carrying to the room. "You're growing conspicuous."

"I am unavoidable," he said lightly, and smiled for a woman whose hat was half peacock. Then, lower: "I have been many things. Invisible was never one of them."

"You need to be less avoidable," she said, and made the smile herself for a different angle, because the room was a kaleidoscope and faces were its colored glass. "The court is not resolved. Gringotts is watching. There are people who tamper with transcripts as easily as changing gloves."

He glanced at her - quick as a cat, then away. Polite. "Ah," he said. "You are on the hunt."

"I found a scent." She kept her tone casual, as though discussing tea strength. "I'm following it."

"You will, of course." He took a cube of sugar with little ceremony and tapped it against his cup because the sound pleased him. "My dear, I am not ungrateful for your concern, but I have been dead. That simplifies one's fear."

"You've also been famous," she said. "That complicates it."

Rahetep considered the air over her shoulder with interest, as if he could see his own fame entering through the door like another guest. "Fame," he said, "is simply the bureaucracy of attention."

"Explain," she said, half mocking, wholly interested.

"In life," he said, "I administered an empire. In death, I have discovered that attention is an empire. It has scribes - your newspapers; it has tax collectors - your gossip; it has borders - taste; and it has wars - fashion. The only difference is that no one admits to dying for it."

"Except poets," she said.

"Poets do not die," he said. "They decay into syntax." He watched the poet across the room with faint affection. "When I was crowned, I thought the gods wanted glory. It turns out they wanted order. Bureaucracy," he added, as if confessing a private vice, "is a form of devotion."

"Stop," Cassandra said, "you'll make me like it."

"You already do," he said. "You love the choreography of forms. You love that if you dance them correctly the door opens."

"I love unlocking things," she admitted, and took another sip of tea to keep from admitting more. The honey in it was south-market - she recognized the faint citrus note that Nebu had

demanded. The recognition made her chest ache with a silly tenderness she did not intend to have for a resurrected king and his judgmental cat.

A woman with pearls the size of opinions asked to see the amulets. Rahetep declined with more grace than should have been legal. Nebu, meanwhile, had progressed to selling “blessed pawprints” pressed in sand. When the journalist asked if the pawprint would ward off death, Nebu said, “Nothing wards off death. But it does improve your kitchen’s conversation.”

“Out,” Cassandra told him quietly when he came near. “You’re encouraging a cult.”

“I am cultivating income,” he said. “One must diversify.”

“You can diversify out of this house. Give him fifteen minutes,” she said to Rahetep, “without witnesses.”

Rahetep lifted a hand and the room tilted in his favor. He had a way of making dismissal feel like an invitation to leave gracefully. People left smiling, full of the feeling that their presence continued in their absence because he would remember them. The poet backed out slowly, still writing. The peacock hat bowed and caught on the curtain; Nebu freed it with the flick of a claw and a remark so courteous the insult in it became a compliment.

Silence went soft over the tiles. The jasmine scent thickened. Cassandra set her cup down. “You can’t hold court like this,” she said, going straight to it now that the room had stopped needing them to be charming. “The Order will hear you without needing to enter the front door.”

“The Order,” he repeated, mouth shaping the word like something sour he meant to enjoy anyway. “You have found them again.”

“I’ve found their fingerprints on paperwork,” she said. She kept Amina’s name behind her teeth, the way one keeps a fragile flame cupped from wind. “They have clerks in places where they can see things they shouldn’t. They like loops where lines should be.”

He was quiet. He did that well: the kind of quiet that was an action, not an absence. “When I was breathing,” he said at last, “my priests told me that immortality was a ladder. They wanted a rung for each virtue - courage, patience, restraint. We built a temple of stairs to keep the sky busy. The Order you describe builds a ladder from signatures and stamps.” He looked down at his hand. The hieroglyphs along his wrist twitched again - breath, again, the ink remembering air. “A ladder is a way to climb and a way to fall.”

“You sealed the Breath because of them,” she said softly. “Didn’t you.”

“I sealed it because of me,” he said, almost kindly. “It is a difficult thing to be beloved by a god. It spoils the palate. Everything else tastes like water.”

“And now?” she asked.

“Now the water tastes extraordinary.” He smiled, a human smile, smaller than his practiced courtier’s curve. “I smelled coffee this morning as if it were the first day of creation. I

listened to a tram bell and thought it was the laughter of an honest man.” He touched the rim of his cup with one bandaged finger. “I would prefer not to stop.”

That was the first truly unguarded thing he had said since he sat up in a sarcophagus and asked for tea. The truth of it hit her beneath her sternum, a clean strike. For a ridiculous instant she wanted to promise him something she had no right to promise: that she would solve the puzzle and no one would be broken by it.

Instead, because honesty and kindness were not always the same instrument, she said, “You may have to.”

“Yes,” he said simply. “Wiser kings than I have been refused what they wanted.”

The stitches along his forearm flickered again. Cassandra leaned in, eyes narrowing. The hieroglyph there was a simple one, well within her training, but it was not responding to light. It was responding to certain words. Breath. Live. Forever. As if the language itself tugged a thread sewn under his skin.

“Do they hurt?” she asked, pointing with her chin.

He followed her gaze. “Only when people say forever,” he said, and there, even on the second syllable, she saw the twitch.

“Then you’re not allowed to host salons where people chant verses into your bandages,” she said, too brisk because the worry had come up through her and needed somewhere to exit. “Low profile, Rahetep. Find one.”

He opened his hands in an elegant helplessness, palms up, as if offering nothing in a beautiful dish. “Where would you have me hide? Under the bed? I might frighten the dust.”

“Behind law,” she said. “Let the sphinx be your shield. And behind boredom - even better. Attend to paperwork. Be tedious in public. Give Cairo the gift of your absence for a week.”

He laughed - and it was a human sound as well, less polished, more pleased. “You wish to enroll me in the Afterlife of Forms.”

“I wish to keep you from becoming a headline,” she said. “Or a relic. Or a rallying cry.”

“Very well.” He considered, then nodded with the gravitas of a decree. “I shall be tedious. I shall be so dull that even Nebu will nap through my existence.”

Nebu yawned deliberately. “Promises, promises.”

Cassandra picked up her cup. “Good. I need a day in the archives and a conversation with someone who’s inconveniently on leave.”

“Should I worry?” Rahetep asked, tilting his head. The falcon statue on the table seemed to tilt with him.

“Yes,” she said, because she had no use for lies between them. “But not yet. Worry later. Today you drink tea and practice being underwhelming.”

“Your concern is very flattering,” he said, but his voice had softened. “You are a kind woman, Miss Blythe.”

“I am a competent woman,” she said, and set the cup down too hard because that was easier than setting down the ache that had appeared without permission. “Kindness is a side effect.”

He studied her face the way she had studied his glyphs and gave a small, almost private bow. The amulets chimed again. Somewhere in the house a fly bumped against a window, reminding them that the modern world included insects that did not respect dignity.

“I will be dull,” he repeated.

“And I will be loud in places where it counts.” She paused, then added, “If anyone comes asking, you haven’t seen me.”

“Miss Blythe,” he said, amused, “no one has ever not seen you.”

She grinned and felt younger by an hour. At the door, she looked back once more. The light had shifted and his bandage-stitches lay quiet, a script asleep between breaths. He lifted his cup to her across the room - a small salute, all the old marks of a courtier condensed into a human gesture.

“Don’t die,” she said.

“Already done,” he said, and his eyes were kind and very tired. “We can try something else.”

Outside, the street spilled its noise into her. She tucked the concern under her ribs like a folded letter and told herself she would take it out later when she had earned the right to read it. Behind her, Nebu began telling someone at the gate that the salon was closed for an hour due to existential tedium. The jasmine shook in a small wind, and the villa returned to breathing.

Night arrived with the ingratiating subtlety of a thief. Cairo’s noise thinned to a hum, the market shouts dissolving into occasional laughter and the clack of hooves; a tram bell wandered the distance like a memory forgetting itself. Cassandra’s room at the guesthouse held the leftover warmth of the day the way a teacup retains heat after it’s been set down - a vapor of jasmine, papyrus dust, and old stone, overlaid with the precise smell of her own work: iron-gall ink, beeswax from a ward-candle, a chip of myrrh smoking itself into a sigh.

She had barricaded herself with her papers as one might with cushions in a childhood fort. Transcript pages squared in careful piles. Field journal open to the hook and its question mark: AMINA (?). The Seal Registry sketch, a miniature orchard of clerkly flourishes. The brass token from the archives, warm from being turned over in her hand until it remembered the shape of her worry.

Her wards purred against the shutters like contented cats: a perimeter charm braided from Ravenclaw habit and fieldcraft, a Gringotts anti-snoop sigil taught with an air of “we will never speak of this outside the training room,” and a shabby little detection jinx that had always worked when the expensive ones had a snit. She trusted them the way one trusted old boots - enough to wear them, not enough to step on a snake for the joy of testing.

She meant to sleep. She really did. Nebu had told her, with the authority of someone who napped for a living, that sleep was “a productive investment.” She had even blown out the last lamp until the room was the color of a closed eye.

The first wrongness came as a sound that did not belong to night: a hiss like sand poured through paper. It threaded through the quiet and laid itself along her spine the way a measuring tape draws itself taut.

Cassandra’s eyes opened. She didn’t move. She had learned somewhere between school and the Valley that the body’s first motion after waking is the landlord of luck. She let her breath go thin as a page and listened.

Another hiss, nearer. And something her detection jinx should have screamed at stayed polite as a dinner guest. The air pressure changed. The little ward-candle, stubby and stubborn on the sill, quivered its flame as if someone had exhaled in its face.

Cassandra reached without looking - one hand to the wand under her pillow, the other to the journal. The wand came eager; the journal resisted, offended at being interrupted mid-thought. “Hush,” she whispered to the page as if the page were the one capable of panic. “We’re practicing calm.”

On the shutters, the perimeter charm glowed a soft blue, then flickered, then steadied. Flickered again. The Gringotts sigil - a neat stamp in the window’s corner, invisible unless you knew to hum the first bar of an approval song - shivered and held.

The hiss circled the room. She could hear where it wasn’t - not at the door, not by the wardrobe - and deduced where it was by process of absence: the ceiling, the seam where wall met plaster, the thin draft-line that old buildings called memory. Sand doesn’t belong indoors, she thought with pedagogue clarity, and that’s the point.

“Nebu?” she said, very softly.

“Mm,” said the night, noncommittal. Then, from under the chair, a golden shape unfolded itself reluctantly from sleep. Nebu blinked, pupils blown into coins. He listened. His ears drew back a degree. “No,” he said. “Not me. And not friendly.”

Cassandra slipped out of bed and to the floor, barefoot to feel the tremor of the timbers. The rug’s weave pressed a reassuring geometry into her skin. She had the absurd thought that if she died, the rug would remember her and be very put out about it.

“Is it a person?” she asked.

“It’s an intention,” Nebu said. His back lifted under her hand as if her touch had startled a storm. “An old one being steered by a new one. The old hates rooms. The new likes records.”

“Wonderful,” Cassandra muttered. She flicked a charm at the lamp, not to light it but to ready it - the flame lifted like a breath taken in. She licked her thumb and pressed it to the ward-candle’s wick, a field trick to make the flame taste like her so it would trust her leadership in a crisis. “We’re not home,” she told the small flicker. “But we’re house-proud.”

Something tiled across the ceiling, too soft for feet, too grainy for cloth. The hiss drew toward the desk. The topmost sheaf - the de-identified handler log - ruffled.

“Don’t you dare,” Cassandra said to the air, because one must show one’s papers that one is on their side.

The sand chose a corner. It found the one gap between shutter and sill where the carpenter had been bored or mortal. It pressed through in a ribbon no thicker than a finger. Her detection jinx, which had been offended and sulking, sat bolt upright and began to ring in a frequency only the fillings in her molars could hear. Cassandra snapped a two-fingered sigil and the shabby jinx shut up, offended anew.

The ribbon thickened and combed the room. Sand behaved badly indoors; it carried the gravity of outside with it. Grains flowed across her desk with the politeness of a guest and the entitlement of a relative. They bumped her quills aside, tasted the wax seal she’d added to her journal, and made for the parchment fragment from the courtroom, which glowed as if thrilled to see a friend.

“Nebu,” she said, “no claws unless I say so.”

“My claws do not accept orders,” he said, but his tail drew around his feet like a belt, the better to sit still. He was afraid. It showed as mockery usually, but now it was a tightness around the eyes and the focus of a predator who recognizes a fire as the kind of animal he doesn’t hunt.

Cassandra lifted her wand and its tip gathered a puff of light like a moth deciding to be helpful. She thought of arresting spells, stunning spells, the clever Philadelphia squeeze (illegal in Cairo; rude everywhere), and decided against all of them. You do not stun a weather. You redirect it.

“Broom-cupboard,” she breathed, and the childhood charm - half housekeeping, half defense - pulled the sand in a slow spiral toward the place she pointed: an empty porcelain bowl she’d used for lemon seeds. The sand resisted, lawyering the instructions - very clever - but the bowl’s curve presented a small valley and old habits loved valleys.

It would have worked if the sand had been acting alone. It wasn’t. Just as the spiral began to tighten, the ribbon kinked, like a nervous quill, and sliced toward the parchment fragment with a cheerful inevitability that made her think of Clerk, Third Class. Cassandra snapped a net into place; the sand slipped through the hole as if it had filed an exemption form.

“No you don’t,” she said. She lunged, hand closing on the fragment’s edge a heartbeat before the sand did. It was like holding a dry river. The grains climbed her fingers, found the crack between glove and wrist, and poured against her skin with polite malice. Ancient warding sand; she recognized the way it tried to read the wrist for veins to sleep in.

She spoke in the old tongue without thinking - the court’s invocations were still in her mouth from the day. “Measure,” she said, and the sand hesitated. “Mercy,” and some of it bowed. “Justice,” and the rest hissed, because there are always grains that resent a scale.

“Gringotts,” Nebu snapped, suddenly vicious. “Use your bank voice.”

Cassandra’s teeth clicked together. “By the authority of the custodial seal of Gringotts, by the chain of custody that binds us, by the ledger that knows you,” she said, the words tasting of paper and brass. She slammed her palm flat over the fragment and flared the token in her pocket with a thought. The brass got hot, very hot, as if remembering the forge. The room flooded with the smell of lemon and old finance.

The sand drew back. Not all of it. A thin skein still reached, like a tongue.

“Who sent you?” she asked it, ridiculous as asking tide. “Show me your handler.”

It did. In the fogged sheen of the window glass, in the narrow mirror by the basin, in the sheen on the polished inkstand, a glyph drew itself that was not a picture, not a word, but a habit: that upward flick at the end of a stroke. Cheerful. Neat. It was a flourish as signature, a personality distilled to movement, and it said AMINA not by letters but by muscle.

Cassandra’s heart slammed. “All right,” she said softly, to the room, to herself. “All right.”

A breeze lifted as if the building had exhaled. The ward-candle fluttered. The sand made its choice. It let go of her wrist in a sudden spill that left her skin stung and dusted with grit. It seized the parchment fragment with a serpent’s decisiveness, rolled it in a sheath of grains, and drew back toward the window seam in a swift, silent tide.

Cassandra lunged again, but the seam was cleverer than her reach. The ribbon poured out. She shoved the shutters. They scraped, heavy with heat and paint, and caught. She snarled something that could have been a charm or an opinion and shouldered them with the weight of a woman who Once Moved a Sarcophagus, Actually. The slat slammed.

Too late.

The room went very still. The detection jinx keened one last injured note and shut up entirely, deciding to take the rest of the night off. Cassandra stood with her palm on the shutters and realized she was shaking, but in a useful way: adrenaline re-shelving itself in the places it needed to be.

Nebu leapt to the sill and put his nose to the wood. He inhaled. “Old tomb,” he said. “New hands.”

“I saw her hand,” Cassandra said, staring, as if staring were an instrument. “Or her hand’s habit.”

Nebu’s whiskers flattened. “Clerks shouldn’t have weather spirits on leashes.”

“Clerks shouldn’t re-countersign directors,” she said, voice thinner than she wanted. She stepped back. There was sand in her hair. She could feel it, each grain a declaration of intent. She ran a hand through the curls and shook it free onto the rug. The rug, to its credit, accepted the mess with the long-suffering dignity of textiles everywhere.

On the inside of the windowpane, where her breath had fogged a half-moon in the heat, the remaining grit settled. It drew itself into letters with the self-importance of a finger on a dirty carriage window. The strokes were precise, tidy, a hand that had learned to be legible in a hurry.

YOU UNSEALED MORE THAN A TOMB.

Nebu read it aloud with exquisite disdain. “How original.”

Cassandra reached out, but didn’t touch it. The letters held their edge. She could see where the grains had aligned to mimic ink, tiny dunes marching into punctuation. Her name wasn’t on it. Somehow that made it worse.

“She wanted the fragment,” Cassandra said, thinking rapidly, stacking suppositions like bricks and checking each one for wobble. “She wanted to remove proof that the court text flickered. Or she wanted to erase her own touch from it. Or both. And she could reach my room.”

Nebu turned and looked at her fully, pupils narrow now, golden ring bright. “And she knows that you know she can reach your room.”

A ridiculous laugh barked out of Cassandra - too bright, too brittle, but honest. “Good! Excellent! We’ve skipped the pretense.”

“Humans,” Nebu said to the room, “take heart from the oddest defeats.”

Cassandra wiped her gritty wrist on her nightshirt and picked up her journal. The wax seal had held. She kissed it, because she was tired and affectionate toward inanimate objects that did their jobs. She wrote under AMINA (?): sent sand to retrieve fragment; cheerful hand in reflective surfaces; message on pane: ‘You unsealed more than a tomb.’ Capable of bypassing wards via seams. Likely Order-trained. Find London duplicate. Find Amina faster.

She underlined faster and then underlined it again until the paper growled. The letters on the window blurred at the edges as if bored. She could have wiped them, but she left them as a promise to the morning: you are not imagining it.

“I hate them,” she said quietly. “Not her. I don’t hate her. I hate the part of me that understands her.”

“Ah,” Nebu said, and the sound was old. He jumped from the sill and, after a dignified hesitation, pressed his head against her wrist where the sand had tried to learn her. “Good. You’re afraid of the right things.”

Cassandra breathed. The night breathed back. Outside, somewhere, a cart wheel hit a rut and turned a simple jolt into a small thunderclap. Inside, the ward-candle steadied. She relit the lamp. The room sprang into its old colors, ordinary as relief.

“Sleep,” Nebu advised, settling himself into the chair with all the moral authority of gravity. “You can hunt better when your metaphors aren’t hallucinating.”

“I’ll sleep when I’ve written to London,” Cassandra said, because obstinacy was her lullaby. She steadied the page, and the letters on the glass watched her as she made a neat list: telegram to Ledger Room, Vault B-2; alert Tarek; visit Court Liaison; acquire better shutters; buy more honey (for bribery, not for tea); keep Rahetep quiet.

She paused, ink shining, and added: lock window; breathe; do not let fear become the shape of the room.

When she finally lay down again, it was with her wand under her pillow, the brass token under her palm, and Nebu on the chair like a carved lion pretending to be upholstery. The letters on the window sat prim and officious, and the little draft that had carried the sand through the seam sighed itself out. The night retook its territory grain by grain until the only things that moved were the slow, small breaths of two beings very determined to keep moving tomorrow.

Morning broke the way Cairo preferred to do most things: loudly, fragrantly, and with a certain theatrical conviction that this was the only morning that had ever mattered. A seller of sesame rings sang his inventory up the street; someone argued with a goat in a tone of long familiarity; a tram sighed past with the hiss of steam and secrets. The guesthouse roof tiles radiated yesterday’s heat like old gossip. Cassandra stood at her window and considered the letters the sand had left behind - prim, tidy, officious - and decided to let them sit as a reminder that paranoia needn’t be unproductive.

A rap came at her door, the sensible kind used by people who valued hinges. “Miss Blythe?” Tarek’s voice, dry as a desert, softer than he let it be in public. “If you are awake, I come bearing apologies and beans.”

She opened to the smell of breakfast and the sight of Tarek el-Farouk balancing a tray with a kind of academic heroism: clay bowls of ful medames glossed with oil, a pyramid of flatbread, salted cucumbers, a tin pot of coffee that had ambitions to set policy. He had rolled his sleeves in careful thirds and brought the heat with him in a line of sweat at his brow. His spectacles were slightly askew, which in a man like Tarek counted as dishevelment.

“Apologies?” she said, stepping back to let him in. “For the state of the world, or for stealing my morning with carbohydrates?”

“For assuming the court would protect your papers,” he said, setting the tray on her narrow table. He glanced once at the window, once at her face, and then, polite as a handkerchief, at

the note she had left in the margin of her journal, which lay open like a considered confession. “And for thinking you would sleep.”

“I slept,” she said, scooping yogurt into a bowl. “Briefly. With a brass token for a teddy bear.”

“That’s more than most heroes manage,” he said. “Please eat. Talking on an empty stomach turns even sensible people into revolutionaries.”

“I’ve always wondered what would do it,” she said. “Hunger it is.”

They ate for a few minutes with the straightforward focus of people who remember what hunger does to thinking. The ful was warm and honest, the bread tearing with that particular soft gasp fresh bread makes. The coffee tasted of dark ideas.

When the first layer of necessity had been met, Tarek looked at the window properly. “Artful,” he said, of the letters in sand. “Intended to be seen.”

“That was my thought,” Cassandra said, and parceled out the facts neatly, like bread. “Clerk’s hand. Third class. A habit at the end of a stroke. The same hook I found in the seal registry. She - Amina bat-Hassan - retrieved a fragment from my room with warded sand. The thread runs through court and bank both.”

Tarek listened the way good scholars listen, with his silence doing the lifting. He glanced at the ward-candle, at the way its wax had pooled on the sill into a geography of hardened decisions. “And you are still here.”

“I dislike rewarding intimidation with useful chaos,” she said. “Also I ran out of rooms to pace.”

He smiled - not quite visible; a shift in the posture of his mouth that a casual observer would have missed. “I am glad you are still in one place long enough to be found,” he said. “I brought a thing.”

He set a slim folio between the bowls with the reverence of a priest placing a relic. Its cover was archival linen the color of paperwork. “Notes from a friend in antiquities,” he said. “Things you should not know if you want to sleep. Rumors, mostly. Threads.”

She wiped her fingers, swore loyalty to nothing, and opened it. Inside, clippings and handwritten fragments nested like birds in reeds. Names appeared and reappeared: an archivist dismissed for “discretionary zeal,” a shipment miscatalogued into a vault that did not exist, a court liaison who had resigned to “pursue… daylight.”

At the center, ink darker than the rest: THE ORDER OF THE SUN’S SHADOW.

The words had acquired capitals, which is how you know a story has joined a club. Underneath, in Tarek’s measured hand: Legacy of priestly faction from Third Sun Dynasty. Belief: immortality attainable through breath-binding. Modern iteration: scholars first, then bureaucrats. Thesis: Death is a category error. Method: Tomb magic + administrative capture.

Cassandra traced the phrase administrative capture with a forefinger that hummed faintly - a ghost of the court's chord still in her skin. "They believe eternity is just very good paperwork," she said.

"They believe that if you speak to a soul in the right grammar, it will obey," Tarek said. "They prefer places where records are kept. Courts. Banks. Ministries. Anywhere people believe that ink is the same as truth if the stamp is impressive enough."

She considered the letters on her window. "They're not wrong about the grammar," she said softly. "But they are wrong about what the soul owes."

"They think souls owe interest," Tarek said. His eyes met hers. "Cassandra, they will not forgive your curiosity if it is not for them."

"I don't intend to ask for forgiveness," she said, leaning back and letting the chair complain. "I intend to ask for files."

He huffed a laugh into his cup. "I dislike you less today," he said. "It makes me uncomfortable."

"What you dislike is my passport," she said. "You just don't want to be rude to coffee."

"It deserves courtesy," he said. "As do the dead." He nodded toward the window. "And you're being told, neatly, that the dead have opinions about your schedule."

"That was last night's opinion," she said. "This morning's is mine."

He sobered without losing humor. "Tell me the plan that has formed in your head while you were pretending to chew."

She laid it out with the economy of a woman who had decided that pretending was a waste of ritual: "I write to London - the Ledger Room, Vault B-2 - for the duplicate of the authorization I found mis-shelved. I visit Court Liaison and ask, with biscuits, who signs documents when the sphinx is bored. I find Amina bat-Hassan, who is currently on leave without forwarding, which is the bureaucratic equivalent of a body in the river. I find out whether she is a zealot with a pen or a pen at someone else's throat."

"And the part where you don't get yourself arrested by three different authorities for sticking your hands in their filing cabinets?" Tarek asked, gently as one might ask a cat if it had considered not leaping off the balcony.

"That part is why I invited you to breakfast in my mind," she said. "You can tell me which doors to knock on without being invited to leave through a window."

"You give me too much credit," he said, but he was already thinking. She could see the algebra behind his eyes, ethics calculating routes through stone. "Court Liaison will not help you openly. They are terrified of their own quills. But one of them - Bashira el-Najjar - has a cousin who sells papyrus in the bazaar and despises the Order on principle. I can speak to her.

The Ledger Room will ignore you unless the request appears to have come from within a conversation that has already begun. I know someone in London."

"Of course you do," she said. "All right. I write the letter; you send it by a language they trust."

"And Amina?" he asked.

Cassandra's jaw tightened a fraction. "I do not want to hurt her," she said. "I don't know yet whether she is a villain or a vector."

"Vectors are responsible even when they don't intend to be," Tarek said, not scolding, simply aligning definitions. "We must find her. Quietly. If she is with the Order willingly, they will be using her like a signature stamp. If not…" He did not finish the sentence. The room knew it: If not, then Amina was in danger.

"Then:" Cassandra pulled her journal close. The window's letters watched her. "Bazaar rumors. Court cousins. London duplicates. We pull on all three threads and see which one strangles us first."

"I have always found optimism refreshing," Tarek murmured.

"Good," she said. "You're about to find it exhausting."

He glanced again at the sand message. "You should change rooms," he said. "Or at least the shutters. Or spend a night somewhere else, where the seams are different."

"I will change the seams," she said, thinking of how the sand had lawyered her spell. "I know a charm that teaches wood to misremember itself. But I won't run. Running teaches the hunter your pace."

He regarded her for a long breath. "I see why the cat likes you," he said at last. "You confuse the definition of prey."

"We like to keep our hunters literate," she said.

"Then learn this literacy." He tapped the folio. "They call themselves the Sun's Shadow for a reason. They think they are the necessary darkness that makes light visible. They think whatever they do is justified by the brightness of the idea. If you argue with them on the level of brilliance, you will lose. Argue with them on the level of harm."

"Harm," she repeated, tasting the word like medicine. "Yes."

He stood. The tray looked suddenly too domestic for the strategies balanced on it. "I will go to the bazaar. Bashira's cousin keeps a stall under the awning with the blue tear in it. If anyone knows which clerks grew zeal where they should have grown boredom, she will." He paused at the door, adjusted his spectacles in the way that made him look like the sort of man who cataloged storms. "Cassandra-"

"Yes?"

“Do not bring Rahetep,” he said. “You will be tempted - he opens doors because doors want to be remembered - but today you must open them by being uninteresting.”

She thought of Rahetep’s easy gravity and the way his bandage-stitches had fluttered when someone said forever. “He will be practicing being dull,” she said. “I gave him homework.”

Tarek smiled properly then - small, sincere, the sort of smile that moved very little and changed a room anyway. “You are a difficult person,” he said. “It is a relief.”

“Flattery so early,” she said. “How continental.”

He bowed a little - not like Rahetep’s courtly tilt, but as if acknowledging that something ungoverned had nonetheless arranged itself. At the threshold, he looked at the letters one last time. “They will come again,” he said. “They like to repeat themselves. It makes them feel inevitable.”

“Good,” Cassandra said, picking up her pen. “I like rehearsal.”

After he left, the room expanded by the inches men leave behind. Cassandra cleared the breakfast things with a charm that did not so much clean as remind the bowls how they had felt before being dirty. She sat, and wrote to London in a hand that had decided not to shake: to the Custodian of Vault B-2, Ledger Room, London Gringotts - Request for duplicate countersignature record, External Liaison Authorization, file ref. 6-Months-Prior; chain-of-custody particulars; clerk annotations.

She sealed it with wax that smelled like oranges and the theory of order. She wrote a second note for Tarek’s friend with the blue tear, containing nothing incriminating and everything obvious: Amina bat-Hassan, Clerk Third Class; on leave; possible association with Order; any sightings, any gossip, any debt.

Then she stood in the doorway for a moment and watched the letters on her window do nothing. “You’re not my doom,” she told them, because naming things helped. “You’re my calendar.”

The letters did not answer. The city did: a tram bell, a boy’s laugh, the clink of a spoon on glass. Cassandra tucked the letters into her pocket, gathered her wand and her journal, and stepped into the day with the peculiar calm that comes when fear is given a list and a schedule.

Cairo gathered itself for noon like a snake for a strike. Heat pressed a palm to every surface; the sky went brass. The city’s sound thinned to glints - a distant seller of oranges inventing a new melody, a cart wheel protesting its geometry, a muezzin’s call riding the light like a thread. Cassandra walked with her journal under her arm and the letters from London and the bazaar sealed and entrusted to messengers who swore by every honest thing to reach their destinations. Sending words out had left her unnervingly light, like a ship after cargo. Now came the ballast: choosing what to carry inside.

The guesthouse’s stairwell smelled of limewash and old conversations. On the landing, a window stood open to a pocket of air that had made peace with the heat. Dust motes rose and

fell, patient as breath. Cassandra stopped there, without meaning to, and opened her journal because that gesture had always given her nervous system something to do besides rehearsal.

She turned to a fresh page. The paper had that faint tooth she liked - enough resistance to make ink feel like a decision. In the margin, beneath AMINA (?), beneath the list where she had already underlined faster twice, she wrote in a heading hand that could have served as a ruling:

CHAPTER: DILEMMA - FIELD NOTES (UNPUBLISHED, FOR NOW)

She began, not with the facts, which she had already catalogued until they felt bored, but with the feeling that had woken in her when the sand's tidy message resolved on her glass.

- There is a difference between being watched and being witnessed. The former is a cage; the latter is a mirror. The Order is the sort that polishes cages and tells you you're looking at yourself.

She paused, surprised at her own neatness. Then:

- I have never wanted to be righteous. I've wanted to be right. Today it occurs to me that the second without the first is simply… accurate burglary.

Ink shone and dulled. She could hear the muezzin still, the call ending in a syllable so human it held a smile. She turned the page to the blank side and drew the cheerful hook, again and again, the way a child writes someone's name in secrecy that isn't secret at all. The upward flick accumulated into a pattern that looked like steps. A ladder. Or a fall.

A shadow padded onto the stair behind her. "You're writing advice to your future self," Nebu said, settling on the step with the opportunism of water. "Don't bother. She won't listen."

"She'll pretend to," Cassandra said. "She's vain about her library."

Nebu regarded the page and flicked an ear. "You've drawn your enemy so much he'll recognize himself and sue for copyright."

"Good," she said. "It will bring him into the open, and I can cross-examine the suit."

"You are feeling brave," Nebu observed, in the tone of a weather report. "Or you are feeling cornered and have misdiagnosed it."

"Both," she said. She capped her ink, because even bravery did not excuse spills. "Tarek's gone to pull on a cousin. London is being professionally offended on my behalf. I am going to the Court Liaison to ask politely for what they will not give, and less politely for what they will not admit they have. Between us, we should be able to move something that insists on being still."

Nebu considered this. "An admirable plan. It includes at least three opportunities for humiliation."

"And two for biscuits," she said.

“Ah,” he said. “Then the gods are with you.”

They went down together. On the bottom step, she stopped, because this was a good time to break something and choose not to. She set her palm against the guesthouse door, which had a crack along one panel like a laugh line. The seam that last night had served as an invitation for sand still showed the faint memory of motion, the way water leaves a darker trail on wood. Cassandra drew her wand and, with the tender severity of someone unknotting a child’s hair, taught the door to misremember itself.

The charm was old household magic, learned in a kitchen when she was twelve from a witch who kept secrets like spices. It turned the wood’s grain sliders and nesting boxes; it asked the door what shape it had loved being before it had gotten tired and started taking shortcuts. The seam shrugged under her hand, puzzled, then sighed as if it had remembered childhood. When she finished, the crack lay fractionally left of where cunning would expect it.

“There,” she said, as much to her own habit of leaving things for later as to the door. “Seams are traitors unless they have a better story.”

Nebu sniffed, approved. “And your better story is?”

“That Cairo will be boring for clerks,” she said, opening the door to the street’s glare. “And interesting for me.”

They stepped into light so white the city looked briefly like the inside of a shell. The alley smelled of stone, cumin, warm metal. A boy ran past holding a kite shaped like a fish that insisted on hunting birds. On the guesthouse wall, someone had chalked a crude falcon - a child’s tribute to kings - and other hands had tried to wipe it away and failed. Cassandra touched the chalk with a forefinger and came away marked. She left the white line on her skin.

Court Liaison sat in a block of buildings that had the gracelessness of things that believe utility is its own grace. Inside was cooler but grimmer, the coolness the sort that comes from stone remembering night. The clerk at the front desk wore spectacles and the expression of a filing cabinet that had learned to frown. The room smelled like paper that had considered burning and thought better of the drama.

“Good afternoon,” Cassandra said, and let every inch of her schooling line up behind the words. “I brought biscuits.”

The clerk did not blink. “Form?”

“Fifteen-A,” Cassandra said. “And B. And, if you’re feeling daring, a conversational tone.”

The clerk led her through a labyrinth that had begun as architecture and become a sport. Under glass cases on the walls, old verdicts yellowed, preserved like moths for their pattern rather than their flutter. She thought of Rahetep saying bureaucracy was a kind of devotion and felt the oddness of agreeing with him and wanting to set fire to his subject.

Bashira el-Najjar met her in a room with too many chairs. She was small, brisk, hand like a clamp. Her hair was knotted in a way that would survive a sandstorm and three unethical arguments. Her eyes were tired and bright.

“Mr. el-Farouk sent word,” Bashira said without prelude. “He says you are honest and incompetent at lying. I find this promising. It means I will not like you, because I will not be able to place you in a category that lets me finish my work without thinking.”

“Categorization is a sin where I come from,” Cassandra said mildly. “We prefer nuance.”

Bashira made a noise between amusement and impatience. “We prefer speed. Ask.”

Cassandra asked. She kept her words short and her tone low, and did not say Order. She said hand. She said habit. She said loop in a chain of custody because this was a temple and she would speak its liturgy. Bashira’s mouth thinned when Cassandra said Amina. At the third sentence, she held up a hand.

“Stop,” she said. “You do not know whether you accuse my office of negligence or conspiracy, so you pad your language with craftsman’s terms. It is endearing. It will not save you when someone decides you are inconvenient.”

“I am already inconvenient,” Cassandra said. “I’m trying to be useful while I’m at it.”

A pause, the kind that lives on a pivot. Then Bashira stood, went to a cabinet that had the shifty look of a fox, and took out a ledger labeled HAND SAMPLE-CLERKS: CURRENT. She set it down with a thud of complicity. “You did not get this here,” she said. “You did not see me. You have ten minutes. If anyone asks, we are discussing the weather, which is obscene.”

Cassandra nodded the kind of nod one gives to a person one suspects one could be in a different life. She turned pages. Hands marched by in neat arrogance. At Amina’s, her heartbeat put a thumbprint on the paper. The cheerful flick waved at her like a relative across a crowd. She copied enough to convict whoever needed convicting later - and enough to acquit a woman if the world turned that way. She did it quickly and carefully. The biscuit tin on the table watched her. When she finished, she slid the tin toward Bashira, who did not smile and did not refuse.

“Your handwriting,” Bashira said, as if diagnosing an illness, “is that of a person who is sorry and refuses to say so.”

“I am sorry and I refuse to say so,” Cassandra said. “Thank you for the contradiction.”

“Go,” Bashira said, already putting the ledger back into the fox. “And do not come here again unless you have brought a miracle and six forms.”

Outside, the sun had moved from cruelty to bureaucracy: less heat, more glare. Cassandra walked until the building stopped being a building and became part of the city again. Her knees did not shake. Her hand did not shake. Her mind had calmed into that shaved-ice

clarity that makes it possible to thread a needle while being shot at (metaphorically, she hoped).

A boy with ink-stained fingers ran up and thrust a folded note at her as if returning a stolen heart. “From the man with the spectacles,” he panted. “The one who frowns politely.”

“Tarek,” she translated, and flipped the paper open with her thumb. The handwriting was neat as a carved lintel.

Blue-tear awning confirms: Amina bat-Hassan left post five days after verdict. Seen last at stall of a woman who sells mirrors that prefer honesty. Rumor: she asked how to vanish without dying. Address enclosed. Do not go alone.

The address pricked at her memory, a corner near the bazaar’s fire lanes where the air always smelled like cinnamon and regret. Cassandra folded the note and pressed it against her journal’s cover until paper thought it had always been one thing. She looked back the way she’d come, toward the Court’s weight of stone, and forward toward the bazaar where everything pretended to be lighter than it was.

“Do not go alone,” she read softly, and considered what she knew of herself in all the small hours. She disliked being told not to. But she disliked even more the memory of sand on her skin migrating toward vein.

“Later,” she told the address, out loud. “We will speak later.”

The day broke itself into practicalities after that, because life does not stop for plots. She bought shutters with fewer opinions and more bolts. She learned the name of a carpenter who could make wood forget how to be obliging. She drank water that had thought very hard about being cold. She spoke to a messenger whose commitment to discretion was almost mystical. She rewove her perimeter charm and folded her shabby detection jinx into it with a pat on the head and a threat of retirement if it embarrassed her again.

By the time the sun had tucked itself into red, the city had forgiven itself for being hot and loud and become merely itself: alleys full of children whose names would become grandparents, teashops exhaling menthol and argument, a rhythm in the air that was not music and not silence but the place between them.

Cassandra climbed the guesthouse stairs with the slow satisfaction of a list turned into fewer lines. At her door, she stopped because the seam sat where she had left it - slightly wrong - and because beneath the wrongness the wood felt… loyal. She smiled at a piece of carpentry. “Well done.”

Inside, the room had cooled by two degrees and acquired the comforting smell of dust acknowledging defeat. On the pane, the sand letters had fallen into a tired blur. She could have wiped them then, and perhaps she should, but she left them until morning to give herself the dignity of erasing when not instructed by enemy or pride.

Nebu was already in her chair, which he did not so much sit in as inhabit. He watched her with the unabashed curiosity of a creature that never apologized for wanting to know. He

flicked his tail once, the punctuation of affection.

“Well?” he asked. “Did the bureaucracy purr for you?”

“It coughed,” she said, and loosened the knot of hair at the nape of her neck. “But it did not bite. I have the hand in my pocket and a path to the woman it belongs to.”

“Good,” he said. “Excellent. Now we can sleep and dream of terrible ideas.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and let the day settle in layers - the clerk’s cheerful flick; Bashira’s tired intelligence; Tarek’s neat warning; the way Rahetep had held his cup as if practicing being mortal. She took up her journal one more time, the way a priest reaches again for the bowl after the ceremony to check nothing has cracked.

In a square of remaining light, she wrote:

- Resolve (do not announce to anyone but paper): I will follow this to the end that harms least. Not the end that shines most. Remember: Brightness is not a virtue. It is a direction.

- Practical: speak to Amina with mouth, not wand. Bring Tarek. Bring biscuits. Do not bring Rahetep. He is doing very well at being boring.

She closed the book. The brass token from the archives lay beside it, warm as a heartbeat. She set her palm on it, as one might on a small animal’s side to reassure it that it was not alone.

“Curiosity,” Nebu said from the chair, into the room’s gentling air, “has killed several cats, in case that proverb hadn’t made it to your school.”

Cassandra lay back and pulled the sheet to her ribs, because the heat was no longer an argument. “Then I’d better learn resurrection quickly,” she said, and her voice made the joke a promise. “Or better - how not to need it.”

Nebu considered her for a long beat that might have been approval and might have been pity and was probably both. “Sleep, curse-breaker,” he said. “Dream lightly. Think carefully.”

The window breathed. Somewhere, a tram bell insisted on one last circuit of the night. Cassandra let her eyes close not as surrender but as strategy. In the morning, the letters on the glass would be wiped away by her hand, not theirs. In the morning, she would walk into the bazaar under an awning with a blue tear and ask for a woman who had tried to vanish without dying. In the morning, she would be the person who had chosen a ladder’s rung not by height but by whether it held.

For now, she was a quiet animal in a hot country, keeping watch by sleeping. The city exhaled in time.

Chapter 8: The Shadow in the Market

Chapter 8
The Shadow in the Market

Morning unrolled over Cairo like a silk ribbon, and the floating bazaar tugged itself awake along its moorings. Ropes creaked against minarets and parapets as the market's vast wooden platforms rose in staggered tiers above the city, each held by charms that hummed underfoot like sleepy bees. Steam from potion samovars bloomed into the warm air and hung there, perfumed with cinnamon, mint, and something like toasted lightning. A flock of argument-prone brooms clattered by in formation, scolding one another in bristly whispers. Somewhere, a vendor tuned a glass oud that sang in pure, shivering notes, drawing a rapt audience of ghosts who hoped sound could touch them.

Cassandra had slept two hours, which was one more than she'd earned. The courtroom's impossible geometry still tugged behind her eyes - the sphinx judge's stare, the evidence that had tried to rewrite itself mid-sentence - and beneath it all the frayed, needling anger of being lied to by someone she admired. She kept her hands at her sides so they wouldn't ball into fists. Curse-breakers were meant to be meticulous instruments, not cudgels.

"Observe," Tarek said, gesturing with the stem of his spectacles as if he'd conjured the bazaar himself. His voice was cool, Cairo dawn distilled. "An ecosystem of commerce and memory. Please try not to purchase any of it."

"I'll restrain myself," Cassandra said. "I left my imperialist handbag in London."

He gave her a sidelong smile that almost forgave her. "I was going to say you left your expense account in the court clerk's inkwell."

They stepped from the stair onto the first platform. The boards were old and smooth, worn by centuries of bargaining feet. Every stall held a little theatre: jars of powdered moonlight flickering like bottled sighs; stacked pyramids of spice jars that floated seven inches above their tables out of sheer pride; piles of parchment that re-inked when you frowned convincingly at them.

A pair of goblin factors eyed Cassandra the way jewelers eye a distant thunderstorm. She pretended not to notice. This was still Gringotts territory, even if she wished it weren't.

"You're sure the parchment fragment was seen up here?" she asked, lowering her voice.

Tarek nodded. "A runner I trust - mostly - saw it last night. Golden thread binding, wax seal impressed with a sun half-shadowed. He said the seller spoke Ancient Egyptian with an accent from nowhere. Which generally means a learned liar."

Cassandra's mouth twitched. "I thought the learned liars prefer Latin."

"We're cosmopolitan."

Wind gusted, and a garland of dried dates spun like a slow clock. The rope moorings sang a low note that vibrated up through Cassandra's boots and into her bones. She felt, absurdly, as if the city were breathing beneath her - deep ribs of stone and spellwork lifting and falling.

A thin shadow slinked along the edge of a tented awning ahead, then sprang to the top of a pitcher stacked in improbable balance. Nebu yawned, exposing a perfect pink tongue and a disdain sharpened by nine or ten lives.

"Lovely," the cat drawled. "You brought your moral compass. I was worried she'd leave it under the court bench with her other scruples."

"Good morning to you too," Cassandra said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I refused to." Nebu's tail made a lazy S. "Sleep is an admission of defeat."

Tarek didn't break stride. "We're looking for a stall dealing in funerary scraps. Linen. Runes. The sort of sacrilege your friends would keep under a table until money appears."

"Try aisle of the Ambitious," Nebu said, flicking an ear. "Left after the jars of hopelessly cursed jam."

They pushed deeper into the bazaar. The floating lanes narrowed and braided, then opened again into courts strung with lanterns that burned with captured dusk. A boy with a dragonfly on a leash offered Cassandra a packet of sugared dates; she bought two, then pretended not to notice the way the dragonfly eyed her hairpins.

"Why are all your snacks hexed?" she asked Tarek, chewing.

"Preservation," he said. "And entertainment."

They rounded a silk-draped aisle and stopped. Ahead, under a canopy patched with stars, a stall displayed folded linens the color of ivory and old sun. Each square of cloth was bound with gold thread and labeled in a precise hand. A modest sign read: FRAGMENTS FOR STUDY - AUTHENTICATED.

Cassandra's mouth went cold.

She knew that weave. The slightly raised warp where warding strands had been threaded in; the faint varnish of protective oils, still exhaling a floral sweetness centuries later; the glimmer of hieroglyphic ink that had once run in perfect rows along the cloth and now flickered when her gaze brushed it. These had wrapped Rahetep. These had carried his spells like veins.

She didn't realize she'd moved until her fingers were inches from the nearest square. The linen shivered beneath her shadow - the way a living thing fidgets when dreaming.

"Don't," Tarek said, very softly.

Cassandra's hand stopped. She drew breath instead, measured and careful, as if inhaling might move something sacred. She let her professional eye take over - the one that saw

spellwork the way architects see stress lines and dancers see rhythm. The wards were broken, yes, but not extinguished. Whoever had cut the wrappings had done so along weak points in the matrix, mapped with a scholar’s care. This was not reckless looting. This was a thesis with a knife.

The vendor materialized as if condensed from perfume. A young person, perhaps, or ageless - smooth, precise face, eyes a flat gray that reflected lanternlight without taking it in. They wore gloves so clean they seemed theoretical.

“Interested?” the vendor asked in flawless English. “They’re from a very polite mummy.”

Cassandra lifted her gaze. “You’ll find politeness evaporates when one’s bandages are stolen.”

“A matter of perspective.” The vendor gestured delicately, as if indicating a particular star. “These are already loose from their owner in every way that matters. What remains is scholarship.”

Nebu sneezed as if the word were dusty. “Scholarship is what thieves call themselves at dinner.”

“Provenance?” Tarek asked. His tone was gentle enough to be mistaken for harmless, which was, of course, how sharp tones survive.

The vendor smiled with no teeth. “Acquired from a source that prefers to remain mist.”

Cassandra’s temper made a small, bright sound inside her chest. She kept it caged. “These were protected by a warding schema I designed,” she said, light, almost airy. “It included a striping curse keyed to anyone handling them without authorization.” She scratched her nose with the back of her hand. “The kind that doesn’t show immediately. The kind that waits until you are alone and very proud.”

The vendor’s eyes didn’t flicker. “A bluff,” they said. “Charming.”

“Possibly.” Cassandra smiled back, matching their emptiness. “Would you like to test it?”

The vendor’s gloved fingers smoothed a fold of linen. “You are far from your bank, Miss Blythe.”

“And you’re far from a museum,” she said. “How much?”

Tarek’s head whipped toward her. Nebu’s tail went question-mark.

“Research,” Cassandra added tightly. “If I can get even one fragment back, the runes may tell me how they were extracted. I’m not leaving Rahetep’s skin in a market basket.”

The vendor considered her, the way a mirror considers a face. “Fifty galleons per square,” they said at last. “One hundred for those with intact glyph junctions. The thread alone is worth - ”

Cassandra didn’t let them finish. She leaned closer, and every trace of polite Gringotts posture fell from her voice. “Where did you get them?”

The gray eyes cooled another degree. “From the past,” the vendor said. “Where all beautiful things live until someone teaches them better.”

She saw it then: a hairline tremble in the air over the back counter, where a secondary charm hummed. The faintest ripple of sand, rhythmically exhaled and inhaled, as if the stall itself had lungs. A bypass ward - designed to unhook protective spells without tripping alarms. Intricate. Illicit. Familiar.

It wore Araminta Voss’s favorite sigil like a watermark.

Cassandra’s stomach folded upon itself. She swallowed the taste of tin. “Tarek,” she said, not taking her eyes off the shimmer. “Do you see it?”

“I see it,” he said softly. “And I see someone who provides this stall with lovely things.”

“Do you intend to arrest me?” the vendor asked, amusement blooming like a bruise.

“Not I,” Tarek said. “I dislike paperwork.”

Cassandra reached into her satchel and laid a small brass disc on the counter. It was stamped with the Cairo Gringotts seal - a key borrowed that morning from a friend of a friend who would be either grateful or furious, depending on how the next five minutes unfolded. The disc quivered, resonating with the bypass ward, and a thin tongue of light licked the air toward it.

The vendor’s composure cracked. Only a little - a fissure that looked like interest, and then like fear. Their hand moved toward the counter’s edge.

Nebu’s ears flattened. “Cassandra,” he said warningly.

She looked the vendor in the eye and said, pleasantly, “I’m calling my bank.”

The vendor’s hand dropped and touched nothing - then touched everything, because it found a sequence of charms hidden in the underside of the counter and tapped them in swift succession. The shimmer collapsed. The stall seemed to flinch. The neatly bound squares of linen rustled like startled birds.

“Ah,” Nebu breathed. “Panic. My favorite music.”

“Stop,” Tarek said - not a plea, an order.

The vendor smiled with all their teeth this time, which turned out to be perfect and predatory. “No,” they said. “You stop.”

The back of the stall peeled open like a curtain. A narrow passage revealed itself beyond, a jugular vein of market labyrinth. The vendor snatched a bundle - Cassandra’s eye caught the glint of a junction glyph, intact, perfect, obscene - and bolted into the dark.

Cassandra didn’t remember deciding. She moved, snatching up the brass disc, her boots biting into the wood as she vaulted the counter. For a heartbeat the lanterns swung and the entire bazaar seemed to lean with her, ropes complaining, city breath catching.

“Cassandra!” Tarek shouted, already running.

Nebu launched from the pitcher, a gold streak with opinions.

The stall’s canopy billowed behind them and snapped shut on the empty air, shaking out a rain of dust that smelled of tomb oils and thyme. The bandage-squares left on the table shivered once, then lay still, pale as unspoken words.

Cassandra plunged into the passage after the vendor, heart knocking at her ribs like an impatient guest. Ahead, the market’s arteries twisted and gleamed. Wind tugged at her hairpins and the moorings sang their low, warning note.

“Try not to buy anything,” Tarek called grimly from behind her.

“Not planning to,” she said, and ran.

The passage was a throat through the bazaar’s body - narrow, ribbed in rope and shadow, hemmed by stacked crates whose labels shifted when you looked at them: SAFFRON / SIREN / SURPRISE. A draft flowed toward them as if the market inhaled. Cassandra’s boots pounded old timber. Behind, Tarek’s footfalls were quieter, precise. Overhead, Nebu ran along the tie-beams like a gilded thought.

Ahead, the vendor’s silhouette flickered at every turn, coat flaring, shoulders a calm geometry that infuriated her. They didn’t run like thieves. They ran like someone demonstrating a point.

“Left!” Nebu called, whiskers flaring. “No - drat, they mirrored the junction. Second left, which is secretly the third.”

Cassandra slashed her wand through the air, sketching a quick locator rune that bit the world and spat out a phosphor thread. It snapped onto the vendor like a fishline. The thief glanced back, assessing, then brushed a hand across their own forearm; Cassandra’s thread writhed, turned to ribbon, tied itself into a very tidy bow, and vanished.

“Obnoxious,” she muttered, breath stinging her throat.

“Compliment later,” Tarek said. He leapt a coiled serpent-rope that tried to hiss him into stumbling and snapped a palm against a doorcharm as he passed; the ward shuddered and went sullen, letting their pursuers be someone else’s problem.

They burst from the passage onto a higher platform - a wide airway where flying carpets queued like taxis, pennants snapping, drivers bickering. A whistle-witch in a peaked cap was attempting to impose order with a brass trumpet and a great deal of optimism.

The vendor didn’t bother with a queue. They sprang onto a courier carpet, flicked it with two fingers, and the mat responded like a racing hound, belly skimming the boards before it

hopped the safety rope and shot into the open lanes - the sky-lanes - where the bazaar's platforms were separated by gulfs of blue.

Cassandra moved without thinking. She flashed her Gringotts medallion at the nearest driver - a stooped man whose carpet bore the legend TEA URGENT - then remembered she had no right to do so and flung him a double fist of coin to make it honest. "Emergency," she said. "Moral and otherwise."

"Bring back the carpet in one piece," he said, already bowing away from it with the weary grace of a man who'd learned to accept destiny.

She and Tarek hit the weave together. The mat tensed like a startled cat, then surged after the courier.

Wind. Heat. A sudden subtraction of floor.

They shot into the lane, ropes like harp strings flashing past, the bazaar now a honeycomb of suspended streets and banners and sails. Somewhere a kettle shrieked and then, entirely reasonably, took flight. Vendors leaned out to heckle them in three languages; charmed awnings curled back from their path with prim disapproval.

Cassandra flattened her free hand to the weave and felt the carpet's temper: it liked manners, hated hesitation, relished speed if you asked nicely. "Please," she said, earnest, absurd. "Faster."

The weave thrilled. They gained.

Nebu streaked above them on the tie-beams, an arrow of gold. He preferred the certainty of wood and magic to the compromise of woven transport. He was shouting advice that might have been directions and might have been insults. The wind shredded it into glitter.

"Hold your center," Tarek said, low and practical, as they slalomed around a line of laundry enchanted to dry instantly whenever it felt neglected. "And do not cast anything that smokes. This lane is powder."

"I never smoke in powder lanes," Cassandra said, ducking a broom that had chosen this moment to practice heroism by blocking the path. She flicked her wand; the broom thought better of it and decided to mediate a separate argument between two roosters.

The courier carpet ahead took a hard bank. Cassandra's stomach tugged to one side, then the other; her hairpins sprang in alarm and rearranged themselves into a more aerodynamic configuration. Below, the lower tiers of the market flowed like a river of color, stalls winking open and shut. The scent mix changed with altitude: sugar and vinegar and ozone, then sweat and mint, then a sudden shock of heliotrope where someone was brewing a love draught legally and another person was brewing one very much not.

The vendor looked back once, measuring. Their eyes caught the light and went dead coin-gray again. They smiled - slight, professional, as though they were on time to a lecture about avoiding pursuers - and pitched downward.

“Down!” Cassandra said, and the carpet obliged. They dove under a rope thick as her thigh. Its fibers hummed against her scalp. Something white and flapping slapped her face - an outraged newspaper that had taken paranormal offense at their trajectory. It stuck to her cheek long enough to declare: MINISTRY WARNS OF BRITISH INTERFERENCE IN - and then went spinning away, printing exclamation points as it went.

“Obvious propaganda,” she coughed.

“Or journalism,” Tarek said dryly.

The courier carpet darted into a carousel of potion stalls that whirled around a central mast like planets. Each booth revolved at its own speed, surfaces glinting with sherbet-bright phials and dark, velvet syrups. A proprietress with hennaed hands was ladling out something that steamed cold; a boy in a vest was stacking flasks labeled DO NOT SHAKE, which shook themselves resentfully.

“Thread the gaps!” Tarek shouted.

“Define gaps!” Cassandra shouted back, and did it anyway, slipping between two moving counters with a whisper’s width to spare. The air tasted like peppermints arguing with nettles. A bottle of sneeze powder flipped its lid, took offense at gravity, and exploded into polite applause that made her eyes water.

The vendor passed a sign that read NO DUELING, set into a frame of spears. They ignored it and flicked their hand; the brass fittings on a rival carpet unlatched and the mat began to unweave itself in a snit. Cassandra instinctively moved her wand. Tarek caught her wrist. “Help later,” he said, and she knew he was right; three nearby witches already snapped their own wands to assist, and the mat reknit with loud, wounded pride.

“Nebu!” Cassandra yelled, voice tearing. “Cut them off on the far spool!”

“I’ll consider it if you stop shouting,” Nebu called down, extremely offended. He vanished across a beam and then appeared a platform ahead, his entire body language that of a cat who has rethought every poor decision he’s ever witnessed.

The courier carpet broke from the carousel and shot toward a tunnel of hanging rugs. It plunged through a salt-and-pepper fringe; the world went briefly black, smelling of lanolin and sun. They burst out into a new district where brasswork blossomed - astrolabes and armillary spheres spun in slow arguments with themselves; clocks ticked in seven rhythms; a tower of compasses pointed accusingly in all directions.

The whistle-witch had evidently lost control of this sector some time in the previous decade. A flock of arguing brooms reappeared and attempted to form a picket line. The courier carpet’s rider squeezed between them with the bland confidence of someone who had never been successfully told no. Cassandra followed and clipped a bristle. The broom took it personally and swatted her shoulder with patriarchal zeal.

Tarek tapped three times on the carpet’s hem in a rhythm that settled the weave. “Give it a long curve,” he said. “They’re expecting sharp corners.”

“They’re expecting competence,” Cassandra said, and banked exactly as he’d told her. The carpet pouted, then purred; they slashed the arc, and suddenly the courier was closer than breath.

“Pull alongside,” Tarek said. “Let me - ”

“Please don’t suggest we talk,” Cassandra said. “I’d like not to be charmed out of my coins mid-air.”

She brought them level. The wind took their words and the heat pushed them back. The vendor’s profile was very calm. For a moment their gaze clicked into hers like a lock finding its key, and she had the sensation - not a thought, a sensation - of standing on a step that wasn’t there.

“Return the fragments,” Cassandra said. Her voice was steady. She wasn’t sure who had lent it to her.

“Learn faster,” the vendor said pleasantly, and snapped their fingers.

Cassandra felt the carpet seize. The weave contracted like a startled muscle; the edges curled inward, trying to wrap them like a parcel. She swore, jammed her wand down, and murmured a binding counter in Gobbledegook, the language biting her tongue. The mat shuddered, reconsidered its loyalties, and decided that being a carpet was preferable to being origami.

“Good,” Tarek said through his teeth. “You speak finance.”

“Poorly,” she said, and yanked them out of the attempted fold.

Nebu flashed below them now, a gold streak on a rope - the rope leading to a pavilion whose fabric was black on one side and mirrored on the other, its edges snapping with charm-sparks. The courier carpet arrowed toward it.

“Don’t,” Nebu snarled up at the vendor, his voice suddenly raw. “You do not get to - ”

But the vendor did. They plunged through the pavilion’s curtain, vanishing as if swallowed by ink.

Cassandra didn’t hesitate. She drove their carpet after, and the mirror fabric rippled around them. For an instant the world inverted. She saw herself from behind: hair half-fallen, jaw set, a stubbornness that would one day cost her something she hadn’t yet named. Her own gaze in reflection didn’t blink. Then the image shattered into droplets and they were inside.

Inside was elsewhere.

The noise of the bazaar fell away, replaced by a hush that felt curated. The pavilion stretched farther than its fabric allowed, floor layered in carpets that didn’t match and somehow agreed to. Lanterns hung from invisible hooks, their glass full of condensed shadow that glowed like ink under starlight. Shelves lined the walls, but they held no goods - only impressions where goods had once been. It was as if a shop had remembered itself and then tried to forget.

The courier carpet floated to a stop before a counter draped in midnight cloth. The vendor stood with hands folded, no breath visible, watching Cassandra with professional interest, like a librarian deciding whether to admit a noisy scholar to the rare books room.

Cassandra slid off her carpet. Her legs registered an opinion about this that she noted and ignored. Tarek landed beside her with a grace she envied and would never admit to. Nebu ducked under the pavilion's valance and emerged, fur lifted along his spine.

"Mirage-tent," Tarek murmured. "I dislike how many of those exist."

"Convenient for people who need to be somewhere else while still being here," Cassandra said. The air had a faint metallic taste, like a bitten coin.

The vendor's gaze flicked to Tarek, to Nebu, back to Cassandra. "You're persistent," they said. "I could like you for that."

"You won't," Cassandra said. "Where did you get the wrappings?"

"In a city that forgets what it takes," the vendor replied. "From the hands of a woman who thinks she can budget eternity."

Araminta, hissed the thought, immediate and burning. Cassandra didn't let it show. "Return them," she said. "To the tomb. Or to Rahetep. You can choose which insult you prefer."

"Neither," the vendor said lightly. "I have an appointment."

"We'll keep you," Tarek said, gentle as a well-honed blade.

The vendor tilted their head. "Try."

Cassandra felt the twitch in the floor before she understood it. The woven layers of carpet underfoot shifted - threads skewing, colors sliding past each other like schools of fish. The lanterns' shadows breathed in. The pavilion exhaled.

The walls were not walls. They were drifts.

The midnight cloth on the counter sighed downward, and the counter went with it - no longer a counter, but a dune in miniature, beginning to flow. The corners of the room unstitched. Rolled carpets unfurled and then unraveled at the ends, fringe becoming grain. The lanterns dimmed as if distant stars had been shaken into a sandstorm.

"Nebu," Cassandra said.

"I see it," he said, small and very old. "They're done talking."

The vendor touched the air twice, the way one pats a well-behaved dog. The pavilion answered by turning to desert. The tent's fabric loosened like the thought of a tent. The mirrored side lost its nerve and went dull. Sand fell from nowhere and everywhere, plastered to Cassandra's lashes, hissed along her boots, hissed along Tarek's. It piled around the courier carpet, which objected formally and began trying to levitate out of the problem.

The vendor moved through the fall as if it were merely weather. They stepped backward, and the sand flowed to fill the space they'd been, making a brief hollow in the shape of their calves and then erasing it with great efficiency.

"Hold," Tarek said, catching Cassandra's sleeve. His other hand went to a charm on his wrist, old bronze rubbed smooth with use. He whispered to it, a word that belonged to the river more than to the desert. The sand at their feet thought that over and firmed a fraction, grains knitting with a memory of moisture.

Cassandra squinted through the veil. The vendor was nearly at the pavilion's back - a place that had become a suggestion of night. She threw out her wand and spoke a net into existence, lines of pale runes flaring between lanterns, anchoring on nothing and everything. The net dropped, elegant and exact, and should have closed.

It passed through the vendor like a rumor.

"Not fair," Cassandra said unexpectedly, childish.

"Mirages never are," Tarek said, grim and nasal, nose full of sand.

The vendor paused at the edge of the dissolving space and turned. For the first time, something like heat touched their face, softening it into human. "You're not the problem," they said to Cassandra, almost kindly. "You're the proof."

Cassandra stepped forward and the floor tried very hard to be not-floor. She scuffed it into staying. "Tell me what I'm proof of," she said, while her mind built boxes around the word Araminta and hammered the lids shut.

"That the dead can be invited," the vendor said. They lifted a hand and splayed their fingers. Sand obeyed. It rose between them in a sheet, the grains aligning into a glyph that hurt to look at: a sun bisected, one half brilliant, one half eaten, the line between them a blade.

"Order of the Sun's Shadow," Tarek said, jaw clenching. His bronze charm dug crescent moons into his palm.

The vendor's smile flicked back on. "Do drop by," they said. "We enjoy tea."

The glyph collapsed. The pavilion finished remembering that it was sand, and rushed downward with the glee of a river being allowed to be a river again. Lanterns winked out; shadows put their coats back on. For a heartbeat Cassandra was inside a falling hourglass.

She raised her wand and barked a single syllable of Gringotts fieldwork - the one that makes a bubble in a cave-in, the one that never quite trusts the ceiling. Air hardened around them, tasting of copper; sand hissed against it, piled shouldering up, hissed over, tried to convince the charm it ought to be helpful.

When the flow passed, the bubble sloughed away, reluctantly, as if she'd dismissed a butler mid-bow. They stood in an open square of the bazaar that had previously not existed, floor scoured clean and glittering. A few stunned shoppers stared at them with the indulgence one

reserves for eccentric relatives. Around the edges of the square, eight glass lanterns burned with shadow, untroubled by the laws of lamps.

The pavilion was gone. In its place, a low dune made of very fine, very stubborn sand slumped against a rope. A symbol was pressed into its surface - a fresh, sharp stamp that would be gone with the next strong breeze. The bisected sun.

Nebu padded forward and sat down, tail tucked primly around his paws. For a moment, he closed his eyes. When he opened them, the color had changed by a shade - darker amber, old honey in low light.

“Cornered,” he said, with a laugh that wasn’t. “And they opened a door.”

Tarek brushed sand from his sleeves with a meticulousness that was almost rage. “We have their sign,” he said. “We have their method.”

“And their appointment,” Cassandra added softly, staring at the fading glyph. The sand already forgot. “Let’s not keep them waiting.”

They found her where the bazaar forgot to be loud.

The newly minted square - scoured clean by the pavilion’s vanishing - held its breath. The surrounding platforms kept a respectful distance, like guests circling a patch of spilled starlight. Eight lanterns burned with shadow at the perimeter, their glass panels ink-dark and precise; the light they cast was negative, outlining things by the absence they carved. The air tasted faintly of iron and date syrup.

A figure stood at the far edge, where a rope dipped and the city fell away in terraces and spires. She wore black that drank color: a plain robe, a hood, and over her eyes a bandage of gold gauze that gave the illusion that light itself had blinded her. The gauze was not opaque - not quite. It was stitched with minuscule sigils that rearranged themselves when you blinked.

“The Sun’s Shadow,” Tarek murmured. He didn’t whisper for fear. He whispered because the moment seemed to require a dress code.

Nebu’s fur lifted along his spine as if the air were asking questions. “I preferred her as an inconvenience,” he said under his breath. “Or a rumor.”

Cassandra stepped forward until the first ring of lantern-shadows brushed her boots. Her ribs were still counting the collapse-beats of sand. She did not raise her wand. Instinct and etiquette, both, told her that in certain rooms a wand was a louder thing than a voice.

“You ran,” Cassandra said, and was pleased with the dry neatness of it. “You wanted us to follow.”

The bandaged head inclined, a courteous nod to an inference correctly made. The voice that came from behind the gold was low and unhurried, an accent like weathered stone - no country claimed it; every century did.

“I promised an appointment,” the woman said. “You kept it.”

Tarek’s hand brushed Cassandra’s sleeve - a warning or a promise, she couldn’t tell. “State your business,” he said. “Or state your absence.”

“Scholarship,” the woman said, and smiled as if the word were a chalice of something forbidden and sweet. “And an invitation.”

Cassandra tasted dust and laughter at the back of her mouth, the kind that happens when you’ve nearly died in a farcical way and are too polite to admit it. “Your scholarship sells mummified wrappings by the square,” she said. “Your invitation is to theft.”

The bandaged eyes seemed to regard her with interest. “Do you think so… Miss Blythe?”

Her name on that voice felt like a glove pulled gently inside-out. Cassandra kept her expression professional. “People who know my name without introductions,” she said, “generally wish to waste it.”

“Not waste. Enshrine.” The woman tilted her head, listening to something that neither Cassandra nor the bazaar could hear. “You’ve begun to see it, haven’t you? The way certain thoughts return to us like seasons. The way knowledge hums under the skin. You touch a glyph and it recognizes you.”

Cassandra felt the temptation like a small sun behind her sternum. It had been rising for days - in the courtroom, in the villa, in the mirage-tent - and now it laid a warm hand on her throat. There was nothing overtly magical in the woman’s words. The magic was in their neat arrangement.

Nebu’s tail lashed once, a metronome for bad ideas. “I have pointed out,” he said, polite as a knife wrapped in velvet, “that flattery is poor bait for a cat. And worse bait for a scholar.”

“Not bait,” the woman said, as if correcting a child about constellations. “Recognition.” Her gaze - or the idea of it - returned to Cassandra. “We are collecting minds that remember what wizardry forgot.”

“And what did wizardry forget?” Tarek asked. His contempt was an instrument with good tuning; he chose a low note.

“That the first magic wasn’t a spell,” the woman said. “It was a breath.”

The lantern-shadows seemed to lean, very slightly, toward the center of the square. Cassandra found herself mirroring the angle. The back of her neck prickled where hairpins had given up and heat had won.

“You mean the Breath of Amun,” she said. It was not a question. It could not afford to be.

Gold gauze gleamed - maybe a smile beneath, maybe only metal enjoying its own existence. “We mean an understanding,” the woman said. “That eternity was once the air between two names. That a life can be extended through it the way fire extends through oil.”

“And the cost?” Tarek said. The bronze charm at his wrist warmed; Cassandra could feel it, like a small sun arguing with hers.

“Refinement,” the woman said. “Studentship. A relinquishing of superstition.”

“You mean ethics,” Cassandra said.

“Ethics are a superstition for people who don’t remember their past lives,” the woman replied gently.

Nebu made a sound like a laugh that had realized it was a cough. “And there it is. The creed of anyone who wants to live forever: ‘I remember better than you.’”

“I am not immortal,” the woman said with a humor that might have been genuine. “I am a librarian with a key.” Her gloved hand lifted and opened. In her palm lay a sigil carved on thin stone - the bisected sun. Up close, the dividing line wasn’t a blade; it was a reed, the kind scribes cut and sharpened to write with. One half of the sun bled a thin line of ink toward the other.

Cassandra swallowed a thought about Araminta that scratched her throat on the way down. “And what do you want with Rahetep?” she asked. “He sealed the Breath away.”

The woman’s shoulders relaxed, like a teacher pleased a pupil had reached the next theorem. “He sealed a partial understanding. The older we become, the more partial our absolutes appear. He sealed a sigh and called it a storm.”

Tarek stepped into the lantern-shadow ring, and it licked his boots with cut-paper precision. “You claim a lineage,” he said. “Scholars. Scribes. Then answer like one. Your method in the pavilion was Gringotts craft, braided with temple work. Who is your bank?”

The gold gauze didn’t flicker. “We’re cosmopolitan,” the woman said, and in the word Cassandra heard Araminta’s perfume, her gloves, her fondness for difficult truths stated as if they were merely tidying the room. The temptation flared hotter, and not all of it was curiosity. Some was anger shaped like clarity.

“Why the theatrics?” Cassandra asked, to keep from saying a name. “The chase, the tent. Why show me the shadow library if you mean to lock the door?”

“We wanted to measure your stride,” the woman said simply. “See if you hesitate at thresholds. See if you warn your friends or save the books.” She gestured, and the lanterns nodded minutely, complicity in glass. “You warned them.”

“And you opened a dune under us,” Nebu said. “As an icebreaker.”

“It was necessary,” the woman said, and for a heartbeat the softness cracked; something sincere, even urgent, lived under the gold. “Your court plays with evidence. Your bank plays chess with bones. We do not have the luxury of politeness any longer.”

“Is that why you’re selling wrappings by the inch?” Cassandra said. “Scholarship must be very expensive.”

“Scholarship always was,” the woman said. “You of all people should know that.”

Cassandra felt the square tilt again, a subtler mirage - the kind where the person making the argument lays the floorboards in directions that make the steps sound like your own. She half-smiled, because that was how she kept from falling. “If this is recruitment,” she said, “you’ve chosen a bad morning.”

“There is no good morning to be less than you could be,” the woman said, with a mildness that felt like a hand cupped to water. “You don’t have to choose in a court, or a market. You can choose in a place built for breathing.”

“And where is that?” Tarek asked. “A temple?”

“A riverbed,” the woman said. “Under the Nile, where life silted itself into meaning. Come and see, Cassandra Blythe. Bring your cat; he remembers the way. Bring your friend if he promises not to spit on footnotes.”

Nebu’s whiskers drew back though he hadn’t moved. “I am recollecting,” he said, voice thin. “And I dislike it.”

Cassandra’s heart made that small sun again, but this time it was eclipsed by something colder. “If you know my name and his and the riverbed,” she said, “you must know what I do to traps.”

“Not all thresholds are traps,” the woman said. “Some are lungs. Choose a breath.”

She extended her gloved hand across the ring of shadow, palm up. The gold gauze caught a brighter flame of lanternlight and fed it back in coins. Cassandra stared at the hand. It wasn’t a coercive magic pressing at her; it was an invitation laid at the right angle to her weaknesses.

Nebu’s voice came from somewhere distant and very present. “Cassandra.”

“I know,” she said, and did. She did.

She stepped forward until her boots kissed the edge of the ring and stopped there, as one does before a tide that is precisely itself. She uncurled her fingers, which had made fists of their own accord a lifetime ago in a courtroom, and showed her empty palm. “You want a choice,” she said. “Here’s mine: I don’t join thieves.”

The golden bandage did not flinch. “Then perhaps you will join saviors,” the woman said, and before Cassandra could deliver the scathing reply she richly deserved, the gloved hand flipped and traced a single quick line in the air - elegant, inevitable.

A grain of light loosed itself from the lanterns and flew like a slow bee. It landed in the center of Cassandra’s palm and warmed there, sinking through skin, through skin’s opinion of itself, down into the place where spells write their true names. Pain arrived - not sharp, but blooming, a brand drawn with sunlight and old honey. Cassandra did not cry out. She inhaled and the air tasted of hot stone and river mud and the metallic sweetness of blood pricked from a thumb for an oath.

When she looked, a sigil lay in her skin: a sun cut down the middle by a reed. The ink of it was not ink; it was shadow that had learned to shine. It pulsed once, aligned with her heart, and then settled, inert and explicit.

Tarek moved before thought - his hand at her wrist, his wand a protest. The woman lifted her own hand a fraction. The lantern-shadows lengthened to a decree.

“It isn’t a curse,” she said, not gloating. Informing. “It’s a key. It will open when you are near the door, and only then. You will find it by accident, unless you decide to call that fate.”

“I’ll find soap,” Cassandra said through her teeth.

“You will find us,” the woman said. “And perhaps yourself, if you like dramatic phrasing.”

Nebu’s fur remained high. His pupils were black coins. “If she is harmed - ”

“Then I will have misread her,” the woman said, and for an instant the voice behind the gold was simply a person speaking to another person. “I am tired of misreading.”

“Where do you meet your friends?” Tarek said. His fingers on Cassandra’s wrist were steadier now. “Saviours. Librarians. Pick your lie.”

The gold gauze tilted as if she were consulting the unseeable horizon. “Where the river forgets it is a river,” she said. “The Temple of the Breath. You already wrote it in your notebook, Miss Blythe, in the margin next to a teacup.”

Cassandra’s throat tightened around three separate answers. She chose none of them. “And if I come,” she said. “Then what?”

“Then you’ll stop choosing between the dead and the living,” the woman said, almost gentle. “You’ll choose both.” She stepped back, the black cloth of her robe dissolving at the edges like steam. “Ask your Pharaoh what he sealed. Ask your cat what he promised. Then decide which one of you lies more beautifully.”

Sand lifted under her feet in a hush and took the shape of a small, obedient wind. Her outline lost confidence, blurred at the hem, brightened at the bandage, thinned. For a breath she was a column of gold dust with a human voice.

“Bring honey,” she said, and smiled in a way Cassandra felt rather than saw. “We are very tired of tea.”

The wind turned. The shape disassembled quietly. Grains fell; shadows chewed them into the floor. The eight lanterns blinked once, long and slow, as if satisfied by a cataloging complete, then resumed their patient burning.

Silence returned, not empty but annotated.

Cassandra let out the breath she’d been hoarding and immediately wanted it back. The sigil in her palm pulsed faintly, then lay down like a trained animal.

“Give me your hand,” Tarek said. His voice was steady, a bridge over something fast. She obeyed. He turned her wrist into the light, studying, then swore in a way that implied a library card.

“It’s not a hex,” Cassandra said, forcing her humor back onto its feet with both hands. “It’s a membership.”

Nebu approached and sniffed the sigil as if it were a rival. His whiskers trembled. “I have seen that mark on doors no one remembers,” he said, very quietly. “On men who never learned to stop breathing. On a mirror that lied so gently you thanked it.”

Cassandra closed her fingers, felt the soft resistance of the brand, the way a coin reminds you of gravity. She remembered the mirage-tent, the vendor’s hand, the librarian’s voice, Araminta’s shadow in a word like cosmopolitan. Choice, choice, choice - laid out as if in a tidy file.

She looked up. “All right,” she said to Tarek and to Nebu and perhaps to herself. “We ask Rahetep exactly what he sealed. We find the door. We see if the key burns on the way in.”

“And if it does?” Tarek asked.

“Then we’ll learn faster,” Cassandra said, and it wasn’t a joke, and Nebu, who adored jokes, did not laugh.

Tarek’s study smelled like old papyrus and mint leaves crushed against stone.

It was a long room tucked above a bookbinder’s shop off Sharia al-Muizz, three flights up a staircase that had once been a ladder and still hadn’t forgiven the promotion. The windows were thrown open to coax the heat into leaving. Cairo’s evening climbed in anyway, climbing over the sills in layers - cooking smoke from the alley braziers, jasmine that had forgotten it was supposed to be subtle, the tired metal of tramlines far below. Ceiling fans turned with the resigned rhythm of civil servants.

Shelves ran the walls from floor to cracked plaster, some bowed under the weight of clay tablets, others precise with stitched folios. Rolled maps kept each other’s secrets by sleeping in the same basket. There was a desk you could land a hippogriff on, and there was Tarek’s narrow bed, made with military precision and used as a table for the overflow of the table.

“Sit,” he said, already moving, already becoming a set of efficient hands. He cleared a drift of journals from a low divan that had strong opinions about British posture. “Left hand.”

Cassandra sat. The divan sighed at her like a disappointed aunt. She placed her hand on the towel he laid out, palm up, the sigil calm as if it hadn’t been a sun a moment ago. The reed-cut line bisecting it seemed to drink the light rather than reflect it.

“It doesn’t hurt?” he asked, setting a brass tray on a footstool. On the tray: a porcelain bowl beaded with condensation, a tin of green salve, a clay cup, tweezers, linen, and a stubby wand hairline-cracked from overwork.

“It hurts in an opinionated way,” she said. “The sort of pain that enjoys teaching.”

“Good,” he said.

“That it enjoys teaching?”

“That it tells us what it is.” He dipped two fingers into the porcelain bowl and flicked cold water across her palm. The heat under the sigil recoiled and then hissed, like rain on stone. “Not a poison. Not a pure burn. It’s binding heat.”

“Comforting.”

“Comfort-adjacent.” He reached for the tin, opened it, and the room’s other smells politely made space for the mint. It was sharp and green and almost sweet, like a promise written neatly in a ledger. “This will cool the edges.”

“Edges are the part of me having a problem,” Cassandra said, but she watched his hands. His workman’s care - the way he warmed the salve between his fingers before he touched her, the way he kept his other hand braced under her wrist so the skin wouldn’t pull - quieted something inside her that had been drum-beating ever since the lanterns.

The first touch burned colder. Her fingers flexed and then uncurled; the brand’s insistence dulled to a presence, like standing near a bell that had stopped ringing but refused to forget that it could.

“Breathe,” he said without looking up.

“I’m excellent at involuntary functions,” she said. She did as told.

Nebu leapt up onto the desk and arranged himself on a disturbing stack of correspondence without asking permission from either the letters or their owner. He laid his chin on Cassandra’s forearm so he could watch the work at closer range, as if supervising a junior. “You should have bitten her,” he said, meaning the woman with the gold bandage. “Hospitable, traditional, effective.”

“I was unarmed,” Cassandra said. “My teeth were busy being polite.”

Tarek snorted - approval filed under derision - and reached for the tweezers. With a care that made her feel both valuable and fragile, he teased a crystalline grain out of the center of the brand. It stuck to the metal like it knew it belonged there. He dropped it into the clay cup. It pinged.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Sand with an education,” he said. “Or rather, sand with instructions.” He leaned to the side and fished a box from under the bed. Inside, a clockwork loupe winked at them with a small lens. He set it to life, perched it over the cup, and bent to the look. The tiny gears worried at the air, and the lens made a magnified world on the surface of the water. “There,” he murmured. “See?”

Cassandra leaned. The grain was etched. Not with letters - those came later in the human trick of it - but with a structure that resembled script. A framework of intention. She felt, not for the first time that day, like a child in front of a cathedral and a lock at the same time.

“It wants to align,” Tarek said, slow with thought. “With something very old. Not a specific phrase. A place. A… tone.”

“The door,” she said. “Our librarian said it would open near a door.”

“And only then,” he said. The grain dissolved as she watched, making a tiny thread of shadow that stained the water and then disappeared, as if embarrassed at having been caught. “The mark doesn’t carry the key. It carries the instruction to accept the key when it’s offered.”

“A key that likes riverbeds,” Nebu murmured. His voice had sand in it. The mint poise of the room didn’t reach him. “It will tremble when we’re close. Like a hound that remembers a dead master.”

Cassandra flexed her fingers. The salve’s cool had reached the throb and convinced it to behave like a promise rather than a threat. “You’re sure it isn’t a curse,” she said to Tarek. “I’d hate to wake up tomorrow as a footnote.”

He glanced at her, eyes tired and bright. “I prefer not to be sure about anything in your company,” he said. “But if it is a curse, it’s one with a deferred appetite. It wants location more than blood.” He closed the tin, then hesitated, reopened it, and smoothed another layer over the slight swelling at the base of her thumb. “You see what they’re doing.”

“Recruitment by flattery,” Cassandra said. “Philosophy by implied compliment. The usual seductions.”

“Also this,” he said, tapping the sigil’s neat cut. “A mark that can be seen by others who wear it. They’ve made you part of a grammar. A sentence that can be read by members of a cult who think themselves editors.”

She laughed without humor. “Well then. I hope they enjoy my commas.”

He wrapped her hand in soft linen, the kind that still remembered a flax field. Ever since the tomb she had been thinking of cloth differently; ever since the bazaar stall she had thought of it with anger. The wrap felt like a small truce with a larger war.

He tied the ends with a clever flat knot and sat back. His shoulders came off their own rope-tension. The fan made another revolution overhead.

“Thank you,” she said. It sounded insufficient in the room, but proper at the same time.

“You’re welcome,” he said, which was better than “it was nothing,” because it hadn’t been.

Nebu stretched his spine into an elegant bow and resumed being unbearable to papers. “And now,” he said, “we tally the enemies.”

Cassandra looked at the correspondence the cat had chosen for his throne. The topmost sheet wore the tidy signature of Araminta Voss, underlined by a flourish that said, gracefully, pay attention. Cassandra's mouth dried. She sifted the stack out from under Nebu's weight with her good hand.

The letters smelled faintly of the London office - ink-bright and cold. Her eyes scanned faster than her mind could approve. Phrases leapt up, waving flags. Field requisitions. Authorization seals. The gallant lie of corporate concern. In one, Araminta referred to "a new partnership of scholarly interest." In another, to "leveraging local expertise in service of Gringotts's mandate to protect and profit."

"Cosmopolitan," Cassandra said, quiet, and set that letter aside before she used it to cut her lip. "Our vendor used the same word."

Tarek leaned over, his shoulder almost brushing hers. He read without moving his lips. His jaw tightened, but he didn't swear this time; the fury went into grammar instead. He tapped the margin beside a phrase: Coordinated oversight with outside benefactors.

"A bank that does not mind what a benefactor looks like," he said. "As long as the benefaction comes home with interest."

"And a director who doesn't care what a seal sits on," Cassandra said. "Only that it sits."

Nebu made a quiet noise that might have been pity and might have been scorn. "It was comforting," he said, "when your disappointment was theoretical."

"It's never been," Cassandra said, and surprised herself. The room tilted a degree, the way rooms do when a piece of furniture you thought was decorative turns out to be weight-bearing. She placed the letters back in their stack, squared them, turned them so Araminta's name faced the desk instead of her.

Tarek watched her. "You still intend to work for them after this?"

"I intend to work for the part of them that believes in locks," she said. "And against the part that believes in forced doors. If those two parts are indistinguishable, we will have a new conversation." She tried to make it wry. It came out tired.

He nodded, a single degree of respect that felt like a glass of water handed to a runner. "Your curiosity is brave," he said. "Your humility is… learning. You can't do both at once forever."

"I'll try," she said. "It's one of my faults."

Silence settled for a moment. Outside, the city performed its evening: a muezzin's call braided with laughter, a donkey objecting to philosophy, a charmer's flute trying to out-argue a vendor's prices. The fan lifted the edges of a map and laid them down again.

Tarek reached under the desk and brought up a battered leather folio. He untied it and spread a map on the table - a hand-inked chart of the Nile around Luxor, annotated so densely it looked like a palimpsest of arguments. He weighted the corners with a jar of brass tacks, a

teacup with a crack down its side, a paperweight in the shape of a hippogriff pretending to be a chicken.

“River tones,” he said, tapping notations. “Fundamental harmonics laid into water by temple wards. Places where the current slows and forgets itself. Here.” His finger circled a spot just north of the city proper, in floodplain that most maps treated as boredom. “The old texts call it ‘the breath-well.’ An aquifer that once sang. It went dry - officially - when the priests decided the gods had learned to hold their breath.”

“Under the Nile,” Cassandra said, the librarian’s voice caught in her ear like a hook.

“Under what the Nile used to be, during flood. Seasonal and therefore invisible to anyone not listening to calendars the way a priest might.” He glanced at her bandaged hand. “Your mark will know the way if it knows this map.”

She laid her fingers on the ink, not touching the circled place. The linen rustled around her palm, a tiny reprimand. The brand warmed a degree - the respectful awareness of a pupil raising their hand.

“Of course it will,” she said. “That’s the trick of keys. They pretend you’re turning them.”

“They also open,” he said. It wasn’t a correction. It was an agreement that didn’t surrender the argument.

Nebu hopped down, threaded himself between teacup and paperweight, and sat on the breath-well. “It’s fond of cats,” he said. “That’s either auspicious or inevitable.”

“Both,” Cassandra said. She rested her knuckles on the table’s edge and let the fatigue have two inches of her spine. “We tell Rahetep,” she said. “All of it. What she said. What she didn’t say. We ask him what he sealed. We ask you” - she looked at Nebu - “what you promised.”

Nebu’s ears flattened a fraction, a rare admission of weather. “I have always promised to be decorative,” he said, then softened. “And to be there when it matters.”

“It matters,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “It does.”

Tarek capped the salve, put the tweezers back, poured the stain-water from the clay cup into a small bottle and corked it as if bottling a mosquito. “You should eat,” he said. “You don’t make wise enemies hungry.”

“I thought it was friends one ought to feed,” she said.

“Both.” He crossed to the window and called down into the street to a boy with a cart. A few minutes later, food arrived as if the city agreed with him - flatbread that had heard the rumors of cloud, a bowl of ful warmed with garlic, cucumbers that had stretched themselves into coolness, a dish of pickled lemons that looked like something you’d find in a treasure chest if the gods had a sense of humor.

They ate on the divan and chair and windowsill, knees almost touching, the way people do when they are not a family but could pass for one in a kind light. The mint salve hummed faintly against her skin. The sigil behaved. The map breathed paper and ink.

Cassandra wiped her fingers, wrote a line in her field journal, scratched it out, wrote another.

“What now?” Tarek asked.

“We take tea with the dead,” she said, and found herself smiling at the inevitability of it. “After we ask them for directions.”

He nodded once, the way someone nods at a road they’ve walked before and still respect. “We go at dawn,” he said. “Before the market wakes another rumor.”

“Before my courage has time to get clever,” she said.

Nebu hopped up onto the window and looked out at Cairo’s warm geometry. “I’ll wake you,” he said grandly. “By sitting on your chest and purring like a funeral drum.”

“Perfect,” Cassandra said. “Make sure to shed.”

“Always,” he purred.

The fan turned. The city breathed. The brand in her palm rested, as if it had finally been given something to do later and was content to wait.

Rahetep’s borrowed villa kept the evening like good linen - cool, well-pressed, faintly perfumed with things the day had forgotten to worry about.

The courtyard had been a merchant’s once. A pool lay in the center, shallow and tiled in blue fish that swam only when the moon was watching. Bougainvillea shouldered the walls in flamboyant magenta. Lamps burned behind pierced brass screens and made constellations on the flagstones. Someone - Rahetep - had insisted on a pair of ridiculous alabaster ibis flanking the doorway; their beaks cast thin shadows like quills. Beyond the arcade, Cairo exhaled: plates clinked in neighboring kitchens, a muezzin called from a nearer minaret with a voice like polished stone, a tram gave up on being dignified and rattled its complaint into the night.

Cassandra let herself in through the side gate. She paused under the lintel to adjust the linen wrap on her palm. The mint salve had dried to a faint tingle; the sigil beneath sat quiet as a coin sewn into a hem. She counted that as polite behavior.

“Ah,” Rahetep said from a chaise as if she had just become his favorite topic. “Our blameless adventurer.” He was dressed as always in an arrangement that fell somewhere between shroud and evening wear: immaculate wrappings under a robe the color of river silt, a collar of lapis beads that insisted on being important. He held a glass of tea, which steamed like orderly incense. Nebu lay lengthwise along the chaise behind him, the exact shade of arrogance.

“You look resigned,” Cassandra said, dropping her bag near a mosaic that refused to stop rearranging its border.

“I am trying it on for size,” Rahetep said. His eyes, kohl-dark and long-suffering, glanced at her bandaged hand with courtly interest. “And you look as if a small sun has been arguing with your blood.”

Cassandra crossed to the low table where a tray waited, its brass etched with lotus and cranky crocodiles. She poured tea into a cup that believed itself to be a chalice. The steam carried cardamom and mint and something sweet like dates left in the sun. When she looked down, the surface trembled, found a shape, and un-found it: for a blink, hieroglyphs skated across the brown like mirage fish, then went solemnly tea again.

“Your house likes to editorialize,” she said, and sat. “We had an appointment in the bazaar.”

Nebu’s whiskers ticked. “She means: we chased a thief through the sky, crashed a pop-up illusion that turned into a sandbox, and then made friends with a librarian who collects cultists.”

“Mm.” Rahetep sipped. “So, an afternoon.”

Cassandra told him, because it was time to stop telling half-stories. The chase through rope lanes that sang. The pavilion and its cultivated hush. The woman with gauze of gold and a voice like a syllabus. The mark - the quick bite of light, the way it settled. Tarek’s diagnosis. The map.

Rahetep listened as if nothing in the world pleased him more than a narrative with footnotes. He tilted his head at the parts that called for sorrow; he nodded approvingly when she used a precise noun for a charm. He did not interrupt until she said the phrase itself - the Breath of Amun - and then he set his glass down with a small, exact click that told the room to pay attention.

“The Breath,” he repeated mildly, as one repeats a prayer learned in a childhood one outgrew and then didn’t. “Good. It has chosen its translator.”

“We didn’t choose it,” Cassandra said. “It chose us. Or it chose to be annoyed at us. The difference is academic.”

“Academics have gone to war over smaller differences,” Rahetep said, but his humor had softened at the edges, as if put briefly in the sun. He leaned forward, cloth whispering. “Do you know what my priests said it was?”

“Immortality,” Cassandra said. “A trick for making a life long.”

“They were poets pretending to be engineers,” he said. “They called it life’s true name held in the mouth. Not a trick. A principle.” He turned his palm up as if balancing something invisible there. “To them, the Breath was a way to keep a story from ending. A spell that reminded the body that it could go on remembering.”

“And you?” Cassandra asked.

“I was a king pretending to be a priest.” Rahetep’s smile was an old scar disguised as charm. “I called it a problem. Because the memory of a kingdom is heavy enough. The memory of a body for a thousand years?” He let the question sit between them and dress itself. “Imagine never finishing a sentence. Imagine being a paragraph that refuses to close.”

Nebu, who had been grooming his right paw with petty vengeance, stopped and looked at Rahetep. “You loved it,” he said without malice. “At first.”

Rahetep inclined his head, concession and confession. “We love everything that calls us irreplaceable,” he said. “For a while.”

Cassandra set her cup down. Her hand, traitor, wanted to press her bandage to the glass to see if the heat would wake the mark. She kept it still. “The woman spoke like a catalog,” she said. “A librarian with a key, she called herself. She invited me to the riverbed. Under Luxor. She said we’d stop choosing between the dead and the living.”

“Ah,” Rahetep said softly. “The Order has learned to flatter plural nouns.”

“Is she lying?” Cassandra asked. “About the temple? About the Breath being… a place people can go? A door a key can find?”

Rahetep considered the moon on the pool as if it had asked for career advice. “No,” he said. “She is arranging true things into an untrue shape. The temple is there. The Breath does not live there; it behaves there. It is like the way a song becomes itself in a particular hall.”

“And the Order?” Tarek would have asked with edges. Cassandra asked with paper and ink. “What were they when you were alive?”

“A philosophy club with funerals,” Nebu said dryly before Rahetep could polish it. He stretched, vertebrae ticking into place. “They practiced immortality the way children practice crowns - sincerely, with excellent posture, and no idea what a kingdom costs.”

Rahetep’s laugh was a breath. “They believed knowledge purifies the knower. It does not.” He gestured to the pool. “It refines. It clarifies. It does not absolve.”

Cassandra thought of Araminta’s letters cooling in Tarek’s study. Coordinated oversight. Outside benefactors. Cosmopolitan. The tea went slightly bitter on her tongue, as if the leaves had decided it was time to discuss ethics.

“Someone is helping them,” she said, and didn’t give the name voice because saying it would make it true in a way she was not ready to catalog. “Someone with Gringotts seals. Modern wardcraft braided into temple work.”

Rahetep’s eyes warmed with the kind of sympathy that does not condescend because it knows the humiliation personally. “We are betrayed most effectively by the people who taught us our vocabulary,” he said. “I am sorry for your… etymology.”

“Thank you,” Cassandra said, and took it as it was meant.

Nebu hopped down and strolled to the tray. He peered into the sugar bowl, saw his reflection, approved of it, and then batted the tongs to hear the nice delicate noise. “If your director is flirting with eternity,” he said, “she’ll call it ‘stewardship’ and send you minutes about best practices.”

Cassandra smiled with half her mouth. “She already has a heading for it.”

Rahetep lifted his glass again but did not drink. “Tell me what the mark is doing,” he said, nodding at her hand.

“Sleeping,” Cassandra said. “Waiting to be near something it likes.”

“It will wake near the place,” Rahetep said. “Your palm will hum and pretend it’s a heart.”

“Is there a way to remove it?” she asked.

“Yes,” Nebu said promptly. “Trade hands. I will pick out the good one.”

Rahetep set his tea down and leaned forward, the careful indulgence vanishing like shadow at noon. “Listen,” he said, not to her ears; to the part of her that wrote down what mattered and crossed out what flattered. “The Breath is not a jewel. It is not a flame in a bottle. It is the name we gave to the way magic remembers its beginning. If you let it - if you invite it - it will teach you how not to end. It will also teach you how not to begin again. There will be no room left in you for either.”

Cassandra’s mouth was dry and thinking. “You sealed it.”

“I conducted a ceremony we called a seal,” he said. “We moved the song out of the hall we had built. We made it harder to hum. We called that mercy and pretended we were its authors.”

“Were you?” she asked.

“For a generation,” he said. “Then the sound found a new wall to bounce from. It always will. The river remembers its bed even when the bed is dust.”

“So if we go,” Cassandra said. “If we find the temple. What happens if we do nothing? What happens if we leave it singing to itself?”

“You will not be the only ones who hear,” Rahetep said. “The Order has been practicing its ear for centuries. They will arrive with reeds and call it a choir.”

The lamps breathed. The bougainvillea sulked prettily. Cassandra put her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand like a woman in a painting who hasn’t decided whether she regrets the letter she is composing.

“I’ll ask anyway,” she said. “Should we go?”

Rahetep looked first at her and then, deliberately, at Nebu. Something passed between them that had been passing for a very long time: a grief with manners, a promise with a cough.

“Yes,” Rahetep said, quiet. “You should. Doors exist to test us. If you do not open them, they will rot and take the house with them. If you do, perhaps you throw the rotten side into the sun.” He lifted his hand as if weighing that sun against air. “You must go because you are the kind of person who will go. Your only choice is why.”

Cassandra nodded without pretending her nod was an answer. She stood and set her empty cup on the tray. Tea leaves made a pattern in the bottom like a small, irritated bird.

“We’ll leave at dawn,” she said. “Tarek has a map that thinks it’s a sermon. And… I’ll look through Gringotts correspondence again tonight. There are phrases I didn’t want to admit I saw.”

“Bring me anything that smells like a bargain,” Rahetep said. He smiled, and it was so kind that it made the room colder. “I am very good at reading what people sell when they think they are buying.”

Nebu wound around her ankles, shedding intention. He pressed his head to her bandaged palm with the seriousness of a blessing and the insolence of a cat. The brand warmed politely, as if reminded it had an audience. “I will supervise your sleep,” he said. “By ensuring you have less of it.”

“Perfect,” Cassandra said. She looked to Rahetep. “Anything you want us to ask your priests, when we find their echo?”

“Ask them,” he said, gaze drifting to the pool where the moon had become more certain, “why they loved me so well they tried to keep me forever.” He tilted his head, listening to old music. “And ask them if they would have loved me at all if I had stayed.”

Cassandra picked up her bag. The night had leaned into the courtyard while they weren’t watching. The fish in the tiles slept like commas. She stopped at the threshold and looked back. “If we bring the song into a different hall,” she said, “and it learns a new echo - ”

“Then you will have changed the world a little,” Rahetep said. “And yourself a great deal. Try to prefer the first.”

She bowed her head, a concession to a king, to a friend, to the one person who made her feel both clever and new. “Good night.”

“And good judgment,” he said lightly, which was not the same, and they both knew it.

Cassandra stepped into the alley night. Heat rose gently from the stones, releasing the day in one last sigh. She walked back through streets that had memorized footsteps like verses. Upstairs, in Tarek’s study, the fan would be turning; the map would be waiting; the letters would be aligned like teeth.

She let herself in with the quiet of a thief who intends to steal nothing. At the desk, she untied the ribbon around Araminta’s correspondence and read until the lamps went lower and the grammar went sharper - phrases that smiled while they arranged their knives, seals that had

begun to show the hair-thin cracks of haste. The word cosmopolitan appeared again, and Cassandra wrote it in the margin with an arrow and the word oh.

When she could not stand her own heartbeat any longer, she closed the packet, squared it, and set a teacup on top as if to keep it from escaping.

She opened her field journal. The pages smelled of dust and optimism. Her hand hesitated above the line where she had written and scratched out sentences all day. The brand pulsed once, the way memory sometimes does when you are about to tell on yourself.

She wrote, and did not scratch it out this time:

Some shadows are cast by lanterns we lit ourselves.

Night turned Cairo into a hushed apparatus: gears of alleys clicking, courtyards breathing, laundry lines strung like harp strings under a black silk sky. Heat released itself from the walls in slow, thoughtful exhalations. Lamps along Sharia al-Muizz tucked their flames behind pierced brass screens and taught the pavement small constellations. Above, the floating platforms of the bazaar had settled into their moorings and slept with one eye open, swaying almost imperceptibly as if rocking an invisible infant.

On a rooftop near the newly scoured square, a figure stood where the city's lines forgot how to intersect. Cloak to the ankles, hood laid back because the air wanted a face to judge. He held a narrow stoppered vial between thumb and forefinger: glass thin as a whisper, lip cut like a reed. He unstopped it with one thumbnail. The sound was a very soft yes.

He knelt and pressed the mouth of the vial to the dune of fine, stubborn sand the mirage-tent had left behind. The grains slithered up the glass, obedient as a rumor. The dune sighed and slumped, the pressed glyph of the bisected sun distorting and then erasing itself as if embarrassed by how public it had been. He tapped the vial against the ground once, murmuring something in a dialect older than the city, older than the word city, older than the argument between river and shore.

"Attend," he said to the sand. "Attend and answer."

The grains inside the vial breathed like a living throat. Light from a half-cloaked moon caught in them and became ink. A shape surfaced in the filled glass, a reed drawing a line between two small suns. The man nodded as if hearing a verdict go as expected.

He rose, slid the vial into a pocket sewn to sit against his heart, and walked the roof's edge like a man who had taught his fear better manners years ago. At the corner, where a pigeon coop made its own country of splints and twine, he stopped and leveled his gaze toward the southeast. Luxor was not visible from here, not even to men with the kind of eyes that get hired to notice invisible things. But the river was. Even at night you could see where the Nile dragged the stars into a long, patient smear.

"Soon," he said to the horizon, not as a promise but as a schedule. In the shadows at his shoulder, something like laughter uncoiled - the dry, old sound of papyrus turning a page.

He lifted his hand, and the wind stood up obediently. It brought him the smells it had collected: date-sugar and donkey-sweat, engine oil and jasmine, tea and the metal the city kept under its tongue. It brought him another thing, too - a thread of heat not from Cairo at all, not from any stove or streetlamp. A distant temperature. A breath.

“The court has lost its appetite,” he murmured to the wind. “The bank is hungry again. We are on time.”

On a different roof, a cat watched him from between two urns. Her pupils were coins. The man did not glance her way. This was not his first city with cats. Cats came with cities the way gulls came with coasts and gossip came with markets. He touched two fingers to his brow, a gesture not of respect but of habit, and stepped down into the stairwell’s ink. The street at the bottom accepted him as if he had always been there.

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Wind found the shutter of Tarek’s study and made a conversational sound. The fan twirled and pretended that air could be corrected. On the divan, Cassandra had fallen asleep sitting up, her back crooked against the arm, a fold of Araminta’s correspondence marking her shoulder like an inconvenient sash. Her journal lay open on her lap; her pen had rolled into the cradle of her collarbone and lodged there like a baton paused mid-conduct. Nebu had arranged himself on her shins with the selfless gravity of a saint, one paw draped over the linen wrap at her palm.

The sigil beneath warmed by degrees, then cooled, the way a dream decides whether to become a story. Somewhere in the edges of her sleep, Cassandra walked again through the mirage-tent and found the shelves not empty this time but full of books bound in linen, in skin, in light. She put her hand to a spine and it flexed like a throat preparing a hello.

“Don’t,” said a voice that might have been hers at another age.

She turned away from the shelves and found a window that looked out over water. The river had come indoors with its usual entitlement. It filled the frame and hummed in a key she would later pretend to have recognized. In the dream, she said without lips, I am not ready. The river said back, very politely, Neither is anyone.

She woke all at once, not with the panic of falling but with the clarity of a sentence ending in a period at last. The room had shifted its weight. The fan’s shadow spun on the ceiling like a very quiet spell. She looked at her hand without lifting her head. The wrap glowed faintly where the gauze overlapped her pulse. Not bright enough to be spectacle. Bright enough to be unable to lie about it.

Nebu stirred and blinked up at her, amber eyes widening to swallow the room. “Either I have decided to purr for no reason,” he said sleepily, “or your hand and I are about to disagree.”

“Feel,” Cassandra said, and he did, pressing his cheek to the linen. A shiver went through him - a current traveling through fur to whiskers to bone. He did not bow his head, because he did not do bowing. He closed his eyes instead, which was his bowing.

“Door,” he said. His voice lost its lovely nuisance and kept only the truth. “Somewhere the city can smell the river dreaming of its floor. It is… closer than yesterday.” He flicked an ear toward the window. “Or it is louder.”

“Both,” Cassandra said, and realized her throat was dry and minted from-before. She sat forward, gathered the letters into a stack, placed them in the drawer without looking at the names, and shut it very gently, as if the wood might take sides.

She rose and went to the window. The street below did not make the sound of danger. It made the sound of late: a woman laughing three buildings over; the slap of water ladled into a bucket; the honorable complaint of a cartwheel; the whisper of a broom keeping the threshold’s grammar neat. Above, the moored platforms of the bazaar sighed in their sleep and adjusted themselves against the ropes’ broad shoulders.

But there it was, anyway. Not sound. Not smell. The sense you get in a library when someone turns a page in a book you have wanted to read since you could read. It was not for her. It was not not for her. It was happening. The brand in her palm brightened, one pulse; then another. Not pain. Invitation.

“Wake him,” she said.

Nebu did not ask whom. He leapt from her lap to the desk to the sill to the shutters and out into the night like a well-aimed joke. His absence took warmth with it. Cassandra closed her fingers around her palm and listened to the apartment settle. Tarek muttered in his sleep in the other room; the bed creaked in a tone of reassurance. A tram far away practiced resignation. The wind touched the back of her neck with fingers like river-cold metal.

“Not yet,” she told it, and the wind, being mannered tonight, withdrew to consider.

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The villa had its own weather. It kept coolness in a tall jar and poured it out slowly, like a careful host. Rahetep sat in the courtyard with a book he didn’t need to hold and a glass he didn’t need to drink and did both because they signified a degree of civility in the face of the inconveniently infinite. The fish in the pool pretended to be asleep. The ibis flanked the doorway in an alabaster mood.

Nebu slid under the gate like spilled light. He crossed the flagstones without touching them and sprang onto the low table in front of Rahetep so silently that the tea’s steam did not change shape.

“We have appointments with ghosts,” he said. “Or with their breath.”

Rahetep did not start; his reflexes had learned dignity long before alarm clocks. He closed the book on his thumb and looked at the cat over the moon’s reflection. “So. The river has tuned itself.”

Nebu snorted, which on him was courtly. “It has tuned her. She thinks she is the instrument.”

“She is,” Rahetep said. He rose, setting the book on the chair with the care you reserve for people in antechambers. He stepped to the pool and touched the water with two fingers. The ripples that went out came back faster than they ought to. “But the song is old.”

“You still want her to go,” Nebu said. Not a question. A small cruelty, perhaps, or a small permission.

Rahetep looked at the cat for a long breath and then smiled the way a king smiles when he has accepted that the crown is heavier in memory than in metal. “I want her to be the person she believes herself to be. Whether or not I am in the world she comes back to.”

Nebu’s tail flicked at the word back. He climbed onto the chair arm and kneaded the upholstery twice, committing hostilities. “If we find the temple,” he said, “and it asks for what it always asks - ”

“We will answer differently than we did last time,” Rahetep said, voice mild, hands at rest. “We have had rehearsal.”

Nebu did not purr. You did not purr at the edge of a tide.

“Bring honey,” he said instead, and Rahetep laughed, and the night relaxed a notch, foolable for a moment into thinking the joke had been the point.

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Cassandra did not remember going back to the divan, only that she was on it when Tarek came through the study door with his shirt half-buttoned and his hair in an anthology of directions. He had already lit the lamp with his left hand. In his right, he held the bottle with the shadow-stained water. The stain inside had lifted from the glass and hovered like a punctuation mark waiting for the sentence.

“It moved when the wind did,” he said, and then he saw her palm and pursed his mouth in the rare, raw expression of having one’s theory confirm something one didn’t want confirmed. “There.”

“Door,” she said.

“Door,” he agreed. He set the bottle down as if it could choose a side. He laid the map flat. Ink glistened as if remembering that it had once been liquid. The circle he had drawn over the floodplain north of Luxor threw a shadow it could not have, given the lamp’s angle.

They looked at each other, and in the look lived the entire argument they might otherwise have had about caution and haste, courage and performance, the British tendency to apologize for their appetites and the Egyptian tendency to pretend they kept none. They did not speak it. They had a morning and a direction.

“Dawn,” Tarek said.

“Before the market can invent the story for us,” she said.

Nebu returned through the shutter as if he had stepped out for milk. He smelt of courtyard and a promise trying to keep its coat on. “He’s awake,” he said. “He is practicing not being heavy.”

“I hate it here,” Tarek said very mildly to the universe, and began gathering tools.

Cassandra wrapped her scarf - thin, the color of old parchment - around her hair and tucked it with a pin. She slid her journal into her satchel. It made a small sound of approval. She touched the drawer with the letters once, the way one touches a gravestone not to say anything but to be witnessed. The brand in her palm pulsed once, gentle as a fingertip against a book’s spine.

Outside, the streets made ready for dawn. Bakers shouldered trays of haloed bread. In a courtyard someone poured water over stones to bring the night closer. A boy yawned on a rooftop and startled a line of pigeons into a soft ceremonial flight. The ropes of the moored bazaar creaked with practiced ache, waking to hold weight again.

Up on the roof where the man had stood, the last of the dune slipped into the crack between two tiles and became the same as all the other sand, which is to say memory. A corner of the scoured square still held the absence of the pavilion like a breath no one had exhaled.

In the window glass by Cassandra’s elbow, the night’s humidity had drawn a fine ghost of condensation. As she moved past, it gathered itself the way shy handwriting gathers courage. Hieroglyphs shouldered themselves out of fog, sharp and bright and then immediately ashamed to exist. They said, in a grammar that fit in the margin of the world: THE BREATH AWAKENS.

Cassandra stopped. Her own moving reflection paused beside the words like a companion in an exhibition. She lifted her bandaged hand without thinking, palm level with the message. The heat there matched the sentence’s temperature as perfectly as a note matches its tuning fork.

The fog thinned. The words un-wrote themselves into a smear that resembled nothing more than sleep. In the street, the wind found a new angle and learned it with delight. Very far away and very close, a sound began: not chanting exactly, but the shape around which chanting collects. A cadence that felt like a history lesson trying to become a song.

Cassandra lowered her hand. She did not smile. She did not frown. She took a breath as if the air were an oath and turned from the window toward the door, where Tarek stood with the map and Nebu with his arrogance and the city with its old, old test.

“Shall we?” she said.

“You’re going to anyway,” Nebu said fondly.

Tarek blew out the lamp and opened the door.

The night leaned in one last time, like a conspirator or a guest. It left them a handful of stars and the rhythm of distant water, as if the Nile had forgotten itself in order to remember, and

wanted witnesses. Then dawn began composing the sky, line by careful line, and they stepped out to read what it would write next.

Chapter 9: Lessons in the Afterlife

Chapter 9
Lessons in the Afterlife

Cairo at dusk held its breath like a singer before the note. Heat softened into something drinkable; the mosaic courtyards exhaled the day's dust; minarets lifted their silhouettes into violet sky. Cassandra's hired carpet skimmed low over the district of older villas where bougainvillea rioted along walls like spellwork gone gleefully wrong. Lanterns, newly lit, haloed the air with honey-coloured circles. Somewhere a gramophone warbled a jazz record that thought highly of itself.

They set down in a palm-shaded lane before a gate of carved cedar. The brass knocker had been filed into the shape of an ankh sometime within the last twenty-four hours. Cassandra, who had left Rahetep for scarcely a day, recognized the symptom at once: the Polite Mummy had discovered home décor.

She lifted the latch and stepped into the courtyard.

The villa had been modest once - whitewashed walls, blue shutters, a square of fountain murmuring to its own reflection - but now it wore its new master's past like an over-eager costume. Drapes of funerary linen hung in symmetrical panels along the colonnade, carefully embroidered with gold thread that caught the lantern light and turned the night into a slow tide of gleam. Stone jars that had almost certainly not been intended for umbrellas had been rearranged by the door in an inviting semicircle labelled (in a hand both elegant and self-satisfied): VISITORS, STAFF, CATS.

"Careful with the categories," said a voice near her ankles, warm velvet dipped in disdain. "He keeps trying to put me in all three."

Nebu uncoiled from the fountain rim like a poured line of shadow. Even in dusk his fur seemed to have its own sun; his eyes burned amber with cat-sized apocalypse. He inspected her boots, found them insufficiently polished, and yawned.

"Do I pass inspection?" Cassandra asked.

"You smell of dust, stubbornness, and black tea," Nebu said. "So yes. Do wipe your feet. He's got the linens to stand at attention."

Cassandra took off her outer robe and shook out the grit. The day's work still clung to her: the chalk of copied wardings under her fingernails; a smudge of ink across her knuckle where her quill had staged a small rebellion; the faint ache behind her eyes that meant she had thought too hard about systems older than language. She tucked a stubborn auburn curl back under the pin that never held and followed Nebu beneath the colonnade.

The main room had been rearranged into a thesis. Pillows in deep lapis and desert gold were stacked in conversational geometry around a low inlaid table. The table itself held a tea service that might once have belonged to a priest-king or to a very attentive burglar. Candles floated at shoulder height - four to a side, keeping time like the most patient of metronomes - and the air tasted faintly of myrrh and something dryer, older, as if time had been ground with cardamom.

Rahetep stood by the far wall, regarding a linen panel with the critical tenderness of a man adjusting his own biography. He wore his wrappings the way some men wore perfectly tailored evening coats - effortlessly, with an air of having invented both the garment and the evening. A narrow gilt circlet held his brow; he had exchanged the previous day’s cane for a scepter that was almost certainly a broomstick in ceremonial disguise.

“Miss Blythe,” he said, turning with that grave delight he reserved for old friends and applauding audiences. “You bring the dusk in with you. How very punctual of the horizon.”

“I bribed the horizon with ginger biscuits,” Cassandra said, crossing to set her satchel on a chair that had developed tassels since she saw it last. “You’ve been busy.”

“Tidying only,” Rahetep replied. “Civilization is a kind of tidying. Besides, the old linen has such a comforting effect on the nerves. I never rest properly without a row of gods scowling at me.”

“They’re not scowling,” Nebu said, leaping to the table and curling around the teapot like a dragon claiming a hoard. “That one’s merely disappointed in your punctuation.”

Cassandra hid a smile. “I brought the court clerk’s transcript,” she said, tapping her satchel. “And a payment receipt for tea that is almost certainly contraband.”

“Excellent,” Rahetep said. “Contraband tea is the only sort with flavour. Sit, please. Allow a dead man to pour for the living and pretend it isn’t a metaphor.”

They took their places - Cassandra cross-legged with the ease of long nights in tents and tombs; Nebu arranging himself so that steam found him of its own accord; Rahetep with priestly dignity, though he had to shift twice to avoid the table wobble a hexed carpenter had built in for humility. The tea smelled of honey and sun-warmed stone. When Rahetep lifted the pot, the runes on his wrist glowed a breath brighter and subsided, as if acknowledging a routine.

“To the god of minor mercies,” Rahetep said softly. “May the tea be hot, the lemons obedient, and the bureaucracy distant.”

“I’ll drink to two out of three,” Cassandra said, accepting her cup. The first sip pulled the day’s grit out of her bones; heat unfurled along her ribs like a politely insistent scarf. She exhaled. The ceiling charms caught the breath and dimmed, then brightened, little tides of light following the rhythm of their talk.

“This is comfortable,” she said before she could stop herself.

“Of course it is,” Nebu said. “I arranged it.”

Rahetep’s eyes crinkled. “He rearranged it after I arranged it, which is what he means when he speaks of artistry. Tell me, Miss Blythe - how fares your hunt among our modern thieves of immortality? Has Inspector Mogrim discovered another form to request in triplicate before sunrise?”

Cassandra reached for a lemon slice and occupied a neat half-minute with its surrender. “The Order prefer their paperwork sand-coloured and unwitnessed,” she said. “But I found two more import authorizations that were stamped with a seal I can only describe as - sticky. Someone wants the Breath of Amun spoken about without ever being named.”

At the phrase the room made a small adjustment. The floating candles steadied. On the linen panel behind Rahetep, the painted god with the tall plume seemed to lean in, though logic insisted he did not. Nebu’s tail stilled and resumed.

“Names matter,” Rahetep said. “Which is why priests hoard them and kings pretend not to. We shall speak carefully. We might even tell the truth later if time permits.”

He refilled her cup with the etiquette of a man who had never once allowed a plate to be empty in his presence. Cassandra watched the steam as though it might resolve into hieroglyphs. Sometimes lately it did.

“We searched the bazaar again,” she said, and thought of the high rattling laughter of potion bottles in the sun, of carpets jostling like temperamental fish, of the masked woman whose title had tastefully left out her face. “Tarek says the Order are older than their current membership, and younger than their ambition. He thinks they mean to do what your priests couldn’t.”

“And what makes him certain I didn’t?” Rahetep asked mildly.

Cassandra looked up. He had the air of a tutor tossing a pebble into a pond to see what circles would be clever enough to return. She weighed her words. Truth had edges here.

“I don’t doubt you,” she said, which, she realized, was true and therefore dangerous. “But the wards in your tomb show modern interference - and intent. Someone tugged the knot you tied. Someone knew it would pull you back.”

“Curiosity is an excellent locksmith,” Rahetep murmured. “It opens rooms that should remain airless. Still. I confess the world is more entertaining for having returned me to it. There is jam now. You had no jam worth speaking of in my time.”

“There was jam,” Nebu said. “It was called ‘lies told to kings.’”

“Pedantry,” Rahetep said. “And cats do not eat jam.”

“Cats eat everything,” Nebu said, and batted a sugared date off a saucer with surgical dexterity. It disappeared. “Especially the parts you hide.”

The joke landed and lingered. Cassandra cupped her tea and let warmth undam a question that had been pacing her skull all afternoon like an anxious archivist.

“May I see…?” she began, and let the rest of the sentence be an academic gesture toward the linen on the wall.

Rahetep inclined his head. “You may, with respect. They are not decoration only. They are… reminders to me of what I promised.”

Cassandra stood. The panel depicted, in the clean impossible lines of temple art, a procession of figures bearing jars beneath a sun that doubled as an eye. In the lowest register, a man knelt - hands raised - not to the god above but to a small flame cupped between two palm fronds. The flame had been picked out in gold leaf so thin she could feel her breath move it. Under her gaze, the leaf did not shimmer so much as breathe back.

Her skin prickled along the forearms. She had seen these exact hieroglyphs a week ago in a shaving mirror that did not belong to a temple wall.

“Beautiful,” she said, because any other word would have been an admission.

“I had a good scribe,” Rahetep said, softly pleased. “His lines were like water behaving itself. He told me art is only successful when the viewer forgets to count the brushstrokes. I told him a king is only successful when the dead stop talking in the hall at night.”

“Have they?” Cassandra asked.

“Not recently,” he said, with perfect courtesy.

She turned back to him. The room looked steadier from this angle; later she would write that down and not know why. Rahetep had adjusted the scepter-broom so it leaned against the table’s edge like a listening ear. Nebu watched her with the unblinking patience of stones.

“You’ve made a home here quickly,” she said, and meant it as an apology for the fact that none of it could last.

“Home,” Rahetep repeated, tasting it as if it were a fruit bred since his burial. “Yes. The word does a great deal of work for four letters. But it is pleasant to pour tea for guests who arrive unannounced and believe me when I declare the hour civilized.”

Cassandra sat again. She had the feeling of a tightrope lowering itself a fraction, not enough to remove risk, but enough to allow a breath between steps.

“Tell me what you’ve learned,” Rahetep said lightly. “And I will tell you what remains inconvenient to admit.”

So she told him the day in small, precise dots: the forged seals that smelt faintly of beeswax and cowardice; the clerk who tried to sell her a rumor and wound up giving her a clue; the way the bazaar’s wards had trembled, briefly, when a masked woman spoke the word invitation. She left out that she had not slept since the dream of a temple under water. She left

out that sometimes, lately, her wand hummed like something breathing. There were truths she intended to keep until they stopped keeping her.

Rahetep listened the way tombs do - seeming silent while being busy with secrets. He nodded at intervals, not to indicate agreement, but to encourage the story to meet itself with honesty. Nebu made little notations with his tail in the air, like commas.

When she finished, he poured the last of the tea and set the pot down with ceremonial finality.

“You are very close to stepping over a line you will not see until your footprint dries,” he said, and his voice thinned almost imperceptibly. “We forget - those of us who love knowledge - that warmth and light are not the same. The sun climbs, Miss Blythe, and if you linger in the open long enough you will burn away the parts of yourself that understand why shade was invented.”

“That’s very poetic,” Nebu said. “He rehearsed it for an hour while the linens were drying.”

“It needed work,” Rahetep conceded. “But the sentiment holds.”

Cassandra laughed, and the sound surprised her with its gratitude. “I am not a moth,” she said. “And I keep shade in a tin,” she added, tapping her pocket, where the emergency tea leaves lived among paperclips, a folded rune chart, and a dried sprig of something Tarek said was either sage or an herb that insulted ghosts.

“Even moths have sense some nights,” Nebu said. He stood, stretching with the sinuous luxury of a creature who trusted every muscle. “He’ll give you history until your ears fall off. Eat first.”

The cat hopped down and padded toward the kitchen arch. Somewhere beyond, a cupboard opened of its own accord and admitted that it contained olives and bread. The floating candles drifted higher as if to make room for a softer border to the evening.

Cassandra looked at Rahetep over the rim of her cup. He looked back as kings look at maps they have not yet decided to conquer.

“Stay,” he said quietly. It was not a command, only an arrangement of air that made refusal ungenerous. “We will talk when the moon is proper. I will tell you about the day I learned that immortality costs interest.”

She nodded. “After olives,” she said. “I’m less philosophical when faint.”

“An affliction of the living,” Rahetep said, rising with a grace that forgot bones. He offered her his arm out of habit more than necessity. She took it out of courtesy more than need.

As they crossed the threshold to the kitchen, the fountain in the courtyard sang a little higher, as if someone had turned a wheel. The night beyond the shutters was the colour of ink that had decided to listen. Somewhere, far away, Cairo’s laughter cut through with the bright bell of a glass lifted and set down.

Domesticity composed itself around them: plates that chose the table with a clink of confidence, a knife that fell in love with a lemon, bread that tore cleanly as a page. Nebu supervised from the tiled counter with the serene tyranny of a magistrate.

Cassandra felt, briefly, the astonishing safety of ordinary things. Tea. Bread. The elegant ridiculousness of a resurrected king insisting she take the softer chair. The tug in her chest that said: Remember this. Remember you are human on purpose.

She did not know yet how quickly that purpose would be tried.

For the moment, she let the villa's quiet accept them, and let the candles lower themselves as if eavesdropping were a mercy. When Rahetep spoke again - voice gentler, edges wrapped in linen - Cassandra set down her cup and listened. The night leaned in with her.

The kitchen had a window of blue shutters that made the moonlight bluer still, as if the night had rinsed itself for company. A dish of olives, a heel of bread, a ramekin of salt the colour of pearl dust - these arranged themselves with the courtesy of practiced hosts. Nebu sat sphinx-still upon the counter, tail draped like a golden bookmark. The cat smelled faintly of anise and smugness.

Rahetep poured fresh water into the kettle and, without wand or word, persuaded the flame to behave. Cassandra had never tired of that: the way his magic moved as if it were remembering a choreography rather than obeying a command. His hands - careful, wrapped, ceremonial almost by accident - tended to the cups while he spoke.

"You asked," he said, "to hear the thing we keep calling by its breath. You asked to know when I first decided that living forever was a vulgar idea."

"That was my phrasing," Nebu said. "He had the vulgarity; I had the vocabulary."

Cassandra took out her notebook, the blue-cloth one with a broken elastic. She didn't open it yet. There are stories you listen to with your bones first.

Rahetep leaned his hip against the table, a king making peace with domestic furniture. The candlelight crisped the edges of his profile, a relief cut from night. When he began, his voice took on the register all good storytellers discover by accident: lower, steadier, as if it has been kept in a jar for just such an evening.

"In my twentieth year," he said, "the priests found a noun that frightened them. They brought it to me wrapped in silk and sand. They called it a discovery. They meant a weapon. We had dug into old vaults of words and found a pattern that described how a life could tether itself to the world as a falcon tethers to a wrist - free in appearance, bound in truth. It was not a spell then, only a notion. Not Breath. Not yet."

Cassandra pictured a room of men with shaved heads and inked fingers, their mouths full of hieroglyphs like teeth. The picture carried its own heat.

"Notion becomes ritual," Rahetep went on. "Ritual becomes law. In those days - perhaps in all days - the clever like to call law the shell of wisdom. I had been raised on that doctrine,

and I believed it. So we tried the notion as an experiment upon a goat."

Nebu made a sound that indicated long-suffering acquaintance with goats.

"The goat returned from the knife with eyes that did not blink," Rahetep said. "It learned three tricks in an afternoon and forgot none of them. At the second sunset, all the water in its dish turned to air and stayed, suspended like a soap bubble that knew better than to pop. The goat stood within the bubble and did not breathe. We had made a problem."

Cassandra's fingers found her pencil and gripped it. She kept the page closed. "And you called it - ?"

"Not what it asked to be called," Rahetep said, with a rueful bow of the mouth. "We called it Peret-em-Ankh - 'the Coming Forth by Life.' Later, those who loved it less called it Hekau en Shu - the Magic of Air. Later still, in your scholars' tongues, it became 'the Breath of Amun,' because too many miracles are named for gods who were in the wrong room at the time."

"The goat?" Cassandra asked before she could think better of it.

"Lived," Rahetep said, "until living meant only standing still and never blinking. The fourth day it began to sing without voice. That is how I would describe the sound. A pressure, like rain about to admit itself. When it looked at us, the torches drew back from their own flames. We ended the experiment. Do not ask how. I did not forgive the priests who insisted, and I did not forgive myself for agreeing."

The kettle breathed out a quiet white plume. Rahetep removed it from the heat with the same care a man uses to lift his child's first letter. He poured. The scent of honey and ash rose and folded the room inside it.

He spoke again only after they had sipped, as if the story required the throat to be warmed.

"After the goat," he said, "the language spread. Not the spell - language. Priests whisper to each other the way scholars write: with an optimism that mistakes secrecy for safety. The idea seeded itself in funerary texts, medical rites, lullabies for children of the noble households. Mothers sang of breath that wouldn't stop. Men pressed amulets to their chests and asked for the air to notice them a little longer. You know how such things work. A thought becomes a room with a door. Then a corridor. Then a palace."

"And palaces," Nebu said, "invite renovations."

"I thought," Rahetep continued, "that my task was to keep the corridor from becoming a street. It felt like a duty no grander than ensuring bread reached the villages when the Nile sulked. I convened councils. I forbade certain liturgies. I invited the most brilliant minds in the kingdom to show me limits I could defend. Some did. Most did not. They were very polite while making the argument that death is a misunderstanding."

He looked up at Cassandra then, a long, level look not of accusation but of kinship. She felt, horribly and tenderly at once, seen.

“In my thirty-first year,” Rahetep said, “my mother died. She had a cough that wouldn’t stop being summer. I sat with her at the water’s edge and told her the sun would ferry her. She told me I was a good boy and then she breathed out the way you set down a cup you no longer want because you have finally remembered you are not thirsty. The priests came to me after the jars were sealed and said: Pharaoh, allow us. We can fetch her back for a while, because grief is a fire and we have learned to cook over it.”

The room did not move, but it kept watch. Cassandra heard a single tile tick under the heat like a patient heartbeat.

“I refused,” Rahetep said. “In the morning I refused again, with more ceremony. Three weeks later the high priest gave me a document on papyrus and said it contained a liturgy that would keep the kingdom safe - and the names within could not die. Not just the bodies. The names.” He smiled, and it was not a kind smile. “That was when I understood that what was being sold to me was not love, or mercy, or even a goat’s trick, but a financial instrument.”

“A tax,” Cassandra said, remembering the phrase he would use later, remembering it before he said it now.

“A tax on the unready,” Rahetep echoed, velvet and iron in one breath. “Because once a people believes it can borrow time, it stops planting the kind of trees whose shade it will never see. It builds monuments with mirrors and calls them temples. And then it must keep paying, in offerings and obedience, to service the debt of its immortality. We do not have language for that in my tongue. In yours, you call it exploitation and make committees.”

Cassandra did not laugh. The pencil in her fingers left a clean grey line on her thumb; she had been writing nothing on her skin without noticing.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“What all kings do when they discover their priests own a mathematics they cannot read,” Rahetep said. “I cheated. I told the high priest I would participate. I allowed the first of the rituals to occur - small things, private, the binding of a name to the breath of a room so that the name would not depart it. And then, on the night of the final ceremony, I took the words and hid them.”

He turned his wrist so that the runes lacing his wrappings caught the candlelight and held it, tiny suns in orderly array. Cassandra leaned forward despite herself. The sequence upon his skin was the same she had seen in the mirror a week ago - an inversion of others she knew, a lattice of protection that doubled as a prohibition. Her mind reached toward it with the greedy delight of a scholar meeting a new grammar.

“The Breath,” he said, and the word loosened something in the room - made the shutters answer with a small, pleased tremor, “was not in a jar, Miss Blythe. It was in the grammar. The order of naming. A person is a sentence. We found a way to place a mark at the end that refused to be a period. I took that mark and turned it into a question.”

“You sealed it,” she murmured.

“I sealed it,” he agreed. “In a temple below the floodplain. Not under stone - under water. The Nile itself would be the ward. I wrote the final liturgy and hid it among the hymns that put fishermen to sleep. I instructed my scribes to paint only what could be misread; I told my masons to build rooms that disobeyed themselves; I taught my captains to forget how to stand in a straight line.”

“And your priests?” Nebu prompted, the tip of his tail tapping like a metronome given manners.

“Called me coward,” Rahetep said, “and then called me traitor, which at least is a more interesting epithet. The Order did not have a name yet, but it had a habit: gather the discontented clever and convince them that the shortest path to wisdom is conquest. They smiled very politely when they tried to murder me. They failed. They succeeded later, after I had built my tomb and furnished it with the sort of dignity a man hopes will distract his enemies from his fear.”

“Is that in the manuals?” Cassandra said, because sometimes levity is the only gospel available.

“It should be,” Rahetep said, with grave approval. “I would write one, but the market is crowded.”

The tea had cooled enough to drink greedily. Cassandra did so, and felt the story settle inside her ribs, taking rooms, opening windows. She reached, finally, for the notebook. The first page received a single sentence in her tidy hand: *Immortality (=) debt instrument disguised as mercy; Rahetep changed punctuation.* She underlined punctuation twice.

Rahetep watched the pencil with a fondness that made her throat ache. “You do what I did,” he said. “You put the world in lines and expect it to stay.”

“I know better,” she said, and did not sound as certain as she meant to.

“Your better knowing is why you will not be swallowed,” he said, and for an instant the room shed its comedy and became a hall of judgment and blessing, and she was very young within it. Then he blinked and the kitchen returned, with its olives and its cat and its blue shutters insisting on the moon.

“Tell her the part where you frightened even me,” Nebu said. “Tell her about the morning you woke with your name on the ceiling.”

Rahetep’s hands stilled on the teapot. “The night after I sealed the grammar,” he said softly, “the air above my bed rippled like heat above a road. Letters appeared - not the ones we write with, not the ones we pray with. Older. Carved out of sound. They arranged themselves into my name and then they opened as a door opens, and behind the door there was nothing. Not absence - *nothing*. It pressed against the ceiling and whispered in many voices that I had mistaken myself for the one who writes endings. It said: We are the breath you taxed. Pay.”

Cassandra felt her own breath shallow in answer, as if the story had reached across years and put its hand on her sternum. On the linen panel in the next room - the one with the gold-leaf

flame - a ripple ran so fine she could not tell if she had imagined it.

“What did you do?” she asked again, because some questions regenerate until you answer them properly.

“I wrote my name on my wrists,” Rahetep said, touching the runes that glowed and quieted. “I wrote the names of my mother and of the river and of the first word I ever remembered my tutor teaching me. I bound myself to things that end. I told the ceiling: here is my debt, and here is my pledge, and if you would collect, you must do so through bread and water and mourning. That is what I understand. I cannot pay in eternity; I can pay in meals and funerals.”

Nebu, who had been pretending indifference with his entire body, looked at Cassandra with something raw and unjoking in his gold eyes. “He made a mistake,” the cat said, low. “He made himself the barrier. He stood between the Breath and everyone it wanted, and he did not stop to consider what that meant for how long he would be required to stand.”

Rahetep accepted the rebuke with the grace of a man weary of being right. “I preferred a watchman to a landlord,” he said. “The choice was poor in either direction.”

Cassandra flipped the notebook open fully now, not to write but to shield her expression. “Your mother?” she asked. “Would she have - ?”

“She would have cuffed my ear,” he said, and smiled in a way that almost made the wrappings irrelevant. “And then she would have made me a sweet and told me that good sons do not argue with the sun about its hours. I have not been good in a very long time.”

Silence arranged itself politely among the cups. Outside, a cart jangled past in the street, its driver singing off-key about oranges and luck. The shutters breathed. The kettle, cooling, ticked like a clock unwilling to admit to the profession.

Cassandra closed the notebook. Her palm lay flat upon the cover as if it were a door she needed to keep shut for a moment. “Thank you,” she said. It felt inadequate and precisely right. “For trusting me with the grammar.”

“I have trusted you since you woke me,” Rahetep said simply. “You looked at me and wanted to understand before you wanted to use. That is a rarity even in ages that fancy themselves virtuous.”

“And now,” Nebu said, sliding down from the counter with a sound like velvet reconsidering gravity, “we have achieved pathos, which is the correct seasoning for olives. Eat. Then decide whether you still wish to follow a rumour to Luxor and see if the river remembers where you put your punctuation.”

Cassandra took an olive because obedience is sometimes the bravest route. Salt burst against her tongue, clean and stubborn. She looked at the runes on Rahetep’s wrists, and at the faint breathing shimmer of the gold in the next room, and at the cat who had laughed at gods and means to continue.

The notebook lay beneath her hand, warm from her skin. She would later copy the sequence of his wrist-runes in miniature, the way a musician copies a melody to memorize its grace. For now she only pressed harder, as if pressure could anchor her and keep her from floating up into the dangerous air of the idea.

“Tomorrow,” she said, “I’ll go to the court again. And then - Luxor.”

“Ah,” Rahetep murmured. “The horizon grows punctual.”

He gathered the cups, and the flame under the kettle let itself be convinced to sleep. In the next room, the painted god returned, politely, to his posture of watching. Somewhere, deep beneath the city and the river and the deserts that pretended to be empty, a temple sighed as if stone had just remembered being sand.

“Miss Blythe,” Rahetep said, the gentleness back in his tone like a door reopening, “when we reach the river’s grammar, do not try to correct it. It has seniority.”

Cassandra nodded. Her pencil, forgotten in her fingers, left another pale smudge on her thumb, as if marking her for a language test she had not studied for. She did not mind. She had, after all, been studying for this her entire life.

Nebu brushed her calf as he went past, as if by accident. “Do try,” he murmured. “If only so I can tell you ‘I told you so’ in a historically significant location.”

The moonlight pushed its way through the shutters and laid a strip of silver across the table. Rahetep’s hands crossed it; the wrappings drank the light and glowed a breath, then stilled. Cassandra rose with the feeling that rooms had moved inside her, making space for something vast and not entirely welcome but impossible to refuse.

Outside, Cairo exhaled. Inside, the air held steady, warm and instructive, like a tutor’s palm over a student’s hand as she learns the shape of the letter that means: *enough*.

They carried the olives and the last of the bread back to the main room as if changing stages between acts. The floating candles followed, dimming to a hush of flame. Beyond the shutters the city unspooled its midnight chorus - distant carts, a laugh torn in half by a doorway, the thin cry of a muezzin practicing tomorrow’s devotion under his breath. The villa kept its own quieter liturgy: the fountain’s syllables, the soft trick of wax, the linen panels breathing when the night current found them.

Cassandra sat cross-legged on the lapis cushion she’d claimed earlier and set her notebook on the table. She didn’t open it. She had a superstition, newly acquired and already making rules in her head: some thoughts must be spoken into the air before the page traps them in the wrong shape.

“I’ve been trying,” she began, “to treat this like work. A pattern, a network of tampered wards, a set of men and women who call themselves the Order and think secrecy is the same thing as ethics. I file the facts. Copper-colour seal here, false authorization there. An informant in the Bazaar who sells relics that should never have been unstitched from their

tombs.” She tapped the table lightly. “But somewhere today, all my tidy lines bent toward your name.”

Rahetep took the opposite cushion and folded himself down with courtly geometry, the wrapped hands composed on his knees. “Lines will do that when they discover a gravity,” he said. “Say the rest.”

“They don’t only want you,” Cassandra said. “They want the grammar behind you - the one you sealed. They’ve built an argument that sounds like mercy and tastes like control. If the Breath returns, they can bind names. Once names bind, power follows. Who gets written into permanence? Who gets edited out? The Bank will say ‘stewardship,’ the Order will say ‘enlightenment,’ and both will mean ownership dressed up for dinner.”

Nebu, who had worked himself into an elegant loaf at the corner of the table, made a noise like a very small violin being tuned. “She’s learning to translate bureaucrat into human,” he said. “Next we teach her cat.”

Cassandra ignored him. “I keep thinking,” she went on, “that I came here to disable historical irritants and go home with a clean conscience. But every step I take opens a room I hadn’t intended to enter. And in each room there’s a mirror.” She tasted the next words, felt their metal, and said them anyway. “I like what I see in the mirror more than I should.”

Rahetep’s head tilted. The small gold on his brow gathered a thread of candlelight and held it steady. “I have been fond of mirrors myself,” he said. “The problem is not admiration. It is forgetting the mirror is furniture.”

Cassandra smiled, then let it fade. “Gringotts trained me to see curses as locks and myself as the locksmith. But locks were cast for reasons. People hid things for reasons. If I’m honest - ” She stopped, surprised at the heat in her voice. “If I’m honest, the reason I open them is that I cannot stand not knowing. It isn’t noble. It isn’t even professional. It’s hunger. And hunger will eat whatever is on the plate.”

Nebu’s ear flicked. “The first step is admitting you’re a scholar,” he said dryly.

Rahetep studied her for a long breath. He had the patience of sediment, the kind that measures progress in layers. “Curiosity is not a sin,” he said at last. “It is a climate. Some days it nourishes; some days it burns the crop. What matters is whether you remember the difference between warmth and light.”

He let the words hang there, the softest rebuke, the kind that trusts the hearer to do the arithmetic.

“Say it,” Cassandra said. “Say the line you’ve been polishing since the dynasty invented afternoon.”

He smiled. “Knowledge is a sun,” he said simply. “Stand in it too long, and it scorches away the part of you that knows why shade exists.”

There it was - the sentence she had been edging toward all day, the shape of her unease spoken in a voice that made it sound like etiquette. She closed her eyes for a moment and saw herself years from now, a woman made of bright facts and brittle kindness, immaculate reports, clever solutions that were just different uses of the same door. She felt the warmth in her chest and asked, honestly afraid: *What would I be if I knew everything?*

When she opened her eyes, Rahetep was still watching her, not like a king, not like a riddle, but like a man who had rehearsed every version of this conversation with himself and still wished for a better ending.

“You think I’ll be you,” Cassandra said, and then grimaced. “That sounded ruder than I meant.”

“It sounded accurate,” he said, amused. “You are not wrong to fear the resemblance. We are cousins across the centuries: each convinced the world would be kinder if only the correct mind held the key. Our error is not in love of keys. It is in thinking doors exist to make us larger.”

Cassandra breathed out and steadied the tremor in her hands by reaching for an olive. The salt anchored her on her tongue. “Tarek,” she said, “tells me history is a person. If that’s true, I’m not sure I like how often I have interrupted her without knocking.”

“You can learn to knock,” Rahetep said. “And - when she does not wish to receive you - to sit in the hall and wait without sulking.”

Nebu yawned a baroque yawn. “Bring a saucer,” he advised. “Waiting is thirsty work.”

Cassandra opened the notebook now, not to shield herself but to confess. She wrote, *Shade ≠ ignorance. Shade = mercy,* and, beneath it, *Doors do not love us.*

“Tell me,” she said, eyes on the page, “how far does this go? The Order. The Bank. The priests who lost their nouns and became a verb in new robes. Does it end at the temple under the river, or does it continue into any room where someone says: it would be better if nothing ever ended?”

“It goes as far as breath goes,” Rahetep said. “Which is to say: everywhere people mistake fear for wisdom. The Order are only industrious gardeners. They cultivate our terror of loss and call the harvest enlightenment. Gringotts are bookkeepers who want to reconcile the accounts of the soul ledger. Many of them are sincere. Sincerity is not a disinfectant.”

Cassandra winced. The phrase landed like a pin perfectly placed on a map. “There’s a memo on my desk in London,” she said, “that uses the phrase ‘custodial immortality.’ The ink is very proud of itself.”

“Words love uniforms,” Nebu said. “They misbehave less when dressed.”

“Do you see,” Rahetep asked, gently, “why I chose to hide the punctuation? Not because I hated language. Because I loved it too much to let it be conscripted.”

She did see. The realization wasn't a single light coming on; it was a series of lamps along a street, the kind that reveals how many doors there really are when you thought there were only two. She saw the faces of the archivist goblin whose hands had shook when he handed her forged papers; of the masked woman in the bazaar whose warning had sounded like an invitation because invitations are easier to accept than commands; of Araminta Voss, who had once told a room full of junior curse-breakers that "ethics, like glass, is clearest when kept polished and out of reach."

She also saw herself at eleven, in a Ravenclaw dormitory, building towers of books in bed to feel taller than her fear that she might go unnoticed in a world made by people louder, richer, braver. Every answer she had ever found had praised her. Praise had felt like safety. Safety had become a habit.

"Suppose," she said softly, "there is a version of me who takes the Breath into her hands and thinks: finally, no more funerals. What would you say to her?"

Rahetep's reply came without hesitation, as if he had practiced speaking to that ghost. "I would ask whose funerals she had in mind," he said. "And when she answered 'everyone's,' I would tell her she had not listened to the most important part of living, which is learning how to finish."

Nebu's tail thumped once against the wood. "And I would tell her to sit down and drink her tea before it grows offended."

Cassandra smiled despite the ache in it. "You both make compelling cases."

"We have had practice," Nebu said.

She looked at her wand on the table - ordinary ash, lightly scuffed, humming faintly as if it had learned to purr in the company of a cat. The hum had not been there a month ago. She placed her palm over it. The hum steadied, then grew the slightest degree warmer, like a heartbeat checking whether it was alone.

"Another confession," she said. "Sometimes, lately, when I hold it, I can feel…structure. Not of a spell. Of *spelling*. It's as if I can sense how the letters lean together under the charm, how syllables choose their weight. My tutors would call it synesthesia; a priest would call it blasphemy. I only know that it makes doors easier to open."

Rahetep's gaze sharpened. Not alarm; recognition. "The Breath is a grammar," he said. "When it approaches, the sentence reveals its hinges. You are standing near a door you will be tempted to name 'destiny' because nothing else sounds as flattering."

"I don't want to be flattered," Cassandra said, and heard the child in it and did not mind. "I want to do the least harm."

"Then keep your old tool," he said, nodding at the wand. "Wands are excellent at reminding mortals that power prefers to be held with one hand at a time."

Nebu snorted. "Also: they break. Which is a mercy disguised as inconvenience."

Cassandra added another line to the page: *Choose tools that admit to failure*. The pencil blunted; she sharpened it with a word and a scrape of patience. “If I go to Luxor,” she said, “if we find the temple under the river, will you ask me to unseal what you sealed?”

“I will ask you,” Rahetep said, “to witness. To measure twice. To admit aloud when ambition is walking in your shoes wearing your voice.”

“And if the Order gets there first?”

“Then,” Nebu said lazily, “you will do something reckless and correct, and I will complain into eternity about the quality of your timing.”

They let the silence after that be clean. Outside, a wind came up from the river and stroked the shutters with the knuckles of a careful friend. The linen panel behind Rahetep - gold-leaf flame cupped in painted palms - shivered almost imperceptibly, and settled.

Cassandra closed the notebook. The movement felt ceremonial. She turned the elastic once, twice, thrice around the cover until it bit the corners. When she looked up, Rahetep had drawn himself a fraction taller, as if the room had a spine and he meant to stand where it was strongest.

“You are afraid,” he said, with the kindness of not making it a question.

“Yes,” she said. “Of wanting too much. Of being right for the wrong reasons. Of…finding out that my hunger is larger than my compassion.”

“Good,” he said, and she let the word surprise her into a brief laugh. “Fear is a shade you can stand under while you consider. Panic is the desert at noon. We will avoid noon.”

Nebu hopped down from the table and circled her ankles until she had to move or step on dignity. “You will also avoid grand pronouncements before breakfast,” he said. “Tarek sent a note. He has coordinates. Luxor wishes to be dramatic on Thursday.”

Cassandra’s pulse quickened. She tried to pretend it was only logistics. “Tomorrow,” she said carefully, “I’ll go to court once more. Then we go.”

Rahetep inclined his head, a benediction disguised as agreement. “Then we go.”

The candles dipped, recovering at once. On instinct Cassandra reached for the teapot to refill empty cups and discovered, with quiet relief, that there was enough left for one small pour each. Warmth, not light. She distributed it like a pact.

They drank.

In the street a cart’s wheel struck a stone and rattled away the way choices do once they’re made. Somewhere a dog barked once, convinced it had altered the universe. The fountain in the courtyard found a slower note.

Cassandra gathered the notebook and her satchel. As she stood, her shadow fell across the gold leaf on the panel. For a breath, the flame seemed brighter inside the shade.

She noticed. She was glad she noticed.

“Shade is not ignorance,” she murmured, half to herself.

“It is civility,” Rahetep said, rising. “The world’s way of asking the sun to lower its voice.”

Nebu brushed past both of them toward the door, tail held like a polite banner. “Come along, mortals,” he said. “Let us store our appetites where they can’t reach the biscuits. Tomorrow we pretend we trust justice, and the day after we test the river’s grammar.”

Cassandra followed. The villa’s lanterns leaned after them as they moved down the colonnade, as if reluctant to let the conversation end. The night smelled of dust gone soft and jasmine coming awake. She held the wand, the notebook, the fear, the resolve. They were not the same weight, but they could be carried in one set of hands.

At the threshold she glanced back once. The gold flame on the linen burned quietly within its painted palms. For the first time she wanted very much not to touch it.

She stepped into the shade.

The villa settled into that narrow hour when even candleflame seems to whisper. Rahetep had retired to his chamber “to rehearse dignity for the court,” which, judging by the murmured cadences behind his door, involved arguing with an invisible audience and winning elegantly. The fountain in the courtyard rehearsed too, trying out quieter syllables as the night cooled. A pale strip of moon rested on the tiles like a bookmark.

Cassandra lingered at the low table, stacking plates with the care of someone convincing herself that order could be domesticated. She had pushed her notebook aside; the elastic girdled it three times, a small restraint that felt superstitiously important. Her wand lay across the cover like a sleeping match - warm, faintly humming, behaving.

“You arrange crockery the way generals arrange troops,” Nebu observed from the sill.

He’d taken the blue-shuttered window as a throne, paws aligned, tail draped in a perfect question mark. Moonlight made his fur a thin sheet of gold leaf; his eyes held two coins of amber fire, minted for sarcasm.

“Someone has to keep a clean line,” Cassandra said, fitting a saucer over a cup. “The future is less terrifying when everyone knows where to stand.”

“The future doesn’t stand,” Nebu said. “It lounges. Usually on whatever you were about to sit on.”

He jumped down without sound and flowed across the floor, all liquid intention. At the table’s edge he paused, placed one paw delicately on her stacked plates, and tugged a teaspoon free with the sort of precision that makes concert violinists jealous. He batted it to the rug and listened, head tilted, until it stopped trembling.

“Important experiment?” Cassandra asked.

“Acoustics,” Nebu said. “One should learn how a room answers before one asks difficult questions.”

“And what are your questions, O Highness of Petty Theorems?”

“The usual.” He sat, curling himself into a dissertation of curves. “Why do mortals collect promises they can’t possibly keep? Why do bureaucrats fashion altars out of paper? And why, Miss Blythe, do you chase after what refuses to stay dead?”

Cassandra opened her mouth, closed it. The last of the candle wax gave up a soft sigh, then steadied. “Because,” she said slowly, “the dead are the only ones not trying to sell me something.”

Nebu’s whiskers twitched. “Flippant,” he adjudicated, “but not incorrect.”

“Also,” she added, and surprised herself with the honesty of it, “because I was always afraid of being left behind by the living. Knowledge doesn’t leave if you put it in a book. If you understand a thing perfectly, it can’t abandon you. It just…sits there and looks obedient.”

“Books are very good at pretending to be furniture,” Nebu said. “Until you open them.”

He rose again and prowled the perimeter of the room, pausing to inspect the linen panels with a professional contempt that fell just short of affection. “He has hung the past like a mirror,” he said. “You, meanwhile, are painting windows on your skin.”

Cassandra rubbed the small graphite smudge on her thumb where her pencil had marked her earlier. “I noticed.”

Nebu returned to her side and hopped onto the table, arranging himself with the entitlement of a minor god. He placed one paw delicately atop her closed notebook. “Humans are peculiar about endings,” he said. “You treat them like accusations.”

“They often are.”

“Hm. Perhaps. But they are also manners. The universe clears its throat; the scene concludes. One bows, even if one is a Pharaoh wrapped like a present left under a throne.”

Cassandra smiled despite herself. “And what do cats do?”

“We leave before the applause,” Nebu said. “We prefer reputations to ovations.”

He regarded her wand for a moment, then touched it with the lightest tap of the pad. The hum rose, curious, then subsided, as if embarrassed to have been caught purring.

“You feel it,” he said.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Enough to worry. Not enough to stop.”

Nebu’s ears tipped back - a cat’s version of sighing. “Endearing. Inconvenient.”

He drew his paw back and examined it as though the wand might have left an opinion. When he spoke again his voice thinned, sanding down its usual velvet to something finer. “You understand that if you follow this to its punctuation, there won’t be room in you for the version who sits cross-legged and laughs at jam. You’ll be all hinge and no door.”

Cassandra considered that, tasted the shape of it, and set it on the table like a cup she didn’t want but would drink. “I know. I’m trying to learn shade.”

Nebu’s head tilted. For a moment he looked less like a barbed remark wearing fur and more like an old thing that had survived out of sheer obstinacy. “Shade,” he said, approvingly, “is a scandalously underrated virtue.”

He shifted his weight and leaned, almost imperceptibly, against her wrist. Heat passed between them - the uncomplicated mammal comfort of shared temperature, an ancient treaty that didn’t require signatures.

“Why do *you* stay?” Cassandra asked, surprised to hear the question choose her mouth. “You could vanish when it gets difficult. Cats specialize in strategic vanishing.”

Nebu’s eyes half-lidded; he looked, for once, not theatrical but tired. “I have been vanishing for a very long time,” he said. “It turns out the trick works better on rooms than on regrets.”

“That sounds like experience.”

“It sounds like a proverb I haven’t finished hating.” He lifted his paw from the notebook and tapped it twice, a metronome of decision. “I stayed because someone must translate when cleverness begins to call itself destiny. I am good at translating. Also, he” - the slightest incline of the head toward Rahetep’s door - “is terrible at being alone. And you - ” His gaze cut to her with surgical accuracy. “ - are excellent at pretending you don’t mind it.”

Cassandra’s retort arrived late to its own party and chose not to enter. The room felt suddenly larger, or perhaps she did - stretched between the person who kept clean lines and the one learning to draw them less like borders and more like courtesies.

“I minded it so loudly,” she said, “as a child, that I learned to be quiet about it.”

“Understandable,” Nebu said. “Noisy loneliness is a prey call.”

“Who hunted you, Nebu?” she asked softly.

He smiled the way cats do when they decide not to answer a question and answer it anyway. “Ambition,” he said. “It has very clean paws. You hardly notice the scratches until you count them.”

He rose, pacing the table’s edge, each step a ribbon laid down and retracted. “Do you want a prediction, scholar? I can do predictions. They are a form of mockery that wins prizes.”

“Go on, then.”

“If you stand in the doorway under the river,” he said, “the grammar will be very polite. It will show you your outline in gold. It will ask whether you would like to be the exception to your own rules. And you will think - because you are not a fool - that accepting would let you protect others longer than a polite lifetime allows.”

“And?”

“And you will be wrong.” He sat. “Protection is not the same as possession. And eternity is only a long word for forgetting how to be held.”

Cassandra tasted iron at the back of her mouth. She folded her hands together to stop their small treacheries - fidgets, rehearsals of reaching. “You speak as if you’ve stood in that doorway.”

Nebu looked past her for a moment, out through the shutters, to where the city made its patient maps of light. When he spoke again the sarcasm had returned, but it fit like a jacket thrown over bare shoulders - insufficient, necessary.

“I have stood in many doorways,” he said. “Some talk. Some bite. Some purr. The important thing is not to decorate them with your name.”

He hopped from the table to the floor and threaded himself around her ankle, a deliberate braid. The gesture felt less like charm than oath. Cassandra reached down, almost cautious with the privilege, and set her fingertips along the ridge of his spine. He extended into the touch like a drawn note.

“Why do you lot chase after what refuses to stay dead?” he asked again, softer now, almost curious.

Cassandra answered without hunting for elegance. “Because we can’t bear that love ends,” she said. “So we try to make knowing do the same work. If I learn a thing completely enough, perhaps I won’t lose it. If I learn a person - ” She paused, unstartled by the ache. “ - perhaps they won’t leave.”

Nebu turned his head and pressed the round bone of it against her fingers, permission and reproach in one motion. “And yet,” he said, “everything good you love is better for ending. Tea. Music. Days. Jokes. That’s what keeps them from becoming furniture.”

“I know,” she said.

“Do you?”

“I’m trying.” She offered him one of the fragile truths she’d been hoarding like contraband. “I want to be the sort of clever that knows how to stop.”

“Then practice,” he said briskly, shedding softness like a shawl before it could be remarked upon. He sprang back onto the sill with an economy of grace that made gravity seem like a

rumour. “Start with sleep. End this day on purpose. Tomorrow we can posture before the court, and the next day we will see if the river deigns to remember his grammar.”

He stretched, a gold arc, and resettled. “And Miss Blythe? Stop putting your fear in tidy stacks. Leave it messy where you can see it. Hidden fear breeds paperwork.”

“Terrifying,” she said. “And unanswerable.”

“Two of my best qualities.”

On the other side of the wall, Rahetep’s rehearsal for dignity concluded with the sound of a throat catching and then mastering itself. The fountain found a slower meter. The shutters accepted a breeze and returned a small blessing of cool.

Cassandra gathered the plates - not as troops, but as citizens allowed to go home. She slid her notebook into her satchel without checking that the elastic held. Her wand she tucked behind her ear for the walk down the colonnade, out of habit and fondness.

“Good night, Nebu,” she said at the threshold, voice low to match the villa’s.

“Good night, Cassandra,” he said, and used her name like a carefully chosen cup. “Dream small.”

“Why small?”

“Large dreams talk too loudly,” he said. “You won’t hear the important ones.”

She left him on the sill, a guardian in silhouette, his profile cut out of moon. In the corridor the lamps dipped as she passed and bobbed back up, like courtiers bowing without losing their hats. She smiled at the idiot grace of it and at the more difficult grace waiting in the morning.

Behind her, Nebu watched until she turned the corner. Alone with the fountain and the linen gods, he blinked once in the slow language of old vows.

“Stay,” he told himself, so softly the room pretended not to hear. “Translate.”

Sleep did not arrive so much as loiter at the threshold, offended by how many thoughts had come in uninvited. Cassandra lay on the narrow guest bed, watching the ceiling charms dim and brighten in the slow pulse Rahetep preferred - like the villa itself was keeping watch with one eyelid open. The air retained a thumbprint of heat. The linen sheet clung to her shin, then relented. Beyond the shutters, the city’s noise thinned to the occasional clatter, the bargaining of cats, a cart that believed in its own destiny.

She rose. The floor was cool where shadow had pooled. She slid her feet into sandals, shrugged into her robe, and tied her hair up with the ribbon she kept in a pocket for moral crises and humidity. The wand went behind her ear. In the mirror above the washstand a few hieroglyphs quivered - habit now, like a house settling - then arranged themselves into a patient silence.

The courtyard received her as a page receives ink - without fuss, certain of its function. Moonlight turned the fountain to a column of poured glass; the palm's fronds wrote soft remarks against the sky. A sleeper's breeze came and went with news of the river. Somewhere beyond the wall, an insomniac nightjar rehearsed its single note.

Cassandra crossed the tiles to the low bench under the fig. She sat, and the bench pretended she'd always belonged to it. She let her head fall back until the stars slid into view between leaves. The familiar ache arrived - curiosity without a target, like a compass spinning in a room with too many doors.

"You are either about to cry," said a voice from the fountain's rim, "or about to write. Which is to say, you are an academic in a garden."

Nebu was already there, a spill of gold in the moonlight; he had been a statue until he wasn't. He hopped down, barely bending the light.

"I was practicing doing nothing," Cassandra said.

"How did it go?"

"I wrote an essay in my head on the ethics of inaction."

"Of course you did."

He landed beside her on the bench with that peculiar weight cats have that suggests they condense themselves for the pleasure of being undeniable. For a while neither of them pretended conversation was urgent. The fountain counted to itself. The moon abandoned one cloud for another and changed the shape of the fig's shadow.

"You wanted to find me," Nebu said, finally. He didn't make it a question; accuracy rarely needs one.

"I didn't know I wanted to until I was here," Cassandra said. "You have a habit of drawing the thought after it forms."

"A skill," he said, "and a curse. Like grammar." He looked up into the leaves, eyes reflecting a second constellation. "All right. Ask it."

Cassandra folded her hands, then unfolded them. She settled them on her knees like penitent sparrows and gave the question the form it had been searching for: "How do you know so much about the Breath?"

Nebu did not sigh. He did something quieter - he allowed a fraction of the pose to drain from his body. The arch smoothed from the tail; the spine ceased to audition for statues. He became, for one careful moment, a cat who had been alive too long but was decided on the matter.

"Because," he said, "I was taught to watch it. And then to want it. And then to guard it. Not in that order, which is the problem."

He leapt from the bench to the edge of the fountain and walked the rim like a minted coin rolling its own axis. When he reached the corner nearest the fig, he sat and looked at her with a frankness that carried no performance. “Before Rahetep’s dynasty had finished naming its gods,” he said, “there were scholars who named their fear instead. They gathered themselves in back rooms that smelled of ink and cleverness and called their little assembly the Meridian. No one outside the room remembers that name. Later, when the rooms got larger and the ink more expensive, it became the Order of the Sun’s Shadow. Rebranding, as your bankers would say. Same doctrine. The habit of admiring mirrors.” He licked one paw with clinical efficiency. “I was their creature.”

Cassandra opened her mouth - objection, disbelief, defense on Rahetep’s behalf - then closed it. The cat’s face left no room for the chivalry of interruption.

“I was not always this shape,” Nebu went on. “This was one of my better mistakes. I have been a boy with quick hands who read too quickly and noticed too much, a clerk who liked the taste of secrets, a priest without the patience to keep his fingers out of forbidden drawers. The Order teaches a particular kind of hunger. It presents the world as a locked pantry and calls stealing dinner ‘genius.’ I shone at it.” He made a small face of distaste at his own pride. “They set me to watch Rahetep, then still a prince, then a king. He was bright in the mind, inconvenient in the conscience. I admired him the way thieves admire guards: as an instrument to practice against.”

Moonlight washed the courtyard. It ran up the linen panels and made the gold leaf breathe. Cassandra felt the bench cool under her knees as if the stone had leaned closer to listen.

“I watched him seal what we wanted,” Nebu said. “I reported every choice that made him human. The Order loved my reports. It made them angry in a clean way they mistook for righteousness. They sent me charms to record his rituals. They sent me approval. Approval is a leash that smells like supper.” His mouth quirked. “When he shut the grammar under water, I told them. They tried to break him. They failed and learned patience. I learned something else.”

He looked down at his reflection in the fountain. The water admitted a cat and showed something older in the ripple. “I learned that wanting everything is a childish way of not wanting anything properly. I learned that I could not be in a room with his mother for twenty minutes without discovering she could ruin an empire with one look if she chose. I learned that to keep his people from debt, he offered himself as collateral.”

Something in his voice thinned - like silk pulled over a splinter. “And I learned shame. A very tiresome lesson. I tried to give back my leash. The Order replaced it with a collar and called it promotion.”

Cassandra’s throat tightened in the subtle, traitorous way throats do when they recognize a shape they know too well - ambition in ceremonial robes. “The collar?”

“A geas,” Nebu said simply. “Old magic, older even than the priests liked to pretend. It bound me to Rahetep as guardian the way a hinge binds a door. If the Breath remained in the world as grammar, I would remain bound to watch the man who had tried to unwrite it. I was to see him fail and report the failure until failure learned to be embarrassed by itself. When he died -

properly - my service would end. Very clever. Very cruel. The Order counted on the world to do its worst without them lifting a finger.”

He stretched, long and precise, as if the memory had put a kink in him. “You see the joke.” He didn’t smile. “He did not die properly.”

“The curse,” Cassandra said. Her pulse had settled into the calm that arrives when comprehension finally finds a chair. “Your leash is braided into it.”

“Beautifully plaited,” Nebu said. “Artistry is no defence.” He hopped down, crossed to her, and sat again so close his shoulder warmed her shin through the robe. “I was meant to be a spy. I became a sentinel. I called him my master to make it palatable. He called me his friend because he is charitable in unforgivable ways. When he was sealed in the tomb, the geas tethered me to the threshold, keeping me, conveniently, from leaving or changing the shape that had been assigned to me. The decades grew their own sand. The centuries learned to be furniture. I developed an excellent disdain.”

Cassandra made a sound that was not quite sympathy - he would only mock it - and not quite anger, though there was plenty. “How long?”

“Long enough to find every sort of boredom and discover which ones cut,” Nebu said. “Long enough to turn clever into habit. Long enough to give up pretending I did not care whether he woke.”

They sat with that. The moon ran its finger along the top of the wall, looking for a keyhole. The fig surrendered one leaf to gravity with the aristocratic reluctance only fig leaves can manage.

“What happens if we destroy the Breath?” Cassandra asked at last, quiet so the question wouldn’t spook.

Nebu’s ears flicked. He stared past her shoulder at the dark square of corridor where the house had become its own abstract. When he spoke again his voice had lost the varnish entirely; it was the plain wood underneath. “Then the grammar ends,” he said. “The sentence cuts to black the way all sentences should. The tether unhooks. The door stops behaving like a mirror. The names find their proper stopping. Rahetep can go where kings go when they finally remember they are not required to supervise the sun.” He paused. “And I will go where guardians go when there is nothing left to guard.”

Cassandra didn’t realize she had gripped the bench until her knuckles told her about themselves. “Go,” she said, though the word came out as if it were holding its own breath. “As in - ?”

“As in stop,” Nebu said, without diplomacy. “I am an addendum written in a margin by a hasty god. When the main text is revised, the addendum erases with it. This is not tragedy; it is grammar behaving itself.”

She turned her face away to keep from making it about her. The fountain continued counting. She counted with it, because numbers are good at keeping hands from shaking.

“Does he know?” she asked.

“Rahetep?” Nebu’s whiskers twitched in something like pride. “He has guessed. He is too polite to say it aloud. He would trade the river for me if he thought the river would negotiate. It won’t.”

“And the Order?” She tasted the old word he’d used. “The Meridian.”

“They know what they need to know,” Nebu said. “Which is never enough. They will tell themselves I am a casualty of elegance. If they had a hymn, it would be in a major key and very boring.”

Cassandra looked down at him. Moonlight turned the tips of his fur to wire. She wanted, very suddenly, to put her hands under him and refuse the structure of endings. She did what she could instead - she reached and set her palm to the back of his neck, where the collar would have been if cruelty liked to be visible.

He did not purr. He leaned until the weight of his head met the length of her fingers and stayed. A small, stubborn reassurance passed between them, mammal to mammal, untidy and sufficient.

“I am telling you this,” Nebu said after a while, “because you are the sort of human who mistakes responsibility for permission. You will be tempted - at the door, at the grammar - to build a rescue out of disobedience. You will imagine a third way. You will ruin yourself finding out there isn’t one.”

Cassandra let the warning settle. It did not frighten her so much as steady her - like a hand on the back before a difficult step. “You’re asking me not to save you.”

“Don’t flatter me,” Nebu said, and the sarcasm returned enough to be kind. “I am asking you not to save the part of me that earned this by thinking words would love me back if I used them hard enough.”

She scraped a breath from the cool edge of the night. “I don’t know if I can do it,” she said. “Choose the river over - ” She couldn’t finish the grammar.

“You will,” Nebu said. “Because you know the difference between keeping and keeping safe. And because you are not alone.” He flicked his tail toward the sleeping villa, toward the room where a wrapped king rehearsed dignity to keep his courage from melting. “Between us, we have enough arrogance to build a lighthouse. We might as well use it to keep from hitting the rocks.”

The first pale suggestion of dawn had begun already, stealthy as a cat. The black of the sky conceded to a thinner blue along the horizon above the roofline. The palm chose to be a silhouette for a moment. The nightjar forgot to sing or remembered silence.

Cassandra withdrew her hand and let it rest in her lap. She felt the absence of weight as a fact, not a wound. “Thank you,” she said. “For telling me.”

“I have excellent taste in confidantes,” Nebu said, but the vanity was perfunctory, a courtesy to habit. He sprang back to the fountain rim and practiced being decorative. “Now go sleep, scholar. The court will insult our intelligence at ten in the morning with ceremony, and you will need your wits to catch the compliments hidden in the insults.”

Cassandra stood. The bench let her go with the reluctance all good furniture has when denied a guest. She glanced up. The stars had thinned to pins loosing their thread. “If I dream,” she said, “what should I dream of?”

“Small things,” Nebu said, as he had before. “A cup not overflowing. A door closing gently. A sentence ending in the right place.”

She nodded and crossed the courtyard. At the threshold she paused and looked back. The cat was a curl of gold on stone, the water a ghost of glass. For a startled second the surface of the fountain showed not her but a figure in linen and a crown of reeds - then the trick of light dismissed itself and returned her to herself.

Inside, the corridor held its breath to ease her passage. The guest room received her without commentary. She lit no lamp. The bed gave slightly, then remembered her shape. From the satchel she drew the blue-cloth journal, untied the elastic, and wrote by moon:

He can’t die. Not properly.

She set down the pencil and pressed her palm over the words until the warmth left her skin and entered the page. Then, obedient for once, she slept.

Dawn arrived on the quiet pads of a house cat - soft-footed, convinced of its welcome. The ceiling charms lightened by degrees until the room had the gentle clarity of paper held to a window. Cassandra woke with her hand still resting on her journal, the impression of her palm faintly damp on the blue cloth. For a moment she could not tell whether the humming she heard was the city warming its voice or her wand remembering a tune. Then both sounds separated, courteous as strangers parting at a doorway.

She sat up. Sleep had sanded the corners off her thoughts just enough to make them stack without cutting. The air smelled of stone that had cooled and wanted tea. She rose, smoothed the blanket as if squaring a page, tucked the journal into her satchel, and slid her wand behind her ear. When she opened the shutters the courtyard lifted its head: the fountain poured silver; the fig leaf she’d heard fall in the night lay like a green ear at her feet; sky-pale birds tested a syllable and liked it.

Nebu was not on the sill. Of course he wasn’t. Cats consider being exactly where you expect them an indecency.

She found Rahetep in the main room, already composed - a figure written in good ink. He stood with his hands folded on the head of his cane-that-was-a-scepter-that-was-a-broom, considering the linen panel with the gold-leaf flame. In daylight, the gilt breathed less and insisted more. It held the sun the way a good sentence holds breath.

“Morning,” Cassandra said, and it felt like a new vocabulary every time.

“Miss Blythe,” he replied, and somehow made the greeting feel like an invitation and a warning. “Did you dream small?”

“For once,” she said. “A cup that did not overflow. A door that closed without anyone catching their fingers. And - this is unbecomingly literal - a courtroom that adjourned on time.”

“A miracle,” Rahetep murmured. “We should not expend our allotment before breakfast.”

He gestured toward the table. Someone - Nebu, the house, the reliable mischief of gravity - had laid out two cups, a pot, a dish of dates, a lemon already surrendering its first slice. Cassandra poured. The first swallow claimed the inside of her chest and set it to rights. She took a date and a breath and placed the day where she could see it.

“Court at ten,” she said. “Inspector Mogrim will make a point of not seeing me until he needs a favor. I’ll place on the record what we can prove without inviting the Order to take notes. Then - ”

“Then Luxor,” Rahetep finished, a soft click of acceptance. The scepter’s ferrule touched the floor, an extra heartbeat. “We have a message.”

Only then did she notice the strip of parchment tucked under the lemon dish, so neat the eye had mistaken it for a place card. She eased it out. The ink had dried in a hand she knew from marginalia and corrections delivered without apology: Tarek’s. A sketch of the Nile’s curve, two crossed lines for a seasonal channel, a set of numbers like coordinates but older. Underneath, in his small precise script: *Old borrow pit, west of Luxor. River remembers too much there. Wednesday night the wards thinned. I’ll meet you by the sycamore with the arrogant trunk. - T.*

Cassandra smiled, involuntary and grateful. “He found the hinge.”

“He found the hinge,” Rahetep echoed, as if pleased with the metaphor. He tilted his head toward the panel. “The river also enjoys a good hinge. It opens to itself and calls it generosity.”

Cassandra slid the note into her satchel, beside the blue journal, as if adjacency could teach them to behave. Under her palm she felt the ridges of previous pages, the weight of the night’s sentence: *He can’t die. Not properly.* The words sat there without melodrama, a stone placed to mark a path, not a grave.

“Nebu?” she asked.

“Has gone to rehearse skepticism,” Rahetep said. “He does it best outdoors. The sunlight gives his sarcasm extra gloss.”

They ate a date each in companionable arithmetic. The villa recorded their quiet - two cups, two breaths, one cat missing himself on purpose. When she reached for the lemon again, her wand, resting along her fingers, gave the faintest thrum. Cassandra stilled. The hum did not ask; it informed. The sentence under her skin had begun to show its hinges again.

Rahetep watched her with a kind of proud worry. “It will grow louder near Luxor,” he said. “Grammars tend to raise their voices when they think they’re about to be corrected.”

“Shade,” she said, the way one says *amen* to oneself. “I’ll keep to shade.”

“Very fashionable this season,” he approved.

A soft rapping came from the courtyard - wood on wood, polite as a guest who’d taken a class. Cassandra crossed the colonnade to the gate and lifted the latch. A sand-sparrow perched on the cedar, small and self-important, a scroll tied like a cuff about its leg. It submitted to being admired, then to being relieved of responsibility. The scroll unfurled. Inspector Mogrim’s neat bureaucratic hand declared, with the spectacle of restraint, that the court would hear CassandRa Blythe, *CurSe-Breaker* (the capital S and embedded rune not accidental) at ten o’clock precisely, and that “undue magical elaboration” would not be tolerated in attire or rhetoric.

“Don’t explode,” Cassandra murmured to the paper.

“Administrations,” Rahetep murmured from behind her, “are the only organisms that threaten without knowing it.”

She rolled the notice and slipped it in her satchel beside Tarek’s map. For a moment - only a moment - the juxtaposition looked like a problem she would enjoy solving. Then she remembered the stakes and the enjoyment set itself aside like a child when the adults lower their voices.

Back inside, she began to pack, the way one learns to pack after too many recoveries in too many cities: satchel, journal, spare quills with temperaments she trusted, a small pouch of chalk for warding, tea tin - the shade in a canister - strapped into the side pocket like a talisman. Her wand she slid into the wrist loop that kept it close without making a spectacle. She ran a finger against the loop’s stitching and promised it better adventures than writing memos.

Rahetep watched the ritual with the fond severity of a father seeing a child put on boots she would outgrow at noon. “There is something,” he said, when she’d buckled the satchel. He stepped to the panel, lifted it very slightly from the wall as if straightening a collar, and with a careful nail withdrew a small rectangle tucked behind the frame: a thin tablet of wood with a single line of painted script. He held it like a note too expensive to leave lying around.

“My mother carved this,” he said. “A proverb so old everyone argues about who said it first and what they meant. I have hung it in every room I have ever thought about dying in. Take it.”

Cassandra hesitated. Gifts carry their own grammars. “Are you sure?”

“If you refuse,” Rahetep said lightly, “I shall be forced to pretend magnanimity, and it will ruin my morning.” He placed it in her hand.

The script was simple, the paint a dark brown that remembered earth. She sounded it out aloud, tasting the consonants. “*Do not drink until you thirst; do not speak until you listen; do not ask to keep what keeps you.*”

“That last clause,” Rahetep said, “has prevented more wars than any charm I know.”

She slipped the tablet into the satchel’s inner pocket where she kept the things she consulted when plans unraveled. It fit as if the bag had been waiting for it. The weight altered - not heavy, exactly, but honest.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant an entire geography with it.

They stood for a moment in the easy pause that comes before departures if one allows it. The villa made a soft sound - timbers stretching their shoulders, stone adjusting its thoughts. Nebu padded in, as if conjured by the possibility of leaving him out of a scene. He surveyed the room, confirmed that it still existed, and sat where the light preferred him.

“Court,” he said, “will be unbearable. I propose we bear it with such style that it becomes bearable.”

“Your definitions,” Cassandra said, “are an education.”

“Someone must teach you to walk out of a room before the room decides you’re furniture.”

He hopped to the table, sniffed at the lemon, and made a face. Then his eyes narrowed - not at the fruit, but at the satchel. “Tarek,” he said, without being told. “Of course he found a tree with an opinion.”

“Wednesday night,” Cassandra said. “By the sycamore with the arrogant trunk.”

“Ah,” Nebu said dreamily. “Haughty trees. My favourite audience.”

Rahetep lifted the scepter and laid it with ceremonial neatness along his forearm. “Shall we?”

“Let’s,” Cassandra said.

They moved down the colonnade. The fountain kept time. At the threshold Cassandra paused and looked back - not in superstition, but in gratitude. The gold leaf on the panel caught the slant of early sun and held it quiet. For a breath, her shadow crossed it; the flame shone steadier inside the shade.

She noticed. She was glad she noticed.

In the lane, the morning had begun to be itself - vendors assembling arguments out of bread and sesame, a boy laughing at a broom that would not accept his authority, a woman bargaining with a jar that insisted on remaining empty until it was sung at. Cairo smelled of cumin waking up and water remembering stone. Their hired carpet hovered at the gate like a very decorous impatience.

As they climbed aboard, Nebu sprang to the rolled edge and found the position that would make him look least like luggage and most like inevitability. Rahetep settled with that practiced economy of motion that makes dignity look light. Cassandra took the front corner, hands braced, satchel snug against her hip, wand’s loop warm at her wrist.

“All right,” she said, not to them only. “Shade, humility, and enough tea.”

“An entire philosophy,” Nebu said, approving. “Try to keep the court from confiscating it.”

Rahetep nodded once, a benediction and an apology for what the day would ask. “We will tell the truth that harms least,” he said. “And afterward, we will ask the river not to take offense at our pronunciation.”

The carpet lifted. The villa fell away, then did not fall at all - only grew smaller, like a word receding into the sentence it completed. The city opened in layers: roofs, awnings, alleys where morning rehearsed itself, the long bright line of the Nile making grammar out of light.

Cassandra looked ahead. Somewhere beyond the courthouses and the patient paperwork, a sycamore leaned over a piece of water that remembered more than it should. Between here and there were speeches, coordinates, and the work of choosing to end what begged to continue. Her chest filled with the ordinary courage that arrives when there is simply no time left to perform anything more ornate.

She laid her palm briefly over the satchel where a proverb warmed against leather, then let her hand fall to steady the carpet’s front edge. The wind took her hair, untying the ribbon’s certainty and replacing it with movement.

“Onward,” Nebu said grandly.

“Onward,” Rahetep echoed, amused.

Cassandra smiled into the rising day. “Onward,” she said, and meant: *Carefully.*

Chapter 10: A Cat’s Confession

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A Cat’s Confession

The courtyard was a bowl of milk and shadow.

Cassandra sat cross-legged on the cool tile with her field journal on her knees, the lantern beside her turned low enough that its flame was only a candle-seed. The whitewashed walls kept the night, storing a memory of the day’s heat; when she rested her shoulder against the plaster, it exhaled warmth into her bones. Beyond the lacework gate, Cairo breathed with her - distant carts, a clatter of laughter, a muezzin’s voice in the mortal world’s late hour, and farther still the hush of the river like silk unfurling.

She dated the page with a precise, fussy hand to disguise the tremor. 22 June, sometime after midnight, guesthouse of Raheema al-Mansour. Observations: Rahetep insists the Breath of Amun was sealed by his order. He did not say why he sealed it. He did not say why his wrappings hum when I speak certain runes. He did say I make a “passable” cup of tea, which is a lie; it was excellent.

She paused, listening for the scratch of her quill to steady her heartbeat. The ink smelled faintly of iron and hibiscus. Somewhere above, a moth battered itself gently against the lantern chimney as if making a case in court.

Under her handwriting, the parchment warmed. The lines of ink thinned, thickened, and then - like a singer clearing her throat - lifted from the page in a damp shimmer. Hieroglyphs shrugged themselves out of English and slotted into place with the quiet confidence of old magic.

The eye, the river, the breath.

Cassandra frowned, and the letters obligingly rearranged:
ARE YOU AWAKE, LITTLE SCHOLAR?

“Unfortunately,” she murmured, glancing toward the rooms where guests slept. Raheema’s house had the kind sort of quiet that made a person want to whisper apologies to the furniture. Even the potted basil by the door seemed to be leaning in.

The courtyard smelled of mint and wet clay. A shallow fountain purred in the corner, its surface stitched with small wobbles of moonlight. She set the quill aside and flexed her ink-stained fingers, rubbing at the callus that curse-breaking had given her - proof that she had spent years treating the past as a puzzle that would yield to persistence and a better diagram. The truth was simpler: diagrams were easier to hold than people.

She dipped the quill again.

I am awake. You are being coy. Who are you?

The hieroglyphs reassembled slowly, as if enjoying themselves.
A BREATH BEFORE THE DAWN. A GUEST BEFORE THE KETTLE.

She made a face. “So, dramatic and thirsty.”

She shut the journal, not to silence it - nothing short of fire would do - but to contain the uncertainty to a rectangle. The mirror across the courtyard, old and foxed with age, showed her a skewed version of herself: hair attempting mutiny from its pins, sleeves rolled to the elbow, a woman trying very hard to look like she knew what to do next. In the glass, the moon had more patience than she did.

From the guesthouse interior came the sleepy creak of a floorboard and Raheema’s cat - an ordinary, judgmental tabby - turning three precise circles on a woven mat before consenting to exist. Cassandra let the domestic sound ground her. Ordinary cats were a blessing: they did not talk, betray ancient kings, or demand moral clarity at inconvenient hours.

Her wand lay on the tile to her right, within reach. It had a new hairline fracture running like frost through the handle from the last time she’d forced a door that preferred to remain a wall. The crack caught the lantern’s light and made a pale seam. Her work had always demanded that she be clever with what resisted her. Lately, everything resisted.

She reopened the journal and wrote without thinking:
What if the price of ending a curse is the person bound to it?

The ink dried too fast, a crisp, impatient black. The fountain hiccupped. A cloud skimmed over the moon and the courtyard changed key. The basil shivered for reasons unrelated to botany.

She told herself it was the night breeze slipping through the mashrabiya lattice. Then the chalk line she had drawn across the threshold - a habit learned in tombs and kept in guesthouses - softened its glow and lifted, a thin, luminous thread plucked by an invisible hand.

“Don’t,” Cassandra said to the air, and then, because that was unhelpfully general: “Not the line.”

The line lay down again, sulking.

Her throat was dry; her cup had only dregs. She took them anyway. The tea was cold and bitter, the way resolve tasted after it had watched the sun go down without deciding anything. Across the page the earlier glyphs unfurled once more, then scattered like birds. In their place appeared an uncomplicated sketch of a cat’s paw with six pads.

“Oh, excellent,” she said to the courtyard. “Mockery via pictograph.”

The gate’s shadow moved without the gate. It elongated along the ground, the slats bending into stripes that did not belong to wood. Soft footfalls stitched the tiles: the particular, smug punctuation of a creature who owned the night by prior arrangement.

Cassandra didn’t look up at once. She finished her sentence - because one must always set a trap with bait, and hers was curiosity - and set the quill in its groove. The footfalls stopped exactly where she had calculated they would, just shy of the chalk line.

“Good evening,” said a voice like velvet scraped with a comb. “Or possibly good morning. Time is so interpretive when one is aesthetically nocturnal.”

“Nebu,” she said, and only then lifted her eyes.

There he was, sleek and gold as a palace rumor, the moon scoring his fur to bright metal. He sat in that comfortable theater of himself with his tail curled like a question mark he’d already answered. His ears were forward, his whiskers immaculate, his expression unfairly superior given his height.

“Ah,” he said, glancing at the chalk line. “Paranoia. How industrious.”

“Professional caution,” Cassandra corrected, and pretended not to notice her heart easing in her chest at the sight of him. Relief where there ought to be annoyance - that was new. “You usually knock.”

“I did,” he said. “With my intangible charm. You were resisting.”

“Difficult habit to break,” she said. It was nearly a joke. It felt like standing at the lip of a well and choosing not to look down.

Nebu’s gaze flicked to the journal as if it had insulted him personally. “We should talk.”

“We always talk,” she said, aiming for breezy and landing at brittle. “You talk. I take notes. Then the notes turn into seditious pictures and my quill judges me.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. That startled her more than the moving ink. The cat’s wit was usually a metronome; tonight it was a heartbeat skipping.

Cassandra closed the journal again, this time with a gentler hand, as if one could coax a confession out of leather and paper by keeping it comfortable. She took up her wand - not to point, only to hold, to balance her palm.

“I made tea,” she offered, half-apology, half-olive branch. “It’s appalling now.”

“Everything human goes tepid, it seems,” he said, but his tone lacked sting. He stepped forward, paused at the chalk, then pressed one paw delicately to the line. The light tolerated his weight and did not flare. She hadn’t layered it against him. She realized she never had.

He sat again, very close now, so that she could see the tiny scars that marred the perfection of his face, pale crescent moons along his muzzle that no glamour covered. She wondered how many belonged to tombs and how many to truths.

“What do you know about breath?” he asked.

“Medically?” she said. “I’ve been told mine smells of mint when I’m making an effort.”

“Metaphysically,” he said, a sliver of impatience revealing itself. “The thing between speech and silence. The price paid for names.”

Cassandra looked at the mirror; the mirror looked at her. In the glass, the courtyard made a second courtyard, a quieter one, where decisions had already been made. Her mouth was dry again. She was tired of being clever. Cleverness had never slowed down a river.

“I know that I am tired of people I care about being made into footnotes by someone else’s obsession,” she said. It surprised her to hear it aloud. It sounded like a person nearly at the end of pretending.

Nebu’s ears flattened a fraction at the word care. He pretended to groom a paw and did not succeed in pretending.

“I will not waste your time with rehearsal,” he said finally, and something in the courtyard shifted into listening. “I’ve come to tell you a thing I have not told anyone who lived to use it. I will tell it without metaphor, which is a sacrifice.”

Cassandra felt the chalk line under her breath, a thread pulled taut. She slid the journal nearer by reflex, then left it unopened. She did not want the words to be dragged into pictures by a magic that loved spectacle. She wanted them plain.

“All right,” she said. “Tell me.”

Nebu looked up into the square of sky, as if the moon were an accomplice who needed persuading, and when he spoke his voice lost its polish and kept its weight.

“The Breath of Amun,” he said, “does not sleep in stone. It sleeps in promises. Mine, among them.”

The fountain forgot itself and held the last drop at the lip for two extra heartbeats before letting go.

Cassandra did not write. She did not joke. The line at the threshold dimmed further, as if bowing.

Nebu’s eyes narrowed, not with disdain but with something like regret. “Walk with me,” he said. “What I have to give you belongs to the hour before dawn, when even the brave are too tired to lie properly.”

He stood, the chalk line consenting without a flare, and padded toward the far wall where the moon laid a path. His tail flicked, a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence she hadn’t yet read.

Cassandra set the journal on the bench and left the lantern low. She took up her wand and followed the cat into the deeper part of the courtyard where shadows kept counsel and truth,

at last, might choose to be simple.

They paced the edge of the courtyard where the moon pooled shallow as a dish. Bougainvillea spilled from the wall like a veil; its papery blooms made a dry, whispering sound whenever the breeze remembered them. Cassandra let her fingertips skate along the rough plaster as she walked. Nebu glided at knee-height, silent except for the soft tick of claws catching tile seams.

“Before anything else,” he said, “I wish to register a complaint.”

She looked down. “By all means.”

“You draw excellent lines,” he said, glancing back at the faint chalk across the threshold. “You never draw them for yourself.”

Cassandra managed a half-smile. “If I drew them for myself, who would cross them?”

“Precisely,” he said. “A hobby you mistake for a destiny.”

They reached the fountain’s shadow. In the lantern’s outskirts, the water had turned to ink; the constant bead at the spout caught the light each time like a blinking eye. Somewhere in the guest street, a donkey snorted; a cart’s wheel complained and was answered by laughter in a language the night understood better than she did.

“I could say the same to you,” she said, because habit was armor. “You have made a career of crossing lines no one put down for you.”

“I had lines,” Nebu said. “I mistook them for ribbons.”

He sprang onto the low wall bordering Raheema’s herb beds and settled with the weightless elegance of something that remembered being worshipped. The rosemary released its bitter-green perfume as if startled from a dream. From this perch he was closer to her face, and Cassandra saw that the moon’s silver had gathered at the wet edge of his eyes, not tears exactly, but a shine that made her think, absurdly, of tide-marks.

“You came to question me,” she said, before he could peel another layer from her. “That was the implication.”

“To question you,” he echoed, “and to make certain you know what you’re choosing when you choose to know more. Curiosity is a ladder into a dark room. People rarely bring a candle; they bring their pride and wonder why they stub their toes.”

“Accuracy compels me to admit I usually bring both,” she said. “Pride and a candle. And spare matches.”

He inclined his head, accepting the joke as one might accept a token at a tollgate. “Why do you do this, Cassandra Blythe? Spare me the psalms to knowledge. You could catalogue salamanders and live a pleasant, singed life. Why tombs? Why dead kings and their dangerous toys?”

The question had teeth. It pressed through the humor and left a mark. She leaned against the wall with the herbs' smell in her nose and tried to find the tidy answer she kept for interviewers and goblin auditors. It was not here, at this hour; it had never been honest.

"Because I was good at it," she said first, buying herself time with a lesser truth. "Because being good at something feels like safety."

"And?"

"And because puzzles don't cry," she said, surprised by the shape of the words. "They don't look at you. They don't ask you to be kind, they ask you to be clever. I can always be clever. It's a habit."

Nebu tucked his paws and regarded her with the steady contempt only a cat can turn into permission. "You are often clever," he said, "and seldom wrong. But cleverness is a knife you keep honing until there is no handle."

She looked away. In the mirror across the courtyard, the scaled reflection of the lantern dwindled and flared with her breath. The cracked seam in her wand pressed into her palm, a tiny ridge of discomfort that had become familiar enough to be reassuring. Broken things settle the hand.

"Why are you angry with me?" she asked, and then, to make it less vulnerable: "Beyond the usual reasons."

Nebu's whiskers twitched. "Anger is the flavor you prefer for truths you don't wish to eat. If I must give it a name… I am impatient. It is an old impatience, and you are new enough to be within reach of it. I would prefer not to watch you mistake the pit for a well."

"You think I can't tell the difference?"

"I think you would climb down either way," he said, very gently. "And I think you would be brave about it, and make jokes on the way, which is admirable and fatal in equal measure."

He jumped down, threaded himself between her ankles, then turned and rubbed his cheek against her boot as if signing a receipt. The contact was warm and ordinary and wrecked the speech she had prepared about professionalism.

"You're doing it again," she said, but her voice came out soft.

"Doing what?"

"Acting like you don't care," she said. "So when you do, it looks like a trick of the light."

"Everything looks like a trick of the light," he said. "We live by reflected suns." He flicked his tail, dissatisfied with his own evasions, and then said, without flourish: "I care. That is the problem. Caring makes one inaccurate."

"Then be inaccurate," she said. "Just tonight."

He stared at her as if she had suggested opening a tomb with a pastry fork. “Very well. Inaccurately: I do not want you to be made into a story that other people tell. I do not want you to become a proof in someone else’s argument.”

It landed somewhere between her ribs and stayed. She reached for levity and missed. “I’ll put that on my grave. ‘She refused to be footnoted.’”

“You think I am teasing.”

“I think you always are, even when you aren’t,” she said, and then: “What do you need from me?”

“Honesty,” he said, as if ordering tea. “And a promise you may not be able to keep.”

She drew breath, and felt the small resistance of the night along its edges, as if the air itself had a skin. “Ask me.”

He paced along the wall, turned, paced back. When he spoke, the words were careful, the way one sets a heavy object down so it will not crack the table.

“Suppose,” he said, “that to end a curse you must leave part of it unended. Suppose that mercy is incomplete by design. Could you choose that? Or must your repairs always be immaculate because you cannot bear the thought of imperfection, even when perfection is cruelty?”

Cassandra almost answered quickly. She was good at hypotheticals; she had spent years in the clean mathematics of what-ifs. But the question was not an equation; it was a mirror she did not want to square. She looked at the herb bed instead, at the dirt’s patient, unmagical darkness, and thought of all the tidy endings she had forced from untidy spells, all the seals she had declared “complete” because a ledger wanted a box ticked.

“I don’t know,” she said, and the truth pricked her tongue like salt. “I thought I did. I thought ‘end the curse’ was the same as ‘do the right thing,’ and that neatness was a kind of kindness. It isn’t, not always. But I don’t know if I can stop wanting it.”

Nebu exhaled, a small, private sound. “Then we are at least near the right door.”

He hopped down again, his tail combing the air. “Another question. Slightly crueller. What would you do if the price of saving many was the loss of one you love?”

She closed her eyes. The night came closer when she did; the city’s distant noises drew up chairs and sat with her. The word love arrived uninvited and behaved itself, which was worse.

“I would try to find a third way,” she said, because that was who she had been in every tomb, every courtroom, every ruined temple: the girl who believed in clever miracles. “And if there wasn’t one…”

“If there wasn’t one,” he prompted.

“I would like to say I would be brave,” she said. “I would like to say I would choose the many. But I don’t know if bravery is the same thing as being able to live with the choice afterwards.”

“It rarely is,” he said. “Living is the long part.”

They stood without speaking. The fountain remembered its job and resumed. The moth found the lantern again and beat its dusty wings, an absurd persistence that felt like instruction.

“You sound very much like a person,” she said, because the silence was filling the courtyard with shapes.

“Don’t insult me,” he said automatically, and then, after a heartbeat, softened it: “Forgive me. Habit.”

Cassandra shifted her weight and heard the grit grind under her heel. “How old are you, Nebu?”

“Rude,” he said. “Though not inaccurate to the moment.” He tilted his head, feline and priestly at once. “Old enough to have watched empires confuse architecture with afterlife. Old enough to have seen curious people become greedy and call it scholarship. Old enough to be tired of not telling the truth because it is inconvenient to the plans of clever mortals.”

“And what truth is that?”

He looked at the square of sky again, as if checking with it. “That some promises do not end,” he said, “even when they should. And that I am bound up in one of them.”

The words wanted to fall into revelation. She felt the shift at the edge of them, the way air changes just before dawn decides itself. She stepped closer without meaning to, until his whiskers nearly brushed the soft inside of her wrist.

“You asked me for honesty,” she said. “I’ll trade you mine for yours. I don’t want to lose either of you. Not Rahetep, not you. I’m not ready for the story to become smaller.”

“Stories do not become smaller,” he said. “We become more human, which is worse and better.”

Her laugh was brief, a break in the surface. “Is there a third way?”

“There is always a path through reeds,” he said. “But sometimes it ends in water.”

He leapt back onto the wall, as if the act could reassert the ordinary physics of a conversation that wanted to refuse them. “One more thing, little scholar.”

“Yes?”

“When the moment arrives - and it will - your cleverness will not be enough. You will need to choose what kind of person you are when you cannot solve the problem.”

“I dislike that very much,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. “We dislike being people most when it matters.”

She let out a breath she had not noticed she was holding. The chalk line at the threshold brightened and dimmed, catching the exhale like a thread catches light.

“So this,” she said, “was the preface to something you mean to confess.”

Nebu’s eyes met hers. In them she saw the courtyard reflected and, beyond that, a corridor of nights stretching backward further than a sensible mind allowed. “Yes,” he said simply. “I have been circling it. I am… fond of circles. But I will not run from the center.”

The mirror on the far wall clouded, hieroglyphs pooling at its corners like shadows in the shape of speech. The moon slipped free of a skinny cloud and returned silver to everything that could bear it.

“Then let’s have it,” Cassandra said, squaring her shoulders as if it were a courtroom door she was about to push open. “No metaphors, you promised.”

“A sacrifice,” he said, and for the first time his voice wavered on the rim of a word. “But yes. No metaphors.”

He jumped down lightly and stood in the very circle of moonlight at the middle of the tiles, as if he had chosen a place where truths were best heard. He breathed once, a feline measure, and the night seemed to lean in.

“Very well,” Nebu said. “Listen.”

The night gathered around the circle of stone as if it, too, wished to hear him.

Nebu’s shadow was a dark petal beneath him. He did not sit; he stood with his paws set like punctuation at the ends of two sentences, tail lifted into a steady curve. The air cooled by a careful degree. Cassandra knew that drop - the way the world held its breath when an old spell prepared to name itself.

“I was not born in a temple,” he said, voice even. “I was made for one.”

He let the words rest there without flourish. The fountain answered with a single metallic drip. Somewhere a late swallow cut the square of sky and stitched it back together before she could blink.

“Made,” Cassandra repeated, the professional part of her mind leaning forward. “How?”

“By needing something,” he said. “Which is how gods are made, and banks, and promises. A necessity took shape; the shape required a guardian; the guardian required a mouth.”

“Did you begin as a cat?” She winced at how schoolroom it sounded and did not retract it. Questions were ladders.

Nebu considered her with an expression that might, in a less constrained story, have been called fond. “Does a river begin as a river,” he asked, “or as all the paths water might take? I began as a concept with whiskers. The priests of the early Order - long before it called itself that - liked their metaphors tidy. They wanted the Breath watched by a creature that understood poise and pouncing and the art of being obeyed without appearing to demand it.”

“The Order commissioned you,” Cassandra said, feeling the floor of the evening tilt a degree. “Not Amun’s own priests?”

Nebu’s whiskers flared. “There were no such priests by then, only men who wanted to borrow the weight of older names. The Order called themselves scholars of the everlasting. Their thesis: if magic is language and language names what is, then the right word spoken with the right breath in the right mouth makes life refuse to leave.”

“Immortality as grammar,” Cassandra murmured. “Of course.”

“They experimented politely at first,” Nebu went on, and the politeness made Cassandra’s stomach tighten. “They sought to make oaths that would not break, vows that prolonged health; small gifts. It worked often enough to be seductive and failed often enough to be instructive. Then a man with a crown and an inconvenient talent for not being awed by things entered the picture.”

“Rahetep,” she said.

“Rahetep,” Nebu agreed, and for the first time a warmth rose in his tone like brass heated between bare hands. “He did not invent the Breath, Cassandra. He discovered that he could refuse it. That is the difference that makes him worth talking about.”

Wind found the bougainvillea and the paper-thin flowers chittered against themselves. Cassandra folded her arms to keep them from reaching instinctively toward him. Touch would ruin the geometry of the confession, and it was very important that it keep its shape; she knew this like she knew a wall would turn to a door if you found its right name.

“The Order placed me at his side,” Nebu said. “A gift. Guardians were fashionable for kings who pretended they did not believe in gods and wanted to be seen not believing beautifully. I was painted into murals, carved into chair legs, given saucers that had never held milk. I lay in the shade where councils happened and learned to sleep with one ear awake.”

“And you reported to the Order,” Cassandra said. The words formed too quickly. She bit down on them and tasted iron. “What he said. What he planned. His weak points.”

“I thought I was serving a future where no one had to end,” Nebu said. “It is easy to love an idea when it loves you back in the mirror. I brought them the cadence of his doubts and the shape of his days; the way he spoke the names of his dead. The Order admired him for those names; they said his grief would make him an ally. They were wrong. It made him a gate.”

Cassandra’s heart tripped. “A gate?”

“Grief is the one honesty we do not know how to lie with,” Nebu said. “Rahetep let me lie beside him while he read the old hymns to sleep and corrected them aloud where they lied. He refused immortality not because he feared it, but because he understood what it would do to everyone else. He said, ‘An eternity that is not shared is theft. An eternity that is shared is a prison.’”

The words carried the cadence of recitation worn smooth with time. Cassandra could see him as she had not seen him, a bronze-skinned man in linen, eyes ringed with kohl and intelligence, one hand on the page and one absently on a cat’s back because touch, too, is a spell.

“So he sealed it,” she said, quiet.

“He tried to,” Nebu said. “But the Breath does not live in artifacts like a genie in a bottle. That is a story for children and colonizers. It lives in bargains. He bound what he could bind, which is to say: himself. He vowed to be the place where the Breath ended. He vowed to carry the temptation and the power down into the dark and sit on it until it could not be misused.”

“And you,” Cassandra said. “Where do you enter that vow?”

Nebu’s mouth twitched. “On the hinge. The Order realized, very late, that they had given their watchman a conscience. They tried to give me a better one. They bound me to him with a clause. If his vow ever failed - by treachery or time - my life would not continue but extend. I would persist until the Breath resumed. I would be the wick that could be lit again.”

“Their eyes and ears, forever,” Cassandra said, her voice thinning with the picture. “Insurance.”

“Etiquette,” Nebu said. “They dislike to be surprised by their own schemes.”

He began to walk in a small circle inside the moonlight, precise, as if measuring something that could not be seen. Cassandra realized his paws fell always on the same four tiles, as if he would not step off a square of safety without permission he would not ask.

“Then the priests betrayed him,” Cassandra said, reaching for the next rung so she would not slip. “Or the Order. The seal became a tomb. The tomb became legend. The legend became a map for thieves and historians. Gringotts bought a copy.”

“Something like that,” Nebu said, and she heard indulgence again, but it was a tired indulgence, almost kind. “You must allow for the way time edits.”

“And you, in the years between?” She swallowed. “You lived.”

“I persisted,” he corrected. “There is a difference. I haunted thresholds. I taught myself not to be noticed by anyone who did not know how to look. I collected opinions like burrs. I learned to mock very well because it is the most humane anesthetic. I watched the Order perform clever surgeries on corpses and call it scholarship. I interfered where I could with the idiot poetry of men who think they can persuade death by flattering it.”

He stopped. The mirror behind Cassandra clouded and cleared, as if a hand had rubbed fog from its surface and found more fog beneath.

“Why tell me now?” Cassandra asked, and heard the cowardice in it: the wish to place the turning point somewhere else, someone else’s hour. “Why me?”

“Because you draw lines for everyone else,” he said, gaze bright and sharp, “and because you are very close to choosing one for yourself. Because you can be cruel when you tidy, and kind when you hesitate, and I require both kindness and cruelty from you presently. Because I have already told Rahetep part of this truth and he looked at me like a man who has finally located the door in the dark room and will not open it for fear it leads outside. Because you will open it.”

She held his eyes and did not break. The tiles under her bare toes were cool; she took the chill up through bone and used it.

“Say it,” she said. “Say the thing you came to say. We are at the center now.”

He inclined his head as if to the Sphinx herself. “Very well. If the Breath of Amun is destroyed, I end. Not die. End. Unmake. The clause was written that way. I was the leverage; I will be the price. There will be nothing left of me to haunt a saucer.”

The small sound that left Cassandra’s throat was not quite a word. The chalk line at the door flared an instant, as if her breath had tripped it. She tasted dust, or perhaps the idea of dust - archives and dried flowers and the crumbling edge of a thing too long exposed to sun.

“You’re certain,” she said, because one must always rule out the kindness of error.

“I am bound by grammar,” he said wryly. “The oldest trap. I am certain.”

Her mind, which loved to build, swiftly assembled scaffolding around the truth to keep it from falling on her. If destroyed, then ended. If preserved, then… “If the Breath is not destroyed,” she said, very steadily, as if reciting a charm, “then you continue.”

“I persist,” he corrected again, gently. “As does the temptation you have seen inside clever people’s eyes. As will the Order’s appetite. As will all our excuses.”

“And Rahetep?” The name frayed her composure to threads. “If it remains, he - ?”

“Is not let go,” Nebu said. “He would become a king in a glass prison, admired and stared at and used as a proof. Which is a cruelty to him and a kindness to the story that wants a mascot.”

Silence fell, the kind sewn by grief’s needle. Somewhere, late footsteps went by in the street, not hurrying, not lingering.

Nebu lifted a paw and set it down again. On the second tile. On the third. “Now you see it,” he said, almost softly. “The elegant equation without an elegant solution. Your third way is a reed path that ends in water. You may either drown or swim with your pockets full of stones.”

Cassandra's eyes burned. She refused a tear because it would make this about her and nothing was allowed to be about her right now. She pressed her thumb into the crack on her wand's handle until the thin pain steadied her.

"Why tell me," she asked again, and this time she meant: why burden me with the lever that will pry you out of the world? Why give me the power to end you?

"Because I am tired," he said, and the simplicity blistered her. "Because wearing a joke as armor makes a poor winter. Because I have been unkind to you in small ways and that is a debt. Because you will choose the world and hate yourself for it and I would prefer you did not also hate me." His mouth quirked. "And because - this is the part you will begrudge me - I trust you."

He looked embarrassed by the last word, the way one looks embarrassed when admitting to an unfashionable hobby. Cassandra laughed once, a broken glass sound that she had not meant to make, and then shut her mouth on anything further.

"I trusted the Order once," he added, almost conversationally. "I confused learning with goodness. A novice error. They wanted very much to be immortal and thought wanting it was the same as deserving it."

"They tampered with Gringotts records," Cassandra said, anger arriving in her like heat does at fever's turn. "They used us. They used me. Araminta - " She stopped herself before the name could become poison except to its speaker. "If the Order is embedded inside the bank…"

"It is embedded inside anything with ledgers and pride," Nebu said. "Do not flatter it with uniqueness. But yes - there are hands inside your house rearranging the furniture while you sleep. You saw their paperwork in Chapter Seven and pretended it couldn't be true because it was printed neatly."

Cassandra let the anger hold her spine up. It was a better brace than despair. "So your truth is a map," she said. "And the map has three destinations, all of them ugly."

"Two," he corrected. "You will discard the third - keeping the Breath - in daylight. It is only tempting at night when one is sentimental and half in love with everyone who refuses to stay. You are not sentimental at noon. That is one of your virtues."

Her laugh this time had more shape to it. "You make me sound like a horrible person."

"I make you sound useful," he said. "The world is full of beautiful people who are not."

She drew a breath that did not want to be drawn and felt the ribs complain, then open. "All right," she said. "Then this is what I promise you in exchange for the truth. If the choice is required, I will not let it happen by accident. I will not let them do it to you while writing a paper about it. If I must end the Breath, it will be because I choose to, with my eyes open, and I will stand the consequences. I won't… I won't ask someone else to pull the lever."

Nebu’s pupils widened, swallowing the moon. He bowed his head just enough that a pharaoh would have called it insolence and a friend would have called it gratitude.

“Do not make a martyrdom of it,” he said, voice roughened. “Make a decision.”

“I am very good at decisions,” she said. “After I have put them off for as long as possible.”

They let that be a joke and then let it not be. The mirror, sated, smoothed to ordinary murk. The chalk line on the threshold was only chalk.

“One more thing you should know,” Nebu said, lighter again, an actor stepping out of a tragic role and adjusting the cuffs of comedy. “If the Breath wakes at proximity to conflict - and it does - then the people who wish to wake it will arrange for trouble inside the temple and call it destiny. They are very fond of narrating inevitabilities they paid for.”

“Then we will starve it,” Cassandra said. Her mind was already building, already setting rules. “We’ll keep words short where they want speeches. We’ll keep spells to a minimum. We’ll carry silence like a ward.”

“Imagine,” Nebu said, pleased despite himself, “a British witch discovering the uses of quiet.”

She reached out then, and he allowed it. Her hand found the curve between his ears and set there like a seal. His fur was warmer than she expected; life carried a temperature words never do. He did not purr. It would have been melodramatic.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant: for telling me a truth that makes me poorer. “I will try to be worth the trust.”

“Try less,” he said. “Be.”

He stepped back, out from under her palm, and the night reclaimed the place where his warmth had been. The courtyard seemed larger now, not because it had grown, but because a piece of it had shifted from ignorance to knowledge, which always rearranges rooms.

“In a little while,” he said, “the birds will begin to shout. It will feel like mercy. Do not be fooled. Morning is merely when the world remembers its errands.”

“Then we should make ours ready,” Cassandra said. She looked at the journal on the bench and doubted the page could carry this without turning the letters into theater. She would write nothing, for once. She would keep a truth undrawn.

Nebu backed toward the shadow of the bougainvillea where his gold went to coal. “One last indulgence,” he said, and paused, outline on the seam between moon and wall. “If there is a third way, you will find it. I do not say that as permission to refuse what may be required. I say it because I know you. You do not throw yourself into water without checking the current. But if the river gives you no favor - ” He bared his teeth briefly, almost a smile. “Swim.”

The first bird, rude and earnest, declared the pending fact of dawn. The city stirred. A cart went by whistling. The fountain resumed its patient punctuation.

Cassandra nodded. “Swim,” she repeated.

“And draw a line,” he added, with the last of his old mischief, “for yourself, for once.”

He was gone, then - not by vanishing, nothing so theatrical, but by returning to the thickness of shadow in a corner where ordinary cats slept and did not carry the grammar of divine bargains in their bones.

Cassandra stood alone in the circle of moonlight until it thinned to a puddle and then to nothing. When she moved, the chalk line did not protest. She crossed it, lifted the lantern’s hood just enough to tease a face of light into the room, and left her journal closed on the bench. The mirror showed her exactly as she was: a woman who had learned something she could not unknow, holding a cracked wand that would not forgive cleverness without cost.

She swallowed, breathed once, and let the night leave her lungs with a small, audible sound. It made the basil tremble and the flame in the lantern bow. Then she turned toward the door and the narrow corridor beyond, where decisions waited like early morning chores, unglamorous and necessary.

By the time the first bird began its bragging, Cassandra had turned the guest room into a ledger.

She spread papers across the cool tile in orderly islands: receipts, court summonses, rubbings from tomb walls, a telegram from Gringotts with its scent of smart ink and London fog, Tarek’s neat notes on market contacts, a pair of wax seals she had carefully softened off envelopes with the heat from a teacup. Her field kit lay open like an honest mouth - charms, chalk, a lens with runic magnification, a tiny bottle of alchemical reagent the color of old bruises. The window lattice cut pale rectangles onto the floor; marched across them lay her evidence, reluctant soldiers in a cause she hadn’t named yesterday.

She worked barefoot, because shoes were for public certainty and this was private doubt. Every small noise - the click of the brass hinge on the lens, the scratch of her quill, the sigh of the city waking - felt clean, necessary, undeserving of apology.

On the bed, her robe was slung over a chair like a deflated official. The mirror above the washbasin had fogged and cleared to show only her own competent face; it had spent its magic for the night and resumed being glass. Fine. She did not want a chorus today. She wanted arithmetic.

“Start with what isn’t true,” she told herself, and the room, and perhaps the part of the world that still believed in memos. It steadied her to be pedantic aloud.

She picked up the Gringotts telegram first - Araminta’s clipped script framed by the bank’s tasteful filigree. The phrases were the old hymns of her profession: operative compliance, inter-branch discretion, avoid law-enforcement entanglement. It was the additional line she had reread until the paper almost showed through that had made her lay down the tea earlier

and step away from the idea of sleep: Proceed to Luxor immediately upon court's adjournment for "containment audit" of reported temple structure. Local intermediary en route.

Intermediary, Cassandra thought. Such a gracious word for a person with a pocket full of bribes and a brief to keep scholars out and contractors in. She turned the paper, held it to the light, flicked the lens into place so the inks broke into their obedient layers of meaning. Official ink sat as stolidly on the fibers as a goblin clerk in his lunchtime chair. Beneath it, faint and eager, ran a second hand - lighter pressure, different angle. The words didn't change; their weight did.

She ran a fingertip across the corner where a seal would have gone on older communications. Araminta didn't believe in wax when a signature would do. But Cassandra had - earlier - lifted two wax seals from other missives to compare: one from the Cairo outpost, one from what purported to be headquarters. The Cairo seal had the usual goblin geometries, the unforgiving symmetries that meant "we will take you to court for sport if you smudge this." The headquarters seal had those too, but embedded in the angles, like burrs hidden in wool, were four micro-glyphs that didn't belong to a goblin hand at all.

She nudged the lens tighter until the world shrank and clarified. There: a reed, a jaw, a sun, a hand - drawn so small a human eye would have called it texture. Together they formed a tiny boundary charm she had seen only once before, inked on a dealer's ledger in the Bazaar: the quiet signature of the Order of the Sun's Shadow. Not the obvious emblem the cultists liked to tattoo where it could be seen, but the discreet mark they used on paperwork they planned to deny later.

"Hello," she said softly. "There you are."

The charm was the sort known as a slip - designed to help documents pass through wards that ought to stop them. Headquarters correspondence was passing like a local through gates meant for strangers. It had done so with her help, because she'd never thought to look. She'd walked it in.

Her stomach acknowledged this with a tight, small twist. Cassandra set the seal in a saucer so she wouldn't smash it simply for being itself. Hatred of a brass goblin emblem would be… unproductive.

Next: the court copy of Rahetep's case file. She flattened it with her palm, smoothing the puckers left by an evening of being rolled and unrolled by ghosts bored with precedent. The verdict notation was in Mogrim's hand, precise as a warding rune. But near the corner, a run of the official date script flickered under her lens - another slip, thin and sly. It backdated the motion for "containment audit" by two days, as if someone had known before yesterday's hearing that a temple would require auditing. As if excavations were calendars and the court a page you turned when the dirt told you to.

"Not destiny," Nebu had said. "A paid inevitability."

She could debunk illusions all day and sleep well. She could strip glamours from greed. This - finding the Order's tidy arithmetic in her own ledgers - felt less like triumph and more like

diagnosis.

She pushed away from the tiles and stood, flexing a foot that had gone numb on the edge of a receipt. Her knees creaked in a whisper of complaint; she was twenty-six and made of soft quarrel with the world, but nights like this were chisels.

The letter from the goblin director in Cairo came next - Griphook al-Azhari's unusual, almost shy apology for "inconveniences caused by sudden protocol shifts." She read the sentences again now that she had a sword to hang on them: we received an instruction from London; we are compelled to respect jurisdiction; I trust your judgement in local context. Goblins were exacting. He hadn't said trust lightly. He had placed it like a tip under a tea saucer, face down, for only the right hand to find.

She thought of Mogrim's monocle tightening with suspicion each time she'd tried to speed the court, of Tarek's silent wince when she'd said "containment" as if it didn't mean "possession." She thought of Rahetep, the way his voice had stopped on the threshold of a word when she tried to make their present a neat argument. She thought of Nebu, not purring.

Pity arrived like a warm animal and tried to sit on her chest. She picked it up and set it beside the desk. "Not now," she said, not unkindly. "Work first."

She returned to the market notes, to the name she and Tarek had chased through carpets and potion steam: the masked witch who'd called herself the Sun's Shadow. Cassandra hadn't wanted to ascribe competency to melodrama. Now the melodrama wrote in her margins. The witch's predictions - Stop digging. The resurrection is not an error. It is an invitation. - were not riddles. They were a meeting agenda.

The invitation had been printed and sealed in London.

Cassandra picked up the telegram again and held Araminta's opening salutation under her breath. Miss Blythe. It had always been Miss Blythe, crisply respectful in public and privately tender the way a cat is tender with a moth. Araminta had been the only senior to invest in her audit of the 1924 Greenland Orb Runic Incident. Araminta had written her a recommendation so sharp it drew compliments. Araminta had her on a string woven of approval and a certain kind of English affection: disciplined, stainless, fiercely loyal to institutions that looked good in marble.

"Araminta," Cassandra said to the air. "Did you keep me close because I was cheap, or because I was useful, or because I was yours?"

The room did not mind the question. The mirror only offered her another angle of her own mouth. The lens, flipped aside, made the world generous again.

She took a fresh sheet from her journal - the one that did not turn confessions into hieroglyphs - and wrote a list down the left margin while the space on the right filled itself with her tidy backhand:

- Forged or augmented seals from London.
- Backdated court instruction.

- Market fragment runes matching Gringotts sigil paper stocks.
- Cairo director’s apology with subtext of local resistance.
- Order sigil in miniature; boundary charm hidden in goblin geometry.
- “Intermediary” en route to Luxor - likely Order asset with Bank credentials.
- Breath responds to conflict and language.
- Nebu’s clause. Rahetep’s vow.

She paused. The last two items wanted a different ink. She capped the black and uncapped the red.

- If Breath destroyed → Nebu ends.
- If Breath preserved → Rahetep imprisoned by reverence; Order empowered; world endangered.
- Third way improbable.
- Choose anyway.

The letters made a shape she hated and admired for being honest.

Her wand rolled against her wrist where it lay on the desk. The crack kissed her skin. She picked it up, feeling the slight imbalance the fracture had introduced, the way draws now hummed when she closed a charm. There were wands that would do as they were told forever. She had never owned one of those. Perhaps this was better. Perhaps being required to feel every spell’s complaint would teach her to say fewer of them.

“You draw lines for everyone else,” Nebu had said. “Draw one for yourself.”

“Fine,” she told the wand, the papers, her own uncooperative heart. “Here’s a line.”

She reached for another sheet and wrote Araminta Voss at the top with a hand that had stopped shaking and started being surgical.

Director Voss,
With respect, I will not participate in any “containment audit” ordered under modified seals or falsified court dates. I will not deliver the Temple of the Breath to Gringotts, the Order masquerading within it, or any other institution interested in eternity as an asset class. Effective immediately, I consider my assignment autonomous and my obligation primarily to the living and the dead whose names we have borrowed without permission. If you wish to dismiss me, do so in writing; I will frame it.

She looked at the last sentence and snorted softly. “Too much,” she told herself. She struck it and replaced it with: I request your written confirmation of the original mandate and the names of any intermediaries currently active between London and Luxor.

She signed it with the neat signature she used when she meant to be obeyed. She did not send it. Not yet. You did not give a chess player your piece until the board was laid.

Instead, she transfigured the letter with a low, single-syllable charm into something uglier and safer: a list of tariffs for cotton bales. The words held; the magic hummed. The crack in her wand sang a small, disagreeable note. The list would unmask itself when Araminta touched it.

If it reached Araminta. If someone else intercepted and tried to read it, they'd get economics and a headache.

She rearranged the islands of paper into a river and stacked them in a leather folder, tucking the fraudulent seal into a separate pocket. The small bottle of reagent glinted; she pocketed it, then hesitated, and pocketed the lens too. It had belonged to a professor who had taught her that seeing was not the same as believing. He'd died convinced of both.

On impulse, she wrote another letter, this one three sentences on thick paper with no filigree.

Inspector Mogrim,
You were correct. London knows more than it declared. I believe the court's order queue was altered. I will bring you proof if I live through Luxor.

She sanded it, folded it like a prayer, addressed it to the court's post drop, and sealed it with a charm that smelled of rivers.

Last, she wrote to Tarek: Bring maps. Bring your worst opinions of me. Bring a shovel you don't mind me hating.

The room had become bright enough to offend anyone who loved night. Voices braided from the street: a baker shouting, the thock of a rug taken out and beaten, the skitter of someone's fast steps going somewhere they were late to. The guesthouse felt suddenly too small for politics and too correct for treason.

Cassandra looked at the cracked wand in her hand, at the papers arranged like a mouth about to speak. She thought of Rahetep's smile when she had corrected his use of a modern idiom, of the small bow he gave to waiters because dignity lived in both directions. She thought of Nebu standing in moonlight and saying end as if it were a legal term and not a cliff. The heat beneath her breastbone rose hard and clean.

"This is the line," she said aloud to test the weight of it. "I will not carry London into that temple. I will carry silence. And if I must speak, I will make the words small."

She packed with a competence that felt like devotion: rope, chalk, two flasks (one for water, one - embarrassingly - for very strong tea), dried dates, a coil of warding thread, three pencils because pencils were sometimes better than wands, a compass whose needle was enchanted to point to whatever she feared most (useful, if you were honest), and a scarf that would argue politely with sand.

In the mirror, the woman who looked back had stopped trying to appear certain and simply was. The basil on the sill nodded in the new wind. The chalk line at the door had faded to a thin ghost of itself; she left it. Some ghosts deserved the courtesy of being stepped over.

She hefted the pack. Its weight was an argument she liked. She tucked the folder of evidence close against her ribs, where some people wore luck. Outside, a cart clattered by. Somewhere in the courtyard, a sleek, golden absence adjusted itself more comfortably in her thoughts.

“Very well,” Cassandra said to no one in particular, and to the two someones who made the decision feel like a theft. “We go.”

When she opened the door, the day came in without asking permission. It tasted of stone warmed ahead of time and sugar melting in tea. She took one step, then another, and did not look back to see if the mirror tried to make her into a more elegant story. She had picked the truth already, and it would have to be enough.

Dawn shook its tablecloth. The city’s crumbs - birds, brooms, voices - spilled into the street.

Cassandra stood in the courtyard with the pack on her shoulders and the leather folder pressed beneath her arm like a book she did not intend to lend. The lantern was out; the mirror had learned its manners and held only a pale rectangle of morning. The basil shivered in a breeze that smelled of bread, donkey, and early sun on stone. Somewhere down the lane, a rug took a punitive beating with a satisfying thock-thock that sounded like discipline applied to chaos.

Nebu had left nothing of himself but a warm absence where he’d stood. It was oddly considerate of him. It kept her from calling his name.

She crossed to the mirror anyway because habit is louder than wisdom before breakfast. The glass had foxed itself along the edges, turning certainty into a vignette. Cassandra lifted her chin toward the reflection and looked at the woman there as if she were a witness in court.

“We’re done with tidy stories,” she told her. “We are not done with tea.”

The mirror, which had been too theatrical all night, behaved. Then, as if it couldn’t resist a last comment, a delicate rind of hieroglyphs bloomed along the lower edge - faint as breath on a window.

The river wakes. The breath wakes.

“I know,” Cassandra whispered, and the characters dispersed into ordinary silver as if embarrassed to have been overheard.

Bootsteps came up the alley, fast but not running. Raheema’s gate rattled politely before admitting Tarek el-Farouk, who arrived in the courtyard trailing maps and disapproval like a cloak.

“You look,” he said, stopping short to take in the spread of her gear, “like a person who slept not at all and wrote at least four regrettable letters.”

“Three,” she said. “One to the Inspector, one to you, and one to a former version of myself whom I have dismissed without severance.”

“Wise. The Inspector will frame yours and glare at it for comfort.” He nodded at her pack. “Are we committing crimes?”

“Possibly,” she said. “But administrative ones. The sort that improve the soul and offend ledger keepers.”

He let that sit, which was a kindness. Up close, the morning made its usual inventory of him: the ink-stained fingers, the careful beard, the scholar’s posture at war with a body that remembered climbing dates palms as a child. He carried a rolled map case whose leather had been handled into friendliness and a shovel that looked like it had opinions.

He propped the shovel in the shade and pulled a folded letter from his waistcoat. “Before you say I am early, I am early because this arrived and I heard your blood pressure from my house.”

The envelope bore Griphook al-Azhari’s seal pressed deep and clean. Tarek had not broken it. Cassandra slid a thumbnail under the wax and lifted the letter free. The goblin director’s hand was as exact as ever, the lines marching like soldiers who had learned to turn corners without breaking formation.

Blythe -
Unscheduled activity reported on the east floodplain beyond Luxor. Unauthorized team under protection of “intermediary.” Digging commenced at coordinates I will not put on paper. Expect interference. Do not bring London. - G.

It was, for a goblin, practically a love note.

Cassandra felt a small, fierce relief that made her weak in the knees for one impolite second. Then the relief hardened into something better. “He said ‘do not bring London,’” she read aloud, handing Tarek the page. “This is now our official mandate.”

Tarek’s mouth tilted. “Your talent for reframing treason as bureaucratic compliance is impressive.”

“I practiced at Gringotts,” she said. She tapped the seal with a fingertip. “There’s more. London’s seals have been wearing other people’s jewelry. Small Order glyphs tucked into goblin geometry. Boundary slips hidden in the ink. And the court docket - ” She cut herself off. She did not need to convince him. He had believed her before she had earned it.

“We go,” he said simply, and she loved him for deleting argument from the line.

He looked past her to the blank mirror. “He told you.” Not a question.

“He did.” She felt the words she could not write and would not speak press to the back of her teeth like a full tide. “Enough.”

Tarek studied her face with the frankness of a friend who knew when not to offer tools. “Then I will carry the part you can’t, for a while.”

“Thank you,” she said, and let the gratitude be literal, not witty. “There’s one more thing. The Breath feeds on… attention. On conflict, on language. In the temple, we keep our spells small. Our words smaller.”

“An Egyptian asking a British person to be quiet in a holy place,” he said, dry. “I have waited centuries.”

“I will practice on the way,” she said. “Starting now.”

Raheema arrived in the doorway with a tray that held three porcelain cups of thick, sweet tea and a plate of bread that had gone straight from someone’s oven to someone’s idea of benevolence. “You will not practice on my tea,” she announced, a general in slippers. “You will drink it and have some manners, Miss Cassandra, or I will tell your mother.”

“I don’t have one present to be told on,” Cassandra said, taking a cup with sincere reverence. The tea smelled like mercy had been boiled and sugared.

“You have me,” Raheema said, unimpressed by the concept of international maternal jurisdiction. She thrust the plate at Tarek. “And you. Eat. You always forget you are not made of air.”

Tarek accepted a roll and a rebuke. “We are going to Luxor,” he told her, because courtesies were also wards. “We may be back with questions.”

“You will be back with dust,” Raheema said. “I will keep the good soap hidden to hurt your feelings.” She glanced at Cassandra’s pack and then at Cassandra’s face, which would not hide what it had learned. “Whatever you are doing, do it like a person who wants to be invited to dinner later.”

“Yes, madam,” Cassandra said.

Raheema squeezed her shoulder, so quick and efficient a gesture that it registered only after the pressure had gone. “And leave the cat alone. He is praying.”

Cassandra blinked. “Nebu prays?”

“Everyone prays,” Raheema said. “Some of us to god. Some of us to breakfast.” She retreated with the royal dignity of a woman who knows where the cups live and who is worthy to touch them.

They drank. The sweet heat unknotted the night in Cassandra’s chest. She imagined, briefly and with obscene longing, how it would feel to stay. To let Cairo’s morning rinse the hour clean, to file a report in neutral ink, to go to the market for oranges and distractions. To be a person whose cleverness was used on furniture arrangement rather than fate.

“Cassandra,” Tarek said, as if he had felt the drift, “maps.”

She surrendered the fantasy with the practiced grace of someone who had already put it on the shelf three times this week. “Right.” She set her cup aside and crouched to the flagstones where the map case had been sleeping. They unrolled Luxor between them like a polite dragon, squares and floods and contour lines crisp and hopeful. Tarek’s annotations marched in a different ink: cursive curls that tucked history into corners like notes for another archaeologist to find in a hundred years and admire.

“The coordinates Griphook didn’t put on paper,” she said, “are here.” She touched a fingertip to an unboastful stretch of floodplain east of the expected ruins. “Too soggy for traditionalists. Good cover for people who don’t mind their boots knowing secrets.”

“Water’s a fine way to hide a door,” Tarek said. “It persuades you there’s nothing firm below. And the low ground keeps nosy tourists high and dry.”

“We’ll take the river,” Cassandra said. “Short way. Fewer eyes.” She felt the plan take skeletal shape, not a cage but a backbone. “We’ll pay the ferry with riddles and biscuits if we must.”

Tarek quirked a brow. “That sounds specific.”

“Long story involving a spectral union representative of boats,” she said. “He has opinions. Bring ginger snaps if you own any.”

He did not press. He withdrew a smaller, paler map and laid it like tracing paper atop the first. “Contours of rumored substructures,” he said. “Collected from old men who remember everything and charge more than academics. Note the clustering.”

It was there: a faint rhyme between distance and depth that sang of intelligent design. Cassandra angled the maps until their ghosts matched. The temple under the Nile hadn’t wanted to be lost. It had wanted to be patient.

“Right,” she said. “We go quiet. We go light. We keep spells to a minimum. If someone with a London tie pin waves a paper at us, we are suddenly unable to read.”

“I have been practicing,” Tarek said. “It is not difficult.”

A small shape shot across the top of the wall and landed on the herb bed with the audible dignity of a creature who refused to sneak. Raheema’s tabby - ordinary, unimpressed - fixed them both with the bureaucracy of her stare. She blinked, yawned with rude conviction, and washed a paw.

Cassandra smiled at her and felt the smile behave itself. “Tell your friend he has terrible timing,” she told the cat. The cat ignored her with the professionalism of a deity on leave.

Tarek rose, folding the maps back into their scabbard. “The intermediary?”

“Order asset with bank credentials,” Cassandra said. “Griphook’s word. We will meet them only if politeness can be a weapon.”

“Politeness is always a weapon,” Tarek said.

Cassandra buckled her pack and settled the strap so it found the familiar groove on her shoulder. The leather folder slid into the inner pocket of her coat where it would thrum against her ribs like a second heart. She turned in a slow circle, committing the courtyard’s small grammar to memory: the crack in the third tile, the basil’s stubborn green, the court of pigeons mustering on the roof opposite like jurors who had already decided and wanted breakfast.

“Anything else?” Tarek asked.

“Yes.” She crossed to the chalk line she had drawn in the night. The faint white mark had gone ghost-pale with morning. She bent and, with her thumb, rubbed it into the tile until it faded into the color of the stone. “A line for myself,” she said. “I nearly forgot.”

She straightened, lighter by no measurable amount and yet.

Tarek stood at the gate, one hand on the latch, eyes asking without asking if she was ready to move the story along.

Cassandra reached for the handle and looked once more at the mirror, which gave her back a woman carrying silence like a charm and a promise like a blade. She nodded to her own reflection as if to a nervous witness and turned to Tarek.

“Then we follow the wind that breathes,” she said.

The gate swung open. The street met them with the well-meaning chaos of morning. They stepped into it together, and the city closed behind them like a book that knew there were fifteen chapters and this was the turn of a page.

Cairo tilted from prayer into commerce as if a hand had turned a page.

They took the alleys that smelled of soap and bread and then the streets that smelled of everything else. The city put on its jewelry: sun on brass lamps, tin on stall roofs, copper on kettles. A man sold bottles of salt-caught moonlight from a cart; a woman weighed curses on a scale and recommended the lightest one for travel. Children were already stupid with sugar and arguments. Over it all, the Nile breathed its slow, reasonable breath.

“Permits,” Tarek said, resigned, as they reached the Ministry of Minor Interventions - a narrow, handsome building wedged between a spice merchant and a tailor. Its façade was carved with the names of every official who had ever resigned with dignity and then been rehired as a consultant.

Inside, the queue moved the way molasses thinks about moving. A clerk in a fez minted from boredom peered at them over the stacks of forms as if tallying the years he’d already given to this exact encounter.

“Purpose?” he said, pen poised to deny.

“Visitation,” Tarek said.

“Which relatives?”

“Architectural.”

The clerk’s pen twitched. Cassandra kept her mouth shut with the concentration of a student trying not to say the answer just to prove she knew it. She let Tarek talk to his city in its own language. He produced letters with polite subtexts. He produced Griphook’s note, which the clerk read to the end and then again, as if hoping a refusal would bloom in the margins. It did

not. He produced a small parcel of candied dates with a bow tied around it so elegant the bribe looked like a favor they were doing the Ministry by letting it accept it.

“Fine,” said the clerk, which in this building meant, I acknowledge that resistance would waste more of my life than yours. He stamped in triplicate. He stamped something that did not require stamping just to demonstrate restraint. “And your London paper?”

“We’re traveling without London,” Cassandra said, carefully choosing the smallest possible version of the truth.

The clerk’s gaze snagged on her accent, then on the crack in her wand when she handed it over for the registry charm. “Hm,” he said, unimpressed to find a human flaw in a British sentence. He inscribed her wand tip with an authorization glyph that would oblige it to behave anywhere that wasn’t a temple. The glyph flared against the fracture, then subsided like a reprimand accepted.

They stepped back into heat and trade. An owl bloated with correspondence beat itself across the street and settled, panting, on a post. Cassandra drew a breath the way the night had taught her - small - and slid three letters into the bird’s satchel: the list of cotton tariffs that would dissolve into rebellion when Araminta touched it; the note to Mogrim; a short line to Raheema that said simply: Keep a room for us.

“Done?” Tarek asked.

“Done,” she said, and hoped the word would forgive her for lying to several futures at once.

They walked on. At the mouth of the wizarding bazaar, Cairo performed its favorite trick of being many places at once: lanes intersected at impossible angles; ropes anchored stalls that floated a patient foot above the ground; incense put arguments into a better mood. Above them, carpets queued as neatly as gentlemen at a club, waiting to be hired. Scales weighed illusions. A toothless man sold laughter in jars; you could uncork one for a room that wasn’t listening and repair it.

“Blythe,” said a voice behind them, plummy as a Sunday roast and just as hard to digest.

Cassandra did not turn. In a stall window she caught the reflection of a woman in hat and gloves with a Gringotts tie pin flashing like a knife that had learned sarcasm. Araminta favored silver; this one wore an iron imitation.

“Miss Blythe?” the woman tried again, closer. The tie pin caught sun and threw it back.

“Hard of hearing,” Tarek murmured, the side of his mouth not visible to anyone with a pin.

“Very British condition,” Cassandra said. She adjusted the folder beneath her arm so it was more obviously a map and less obviously trouble. She and Tarek merged expertly into a knot of students arguing about the ethics of animated brooms and let themselves be carried three stalls away. There, they stopped at a man selling clay whistles shaped like birds.

“Do you have one that sounds like silence?” Cassandra asked him.

“Most of my customers bring their own,” he said gravely, and handed her one painted with a Nile heron. She paid and put it in her pocket with the seriousness of a weapon.

They reached the river by a path that pretended not to know them - down a set of stone steps polite to the foot, under two archways, past a fig tree that had successfully argued with the wall about who should own the sky. At the quay, a half-dozen boats were taking on people: fishermen, clerks, a group of boys with sticks and hopeful nets, two witches with pails of that day’s fortune.

Cassandra’s breath knew the Nile before the rest of her did. The air here was cooler, earnest. The water made statements rather than suggestions. She felt her shoulders lower their dukes.

A shadow detached itself from the shadow of a pole and became a man with a beard like river reeds and a coat too fine for the job he appeared to be doing. His eyes were older than anyone’s hands. He looked at them and at their papers and then past their papers into their intentions with the sort of accuracy that made Cassandra feel in need of an audit.

“Fares,” he said, voice like oars.

“Two,” Tarek said. “With discretion.”

“We sell that by the yard,” the man said. “You pay what you can carry.”

Cassandra took the packet of ginger biscuits from her coat and set it on the post between them. The man’s eyes brightened with the smallest genuine pleasure of the morning. “And we pay with the old currency,” she said softly. “A riddle for a river.”

He weighed the biscuits and the words and nodded. “Two riddles,” he said, compromise baked into his tone. “And no speeches. I don’t feed the water with arguments.”

“We’re learning,” she said, and was not ashamed to mean it.

He did not ask his riddles aloud. He handed them a piece of slate scrubbed nearly white and a stub of chalk and tipped his head toward a clean bench of stone out of earshot. Cassandra laughed under her breath: of course. Silence as a condition of passage; answers written, not said. The old magic did not simply rely on habit - it enforced it. Nebu had said they would need to carry quiet like a ward. Here was a practice run.

Tarek took the chalk first, read the carved prompt - three lines, elliptical and clean - and wrote with spare, neat strokes. Cassandra read it after him, felt the little snap in the language where the logic hid, and touched the chalk once to the correct corner, the way you tap a door to tell it you recognize its shape.

They wrote the second together, four words between them, each resisting the editorial flourish they would have brought at any other hour. When they brought the slate back, the ferryman looked at their handwriting the way one looks at weather, then at their faces as if there might be footnotes there. “Good,” he said. He added the biscuits to an invisible ledger and gestured to the quietest boat.

They stepped in. Water accepted their weight with the humility it reserves for people who will be different when they reach the other side.

As the ferry slid away from stone into animal movement, Cairo shifted its perspective, the river re-framing the city’s pride into something more bearable. Domes became shells, minarets reeds, alleys arteries. The sun, not yet brutal, proposed a treaty with their skin. A boy on the bank practiced a charm that would make his fishing line polite to fish; his grandfather corrected his wrist, not unkindly.

Cassandra sat with her pack between her knees and the folder under her hands and practiced not talking. The trick, she discovered, was to have thoughts that did not require an audience. It made an odd, sober peace. Tarek, beside her, honored the silence not with solemnity but with attention: he looked, and looked again, reading the river as one reads an old text whose words stayed still and whose meanings wandered.

Midstream, a carpet came low toward them, carrying three men in shirtsleeves and determination. One wore a pin that echoed the one in the bazaar. He saw them, saw that he saw them, and altered his course to make not-seeing a policy. The ferryman did not look up. The boat did not rock.

At the far bank, reeds gestured in the clumsy sign language of plants trying to warn and welcome at the same time. The ferry kissed mud. The ferryman held out a hand to steady Cassandra as she stood; she took it and felt callus and heat and a small shock that might have been nothing and might have been blessing. When she would have thanked him, he shook his head, a smile like a wrinkle he could not iron out. He touched two fingers to his lips and then to the water, not quite a prayer and not quite not.

On the bank was a man with a donkey who did not entirely approve of his employment. The donkey considered Cassandra with the accuracy of an accountant. Cassandra considered the donkey with the wistfulness of a woman who had not slept enough to argue with stubbornness on four legs.

“I can walk,” she began.

“You can,” Tarek agreed. “And we can also arrive today.”

She surrendered. “Fine. But if he bites me, I will bite back.”

“I will tell him,” Tarek said gravely, and did, in a tone that made the donkey snort with what might have been laughter. He paid the man with coins and a promise that they were not the sort of tourists who made statues blush.

The donkey set a brisk, resentful pace along the path that skirted fields and then shouldered up into sand. The city thinned behind them into the kind of memory that feels like it happened to more patient people. The river kept its own counsel. Ahead, the floodplain opened its ribs to show a line of darker ground, as if someone had underlined a sentence in the earth and dared them to read it.

Cassandra allowed herself a handful of words as they went. “I sent the letters,” she said, because leaving them unspoken would let doubt invent endings for them. “If Araminta intercepts mine, she’ll find cotton and tariffs until she touches it. Mogrim will read between the lines at speed. Raheema will keep the good soap hidden out of spite.”

“Good,” Tarek said. He tugged the brim of his hat lower as the sun grew opinionated. “And your line?”

“I rubbed it out,” she said. “The chalk one. I made it inside instead.”

He nodded as if she’d answered in a language he’d asked her to learn and she’d finally hazard a sentence. They walked on. The donkey revised his opinion of the morning downward with each step and let them know.

By the time the path lifted onto the higher ground, the day had declared itself. Heat set about its industry - not yet punishing, but intent, like a clerk with a backlog. The world flashed less; it steadied. The city had become a suggestion, the river a rule, the desert a page that had not yet decided what story they were in.

They stopped at a rise where the floodplain could be seen making its shy approach to the horizon. Tarek held up a hand and pointed with his chin. There, far off, a glint where no glint should be. Metal or glass, a sun-hungry thing in the low land. A tent. A tool. An Order man’s pocketwatch. Proof.

They both let their breaths arrive and depart without comment. Cassandra flexed her fingers on the folder. It felt absurd to be carrying paper toward myth, until she remembered that paper had declared and unmade empires. Words were just a different shape of chisel.

“From here,” Tarek said, “we go quieter.”

“Quieter,” she agreed. She felt the decision fix into muscle and marrow as if a rune had been cut there. Spells small, words smaller. Every joke a ration. Every cleverness counted out like coin.

A carpet’s shadow swam over them for a second - one of the hired ones ferrying a family with baskets and impatience - and then was gone. The sky resumed being indifferent. In the distance, a thread of birds stitched the air together with their complicated, trivial names for the day.

Cassandra adjusted the strap of her pack and the set of her mouth. “Remind me,” she said, “when I try to make a speech.”

“I will throw a biscuit at you,” Tarek said.

“Ginger,” she said. “They work best.”

He extended his hand. She took it. They set off down the slope, footprints arguing briefly with the idea of permanence and then giving it up. The donkey followed with the martyrdom of donkeys everywhere, resigned to the proliferation of human intentions.

Halfway down, Cassandra paused and looked back once. Cairo had gone into its later sentences. The minarets were ink-strokes now; the roofs arranged themselves like thoughts around a truth. The river held the light as if the sun were something it had always meant to return.

“Goodbye,” she said under her breath, not to the city exactly, but to the version of herself who believed she would be allowed to live there forever, solving tidy problems and being clever for money. The wind took it, uninterested in drama.

“Cassandra?” Tarek said.

“Coming,” she said, and meant it, for the path and for the story and for whatever waited within stone.

They crested the next rise and the desert opened its quiet mouth. The floodplain stretched ahead like the blank between question and answer. Somewhere beyond its low green and bruise-dark water lay coordinates Griphook would not write, a temple that refused to be found and had been cross at being sealed, a breath that woke when people forgot how to keep their voices down.

She put her hand on the cracked wand at her hip. The fracture hummed once, like a throat learning a new melody. She pressed the sound flat with her palm.

“All right,” Cassandra said, and let the words be the last ones for a while. “We follow the wind that breathes.”

They went. Behind them, the city finished putting itself on. Before them, the old country - the one under the visible one - waited with the patience of stone and the appetite of water.

Chapter 11: The Temple Beneath the Nile

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The Temple Beneath the Nile

Dawn had not yet decided what color to be. The Nile held a bruised purple where the last of night diluted into morning, and the embankment smelled of rope, wet wood, and the honeyed smoke of a tea brazier someone had coaxed to life among stacked crates. A heron stood knee-deep in the shallows, an austere sentinel judging everyone's paperwork.

"We have the river permit," Tarek said, flipping through a leather folder that looked as if it had been rescued from a scholar's flood. "The antiquities transit token. The Ministry's 'strong recommendation against entering unregistered ruins,' which you will ignore. Two letters from the court authorizing 'cultural observation of a former monarch in transit' - that's you, Lord Rahetep - and one extremely rude note from Inspector Mogrim reminding us to sign them in triplicate."

"Good," Cassandra said, though her stomach had arranged itself into an origami crane of apprehension. The air had the clean taste of beginning, and she could feel the wards she'd woven into her coat prickle against her collarbone as if eager to be tested.

Rahetep, swathed in linen so immaculate it might have been ironed by the dead themselves, stood with hands folded like a diplomat about to give his resignation speech. He watched the river with an expression of old sorrow and new curiosity. "It is narrower than I remember," he murmured.

"The river?" Cassandra asked.

"Time," he said lightly, and turned to survey the boat they had hired: a broad-bellied felucca with a patched sail the color of river mud. "And boats. Do they… creak less now?"

"They creak exactly the same," Nebu pronounced, materializing on a coil of rope with the bored grace of royalty caught waiting. Morning light slid along his golden fur, picking out a scatter of darker stripes across his shoulder. "Because the design premise remains: we sit on wood and pray it remembers how to float."

"Boats float by displacement," Cassandra said before she could help herself.

"Everything floats by faith," Nebu said. "Some things merely disguise it with arithmetic."

Tarek suppressed a smile. "The pilot's name is Mahir. He has transported scholars and lunatics on this stretch for twenty years. He tells me there is no difference between the two."

"Tell him he is very perceptive," Cassandra said, tugging her satchel higher on her shoulder. It was heavy with chalk, etched copper tokens, tea packets, a pair of charms for reversing

minor hemorrhages, and a new journal whose first page remained obstinately blank. She had tried to write an entry before dawn - something crisp, professional, unfazed - but the words had crowded the nib like nervous guests, then fled.

She looked back once at Cairo. The city rose behind them in stacked silhouettes: minarets like lifted wands, roofs where laundry and caged owls shared the same breeze, invisible wards netted between buildings like spider silk in sun. Even from here the Wizarding Bazaar made a low, contented noise - the tinkling of bottled starlight handled by someone who claimed to be careful, the chatter of bargaining that was as much spellwork as mathematics.

“Ready?” Tarek asked.

Cassandra nodded and regretted it. She wasn’t sure anyone could be ready for a temple no one admitted existed, that predated wizarding magic and - according to every scrap of lore - remembered you if you dared visit it.

“Your hand,” Rahetep said gently.

She blinked and looked down. Her left hand had curled without her noticing, fingers pressed tight into the soft inside of her palm. She uncrooked them. The half-moons her nails had left looked like a tiny eclipse.

“Fine,” she said, and gave him a smile that felt both honest and useless. “Just thinking about ginger snaps.”

“That’s a lie,” Nebu said. “She’s thinking about the end of knowledge.”

“I can think about two things.”

“Then add ginger snaps to the shopping list,” Tarek said, dry as the embankment stones. He motioned to Mahir, who lifted a hand in acknowledgement and leapt to loosen the mooring rope with the casual grace of someone who trusted the river more than people.

They boarded. The felucca accepted their weight with a pensive groan. Mahir offered a curt nod to Cassandra, a deeper one to Rahetep, and did not look at Nebu at all. “We ride the current until Luxor,” he said, tone making it less a plan than a treaty. “After that the river grows crowded with tourists and more opinions than water. We will cut into the floodplain where you asked.”

“Are you aware,” Nebu said, toes flexing against the deck, “that your boat is held together by optimism and two insulted nails?”

“I am aware,” Mahir said, and stepped to the rudder. “The nails are very loyal.”

The sail cracked and took wind. The quayside drifted away with the steady patience of something that had watched centuries of departures and had judgments about all of them. The first smear of sun lifted past the far bank like a golden coin being slowly bribed out of darkness. Air blew cool across Cassandra’s face, and the prickling wards along her collarbone settled as if soothed by motion.

She leaned her elbows on the gunwale. The river smelled of silt and leaf, of last night's cooking fire carried thin and sweet across the water. On the east bank, a boy called after a dog that refused not to be a dog. A vendor rolled his cart along the quay and began to shout about sesame rings with the energy of a prophecy.

"You are leaving a city that likes you," Rahetep said. "It approves of your impudence."

"That can't be true," Cassandra said. "Cairo disapproves of me with style."

"That is liking, in cities' dialect," he said. "Disapproval is a kind of fondness when properly inflected."

"Tell that to Inspector Mogrim," she said, and pulled a folded note from her pocket. She had read it three times already and couldn't stop reading it. It was heavy with officious ink and restraint; she could still see the precise pause before his signature as if it lived in the paper, taking its time. At the bottom, in handwriting that did not belong to him, a line had been added: Don't be a hero. Be a witness.

"Will you listen to him?" Tarek asked, watching her without asking too much.

"I will interpret him creatively."

"Of course," Nebu said. "Because nothing says 'safety' like creative interpretation near eldritch monuments."

"Speaking of safety," Tarek added, "I promised Raheema I would remind you that her cousin's clinic is open to friends should you return with all your limbs in different places than they began."

"Tell Raheema," Cassandra said, a warmth twinging under her breastbone, "that I will endeavor to keep my limbs in a pleasing arrangement."

"I will tell her you said 'endeavor,' and she will pray more fiercely."

Cairo loosened, then unspooled behind them. The river widened and the felucca found its pace, the bow whispering through a lace of floating weeds. Palms leaned in to trade the boat shade for gossip; egrets took offense at the intrusion and then forgot it at once. The light sharpened, that miraculous Egyptian clarity where every edge looks like a law.

Cassandra let her gaze rest on Rahetep. He had not sat. He stood as if receiving an audience, spine straight, wrapped hands light on the rail. A breeze teased the fringe near his wrist and made it look almost like sea grass. She felt an ache she did not want to name - something like admiration and something like dread. He had been a story all her life - Pharaohs and curses and the dignified cruelty of history - and now he was here watching the sun like a man who had seen it first.

"Do you remember this stretch?" she asked.

"Not the boat," he said. "The light. It was always a little too tender before it burned us honest."

Nebu made a sound that could have been a purr or a scoff. “He means he remembers complaining about mornings in a different century.”

“I was a ruler,” Rahetep said. “Complaining was statecraft.”

They passed a low island where someone had erected a shrine of piled stones threaded with river grass and three ribbons, blue, red, and a tired gold. The ribbons tugged toward them, then away, like fish trying to make up their minds. Tarek murmured a greeting in a soft rush of Arabic, then in a slower tide of old words not meant for modern ears. Cassandra felt the syllables brush her skin. The wards on her collarbone flickered again, but not with warning - more like recognition.

“The floodplain will be treacherous,” Tarek said quietly. “Not for the mud.” His eyes flicked to the horizon where the land was beginning to lift and dip in ways that felt like sentences. “For memory.”

“Excellent,” Nebu said. “We have so little of that aboard.”

Cassandra took her chalk from her pocket and marked three runes on the inside of the gunwale, the strokes crisp despite the boat’s gentle sway. A seal against unwanted eyes; a sluice that let intention out but not invitation in; a compass that oriented not to north but to need.

“You think that will help?” Tarek asked.

“No,” she said. “I think it will remind me I helped.”

“Honest,” Rahetep said approvingly.

Wind bellied the sail again, and the felucca surged as if pulled by something eager further downriver. Mahir adjusted the rudder with two fingers and an expression of narrow tolerance for drama. The city thinned to a rumor. The embankment fell away. Morning found its color at last and turned the water to a bright sheet someone had hammered out of sky.

Cassandra breathed with the river: in, while the boat rose; out, when the deck surrendered a sigh. The crane of apprehension in her stomach folded its wings - not flying, but quieter. She slid her new journal from the satchel, braced it on the rail, and wrote without thinking: *Departure at first light. River agreeing. Company ridiculous and dear. If we do not return, let it be said that we went as we are: stubborn, insufficiently cautious, and hopeful despite ourselves.*

She hesitated, then added: *The air tastes of beginning. The wards hum like bees. Somewhere ahead, something is breathing.*

Nebu leapt to the journal and planted one paw squarely in the wet ink. “There,” he said, withdrawing to inspect his mark. “An official seal. Now no one can forge your sincerity.”

“Thank you,” she said, laughing before she could stop, because fear and fondness had met in her throat and discovered they were the same shape.

Rahetep inclined his head toward the east bank where the land unrolled into scrub and then into a pale distance that seemed to inhale. “Onward,” he said, as if the river required permission.

Mahir said nothing, and the felucca answered for all of them. It turned its patient nose toward the floodplain beyond Luxor, toward reeds that whispered like scribes, toward a line in the light where the color of morning shifted from ordinary to intent. The sail took a deeper breath. The deck shivered as if remembering. And Cairo, generous even in farewell, let them go.

The river narrowed to a thought of itself, then widened again as if embarrassed by its own introspection. By late morning the banks had loosened into flooded meadows and low islands braided with reeds, their tassels combed by wind. Here and there, stone shoulders pushed up out of the water - crumbled pylons and carved blocks - a drowned sentence the Nile had not finished erasing. The sun climbed without mercy and yet the light felt tempered, as if it had passed through centuries before it touched them.

Mahir brought the felucca close to the left bank where the current slowed behind a scuttle of islets. The water lay glassy and shallow enough to show pale sand shifting like breath beneath. Dragonflies wrote small bright scandals in the air. A smear of ibis lifted, scolding, then settled again in a patch of papyrus that hummed with bees.

“Ordinarily,” Tarek said, resting a hand on the gunwale as if to steady the world, “we would cut straight south. But the floodplain is fickle. Channels appear where there were none. Ridges move. Whole villages wake up on the wrong side of the river.”

“Convenient, if one has enemies,” Rahetep observed. His voice softened as he turned to watch a pair of children on the far bank racing the boat with a plank for a raft. “Or inconvenient, if one is the enemy of oneself.”

“Common arrangement,” Nebu said. He sat at the prow like an offended figurehead, tail curled precisely around his toes. The sun limned a halo on his fur; his ears angled toward the reeds as if listening for an insult he could respect.

Cassandra shaded her eyes and looked ahead. The reedbeds gathered into a continuous green wall, pierced by narrow black mouths where water slipped through. Mahir chose one of the mouths with the confidence of long acquaintance, dipped the rudder, and let the felucca glide in. Instantly the wind dulled to a whisper. The boat’s wake pressed the reeds flat for a moment and then they sprang back, hissing.

Within, the world changed temperature. Shadow dappled the deck; everything smelled of wet root and mineral sweetness, like cooled tea. Distant, a bell rang - no village bell, but something quieter, a struck shell. Cassandra felt it in her molars.

“Old priests’ channel,” Tarek said. “They traveled this way to the river shrines during inundation.”

“They sang,” Rahetep said, as if surprised by his own mouth. He lifted his wrapped hand to his throat. “There was a… cadence - a call and answer. The river answered back. We

pretended we were teaching it to listen."

"And was the river a good student?" Cassandra asked lightly, because the air had gone so still that words needed a nudge to move.

"The river," he said, and the linen at his jaw drew faintly tight with a smile, "has been alive longer than ambition has had a name."

The channel opened suddenly into a pool where the sky fell in and floated. In its center, a dais of black stone rose three handspans above the water. It was cut smooth as invention, bare but for a rim of tiny holes drilled in a circle. Cassandra leaned closer, squinting. The holes were arranged in groups of five, then ten, then five again, spiraling inward. Every few breaths a bubble slipped up through one and broke the surface like a quiet punctuation.

"Breathing stone," Tarek said. "They built these to measure flood height. Each hole corresponds to a prayer."

"Five, ten, five," Rahetep murmured. "Morning, midday, evening." He reached out, not touching the stone, simply sharing the inches above it. "The priests would stand there when the water was low and speak to the open mouths of the holes, and when the river rose the prayers rose back through them, changed."

Cassandra watched one bubble form and pop. It left a ring that widened and merged with its neighbors, repetitions eating their own edges. She had the abrupt sense that if she leaned too far over she could fall through the reflection of the sky into something older.

A wind moved through the reeds. Not the ordinary rattle, not the ordinary sigh of plant against plant, but a tone - thin at first, then braided, filling without getting louder. It was not quite a melody. It was the suggestion of one, like a song remembered by someone who had lost language and kept time. The hairs along Cassandra's forearms lifted. The wards along her collarbone hummed in precise sympathy, as if finally they had been playing the wrong key this whole time and the world had produced the tuning fork.

"Do you hear that?" she asked, though she could see by Tarek's face that he did, see by Mahir's tightened mouth that he had decided not to.

Rahetep closed his eyes. The light wrote an eloquent script along the planes of his facecloth; the lines seemed, for a breath, to shift. Cassandra knew the runes on his wrappings intimately by now - a professional affection, practical and a little defensive - but in that instant the familiar sequence of protection and naming dissolved and reassembled around his throat into a new interval. She recognized it with the kind of knowing that enters through the sternum: the same staggered rhythm as the wind.

Nebu's ears flattened, then gradually rose again. He had not made a joke in several minutes. "I know that song," he said, and his voice, usually metal-bright, had gone dull as bone. "I knew it when my whiskers were shorter."

Cassandra stared at him. "Nebu - "

“Not now,” he said without malice. “It is better to remember in pieces.”

Mahir steered them around the dais with exaggerated care, as if the stone were the idea of a stone and therefore treacherous. The boat slid into a narrower channel where the reeds gave way to a line of low mudbrick walls that grew straight out of the water. They were roofless, and within them lily pads crowded in like audience members who refused to leave even after the play. On one wall someone had carved a figure in relief - arms lifted, mouth open. The face had long ago been scraped blank. The hands remained expressive, caught between supplication and instruction.

“The priest-town,” Tarek said softly. “Abandoned when the river changed its mind about the path, then drowned when the path changed its mind about the river.”

“They never left,” Rahetep said, with the easy authority of a man performing a newsreel voiceover of his own empire. “They simply stopped walking and became echoes.”

The wind - if wind it was - threaded the broken walls and made a low trilling. In the intervals, Cassandra could hear other sounds: a faint irregular tapping like beads counting themselves; a wet, careful shifting like pages turning under water. Once, a syllable that could have been her name and could have been the reed’s opinion of it.

She laughed, involuntary and thin-edged. “If this is meant to be reassuring,” she said, “it is exquisitely failing.”

“I find it restful,” Rahetep said, and she heard the lie in his politeness. “It is simply the past daring us to out-listen it.”

Nebu flicked his tail in what could have been agreement. He had faced forward since they entered the channel, a sentinel. The scar at the notch of his right ear - till now a small, rakish thing - caught the light and showed white, old and sharp. He licked one shoulder with absent precision.

They slipped beneath a collapsed arch. The shade there was sudden as intent; Cassandra’s eyes tightened to accommodate it. On the far side the channel widened again, and for a long stretch the water ran black and unbroken, a corridor for boats and thoughts. A fish turned near the surface and showed a lonely flash like a dropped coin. The smell shifted toward iron.

“Stay to the right bank,” Tarek murmured to Mahir. “Left floods without warning.”

Mahir nodded, tapped the rudder twice, then once as if finishing an incantation. He had taken off his sandals. His toes read the boat.

Cassandra felt a pressure without location. It was not on the boat; it was not in the air. It was a weight like a hand on her back, steady, not unkind, turning her head toward the east bank where the reeds gave way to a strip of open mud patched with mounded shapes. At first she thought they were boulders. Then one of the shapes shifted, and a human skull looked up, delicate as an egg, its upper edge lapped by water. No - looked up was the wrong verb. There was no looking left in it. It had no eyes, of course, but more than that: it had no intent. It had happened to be looking when the river arrived.

The song - I must stop calling it a song, she thought - the wind's thinking - grew a fraction louder. The skull settled. Another in the cluster listed to one side, absent as a late thought. Rahetep made a sound like a man stepping on a tile he thought was stable.

"We should move along," Nebu said briskly, and Cassandra could have kissed him for the return to tone. "I do not wish to be encouraged by scenery."

"No," Tarek said. His hand had gone to the amulet at his neck - a simple disc of lapis with a shallow scratch that made it his and no one else's. "Wait."

Cassandra followed his line of sight. On a mud patch beyond the skulls, a small shrine of bricks rose - a poor thing compared to anything in Rahetep's memory, but clearly tended. A coil of palm frond lay before it, fresh. Beside that, a clay bowl. And in the bowl, a line of biscuits.

"Ginger," she said, surprised into delight. "The ferryman's union is alive and well."

"It means there are people," Tarek said, and the two words threaded relief through the unnerving. He cupped a hand around his mouth and called a greeting, then another. No one answered. The reeds shivered anyway, as if amused at being addressed like walls.

The pressure on Cassandra's back moved to her sternum, not pain, merely a hand impatient to be helpful. She closed her eyes. The hum at her collarbone harmonized with the not-song. For a moment, an after-image flared behind her eyelids: five lines of script, stair-stepped, braided with circles. Not words. Instructions. Her mouth shaped what her mind did not. When she opened her eyes she found her own hand lifted, a small chalk mark on her fingertip where there had been none.

"Cassandra?" Tarek asked.

"I don't know yet," she said truthfully.

She knelt and drew a rune on the inside of the gunwale, three strokes quick and automatic: a simple amplifier, the sort used to coax a reluctant message through a noisy conduit. She was not casting at the channel. She was touching her own ear. The sound changed at once - not louder, but nearer, as if someone had leaned in to tell her a secret that had been told to everyone for three thousand years.

It wasn't music. Of course it wasn't. It was the shape of breath made obedient to pattern. In-and-four, out-and-five, a long-held note where the flood should crest, and a sudden stop where once the gods had been expected to answer. The missing answer made a negative space as alive as a cat in a room that no one mentioned.

Rahetep was looking at her. His eyes were not eyes, and yet they did something that hurt her more than eyes would have. His voice, when he spoke, had nothing of court in it. "Do not sing back," he said.

"I wasn't going to," she began, and then realized she had been. The rune on the rail had tugged at her mouth.

“Promise,” Nebu said, and there was no humor left anywhere in his shape.

“I promise,” she said. The tug eased as if she had turned away from a mirror. The pressure on her sternum lightened but did not leave. “I hate this,” she added, because honesty, when fear rose, was as useful as any spell.

“Good,” Tarek said. “That is respect learning its manners.”

They moved on. The channel meandered, found a second shrine, forgot it. Clouds - thin as brushstrokes - crossed the sun and made a brief, kind shade. The air drank it and pretended it had always been cool. The boat’s shadow passed over the back of a crocodile that had chosen stillness so absolute it appeared carved; the beast’s eyes flicked once and did not again. The ribs of a collapsed roof rose out of the water like a half-remembered cage.

They came upon a place where the reeds bent away to show a field of low stelae, each carved with shallow glyphs. At first Cassandra thought it was a cemetery. Then she saw that the glyphs repeated, and not as names. They were instructions for the direction of prayer. Compass-stones. The field was oriented toward a point that did not live on the horizon.

“North?” she guessed.

“Not north,” Rahetep said. His voice was soft enough to bruise. “Inward.”

Mahir shifted without meaning to, as if the deck had lifted and then settled. He spat into the water, a sailor’s oath. The water took it and made no comment.

The not-song changed again. Cassandra felt it as a new current sliding under the boat, a nerve under skin. Her gut folded and unfolded like laundry done with haste. Nebu stood, took two steps, paused with one paw suspended, then sat again with deliberate ceremony. “There,” he said. “Do you see?”

“What?” Tarek said, before Cassandra could ask, and then he did see. They all did. Ahead, the channel’s walls thinned, and beyond them the floodplain broke into open water gnawed by sandbars. In the distance, where the light went too bright even for Egypt, the land rose into a low ridge. It had no feature worth naming - no temple, no door, nothing to hang a sentence on - and yet the ridge drew the eyes like a hand draws a bow across string. Each breath Cassandra took matched, unbidden, the spacing of the marks on Rahetep’s throat.

“Obsidian,” she said, though the distance kept color to its own counsel. She knew it the way one knows the taste of iron before blood touches the tongue.

Rahetep’s wrapped fingers tightened on the rail. “It is farther than it looks,” he said.

“And nearer,” Nebu added, almost gently, as if this was help. “We always underestimate the distance to ourselves.”

The channel made one last thoughtful curve and guided them into open water where the felucca had to find its own ethic. Wind returned like gossipers relieved of secrecy; the sail filled with a sound that made Cassandra’s bones remember sails they had never known. The

ward-hum along her collarbone resolved to a single, sustained note. The not-song did not grow louder now. It simply became the air.

She looked at her companions and saw versions of the same expression wearing different masks. Tarek had tucked his mouth in, scholar-fashion, to stop anything unfortunate from falling out of it. Mahir watched the water the way a man watches a child who has learned to walk: with love, with an understanding of how easily legs betray. Rahetep looked young and terribly old at once, like a student in his first library who has realized all the books are about him. And Nebu - Nebu did not speak, which was appetite enough for the gods.

“Shall I make tea?” Cassandra asked, because ritual was a rope one could hold. She found the little kettle, the brazier, the packet of leaves charmed to boil at a scold and at no other temperature. Heat curled into the shade at the base of the mast; the first breath of steam lifted a smell of sharp comfort.

“Tea,” Rahetep said, with naked gratitude. “The treaty between mystery and patience.”

Cassandra poured and passed cups. The boat heaved, settled; the ridge did not come closer and yet it did. The song stayed a song only because none of them admitted what else it was.

“Drink,” Nebu said, and took his share not in a cup but out of the air where the steam dispersed. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the amber there looked older. “We will not be able to keep pretending much longer.”

“Pretending what?” Cassandra said, and regretted it, because she already knew.

“That we are travelers,” he said. “We are very soon to be invitations.”

The tea kept her hands from shaking. The ward at her collarbone thrummed like something breathing in time with her. The river pulled them nearer to the low, impossible ridge. The sky above it paled to a color that did not have a name in any tongue she had learned. Somewhere behind them, Cairo went on being itself without their permission.

The felucca slid onward, and the floodplain sang, and none of them tried to sing back.

They saw the ferry only after it decided to be seen.

The channel tightened between banks the color of old parchment, and the reeds leaned in as if conferring. Ahead, the water went slick as poured oil, darkening to a depth that did not match the map in Mahir’s head or the river beneath their keel. In the middle of that dark patch, a boat waited: low, narrow, made of wood too black to have ever been a tree. It had no oars. A pole rested across its gunwales like a thought interrupted.

“Not on my charts,” Mahir said, which was the river-man’s version of swearing. He eased the felucca’s sail so the boat lost speed and came to a careful, drifting halt. Wind slid off their canvas as if repelled by a courtesy it couldn’t match.

A man stood at the prow of the black boat. He was as thin as the pole, his skin the pale of well-worn bone, his hair like a brush of reeds in winter. He wore a cloak that could have been

woven of mist or spider silk or both. Where his eyes should have been were soft hollows full of reflected water, and in those hollows stars glinted - impossible, as noon wrote itself across the sky. He tipped an invisible hat to them; the gesture was immaculate.

“Good morning,” he said. His voice sounded as though a river had practiced being a throat. “The fare for passage is five riddles and a biscuit.”

Cassandra made a small, incredulous sound that escaped before she could train it. “Five riddles and a… that’s very specific.”

“Custom,” he said, as if that explained everything. “On this stretch, knowledge feeds the channel and crumbs pacify the lesser aristocracy.” He jerked his chin toward the reeds. The reeds pretended they had no idea what he meant.

Nebu lifted a paw and inspected the fur between his toes as if checking whether it contained loose change. “And if we paid in sarcasm?”

“That,” said the ferryman, “is overfishing.”

Rahetep inclined his head with the effortless diplomacy of someone who used to make weather into policy. “Sir, we are honored to meet you. Might we know your name, that we may inscribe it into the record of our gratitude?”

The ferryman considered this with admirable seriousness. “Names,” he said at last, “are for arrivals and departures. I am the hyphen.”

“Charmed,” Nebu muttered. “I do love punctuation.”

Tarek leaned on the gunwale, studying the black boat with skepticism that had managed to keep him alive so far. “What happens if we refuse?”

“You drift,” said the hyphen, amiably. “For a long time. You will learn to love sameness, and then you will learn it did not love you back.” His starry not-eyes flicked to Cassandra. “Five riddles and a biscuit. No substitutions.”

“Fortunately,” Cassandra said, forcing her professional voice to clamber over her awe and find balance, “I travel prepared for both the theoretical and the practical.” She rummaged in her satchel and came up with a small tin stenciled with a blue cat in mid-sneer. She tapped it against her palm. “Ginger snaps?”

“A very fine vintage,” the hyphen said gravely. “I accept the promise of a biscuit after each correct answer. It’s what the bylaws suggest.”

“Who wrote the bylaws?” Nebu asked.

“People who wanted to arrive on time,” he said, and bared his teeth in something that might have been a smile and might have been the idea of one.

Mahir cleared his throat, a sound like stone remembering it used to be water. “We must cross.”

“We will cross,” the ferryman agreed, as one might agree that death will eventually take tea. He set his pole upright and rested both hands atop it. “First riddle.”

He did not declaim. He simply said, so conversationally that for a moment it did not register as challenge: “What runs but never arrives.”

“Your cousin’s bureaucratic apology,” Nebu said.

“Time,” Rahetep and Tarek said together, then looked at each other, and smiled in that embarrassed way strangers smile when they reveal the same nostalgia.

The ferryman tilted his head, as if listening for something behind their answer. “Sufficient,” he pronounced. He extended one bony palm toward Cassandra, who settled a ginger snap into it as solemnly as if placing a coin on the tongue of a god. He did not eat it. He slid it into a pouch at his side, and the pouch rustled with the polite satisfaction of a jar full of bees.

“Second,” he said, and the pole made a small, expectant sound against the boat. “I am the mother of stories and the enemy of sleep. I feed on names and starve on silence. What am I?”

“Gossip,” Cassandra said, before either of the men could overthink it. The hyphen’s hollows brightened faintly, as if a distant nebula had approved. She placed a second biscuit in the pouch. The reeds hissed in a way that might have been envy.

“Third,” said the ferryman. “I am made when you don’t look, lost when you do, and the wise wear me like a veil. What am I?”

Tarek smiled with that small corner of his mouth Cassandra had come to rely on. “Doubt.”

“Applicable,” the hyphen said, with what might have been respect. “Fourth: My house has no doors and no roof. Guests come to die and leave to live. The rent is grief and the landlord patient.”

“Grave,” Rahetep said, almost tenderly. “A good one. Old.”

“Older than both of us,” the ferryman said. The fourth biscuit went to its busy afterlife.

“Fifth,” he said, and there was a change Cassandra could not locate. Not in his voice, not in the air. Something to do with distance, the way a thing halfway across a room can be nearer than your own hand. “It breathes without lungs and sleeps with both eyes open. It grows by being emptied and dies when it is kept. What is it?”

The humming at Cassandra’s collarbone, which had become background to the world, rose like a struck wire. She could feel Rahetep go very still without turning to see him. Tarek’s shoulders had that sorrowful attentiveness of a scholar before a truth he would rather not be right about. Mahir spat - again, for luck - and held the rudder with both hands, not because it was needed but because he had acquired a sudden respect for the touch of wood.

Nebu’s fur lifted along his spine in a ridge of gold. “Careful,” he said, not to the ferryman, not even to Cassandra. To the space between her breath and the answer.

Cassandra tasted iron, and something like the first dryness of a page. The obvious crawled toward her like a very clever mistake. She could feel the shape of “knowledge” in her mouth, like a splinter begging to be called a jewel. She did not say it. She thought of Rahetep’s throat and the marks that had rearranged themselves when the wind remembered its tune. She thought of the Breath of Amun, not as rumor but as a rhythm that had been thinking itself inside her sternum since dawn.

“Air,” she said at last, softly. “Not air,” she added, and made herself look at the ferryman, so the temptation had a witness. “Breath. Which is to say: life. Which is to say: not ours when it isn’t.”

The hyphen’s impossible eyes deepened as if something far in them had taken one step closer. He nodded - a small movement that managed to be approval, warning, and condolence in one. “Accepted,” he said.

Cassandra held out the fifth biscuit. He did not reach for it. He inclined his head toward the reeds. “The lesser aristocracy feel overlooked.”

She laughed, shaky, grateful. She broke the biscuit into four pieces and flicked them into the water. They vanished with tidy plops, and the reeds rustled with the precise sort of satiation that comes from being paid exactly what one is owed.

“Now,” said the ferryman. He set the pole. He did not dip it into the water so much as into its reflection; the black boat slid forward without disturbing a single ripple, and in the slick surface between them and it, Cassandra saw stars. Not the sky above - she knew noon when she saw it - but a congregation of patient lights under the skin of the river, arranged in unfamiliar constellations that nevertheless suggested a grammar. One of them winked precisely in time with the hum along her collarbone. She steadied her knees. They felt wrongly shaped in the presence of such symmetry.

Mahir, to his credit, did not ask how a boat moved without water agreeing. He did not adjust the sail. He did not even breathe loudly. He simply allowed his vessel to be guided as if it had entered a sentence in another language and the grammar would carry it across.

“Custom also requires advice,” the hyphen said, conversational again. “So that travelers cannot later say they were not told.”

“We love advice,” Nebu said in a tone that suggested he loved dental surgery more.

“Speak for yourself,” Cassandra murmured.

The ferryman ignored them both with elegant patience. “You will pass a mouth that inhales. Do not feed it your names. It prefers those.”

Cassandra felt the word “name” slide across her skin like a coin against glass. She pressed her lips together to keep it inside them.

“You will see stars below,” he continued, “and you will want to pick one up and put it in your pocket. Do not. It will go out there and never go out of you.” He tipped his head at Rahetep.

“You know something of that.”

Rahetep bowed his wrapped head the fraction owed to a painfully accurate remark.

“And when the walls begin to breathe,” the ferryman said, “leave them to it. The temple breathes because something was never buried. If you try to bury it now, you will only teach it to climb.”

Tarek exhaled, a librarian’s sigh upon hearing a banned book discussed with love. “And if we try to steal it?” he asked, as a man might ask the wind for a map.

“You will succeed, briefly,” said the hyphen, “and then it will decide you are its box.” He looked again to Cassandra. “Boxes are quite sure they are in charge of what they hold.”

“Noted,” she said. Her mouth felt very dry; the ginger in the air did nothing for it. “Thank you.”

“They never say thank you,” he said, as if delighted with a novel entry in a field notebook. “They say later that they were tricked. But who am I,” he added, with exquisite courtesy, “to comment on narrative.”

They had almost drawn even with the black boat. The water between them and it looked like a pane of night laid across noon. When the felucca’s bow touched that surface, it made no sound; it simply slid onto a mirror and became two boats, one above, one below, both moving without friction toward the same invitation.

The ferryman set his pole against nothing Cassandra could quantify and eased his craft alongside. Up close, the black wood smelled faintly of resin and a colder scent that pulled thoughts toward caves. She saw that the hull had been inlaid with a pattern so fine her eyes had mistaken it for shadow: a spiral of little holes, five-ten-five, the same as on the flood-measure stone. Each hole had been filled with a circle of silver.

“Who are you ferrying, when you are not ferrying the living?” Rahetep asked, and there was no joke in him now.

“The parts of people that arrived without the people,” the hyphen said simply. “It keeps the channel honest.” He leaned forward then, too close, not-threatening, and Cassandra saw for the first time that his mouth had two smiles: the one on his face, and a second, smaller one just at the corner, like a seam. He smelled like the first breath after grief.

“Well,” he said, straightening. “You have paid your riddles and your biscuit tax. In return you will have a current that forgets to push you in circles.” He tapped the black water with the tip of the pole. The mirror trembled and became river again, as if someone had looked away in embarrassment. Wind found their sail. The felucca shivered with relief.

“Wait,” Cassandra said, because gratitude had struck too hard and too near her ribs to leave unspoken. “May we - We have no coins for the other custom.”

“The living always owe more than they can pay,” said the hyphen, with such kindness that she nearly cried. “Go, little box.” He inclined his head toward her satchel, toward her chest, toward the way she held her breath. “Keep your lid on.”

Nebu, who could not stand a line left beautiful and alone, added softly, “And do not sit too close to any mouths that promise to be gentle.”

The ferryman set his pole and let his boat fall back with the casual exactness of a star returning to its position. The black shape dwindled, then folded into glare, then was simply not there. Behind them, the water wore no memory of being a mirror. Ahead, the channel widened into a languid sheet where the sky came down to meet its twin.

“Five riddles,” Tarek murmured, half-amused, half-undone. “And a biscuit.”

“Five answers,” Rahetep said. He watched the place where the black boat had been until it was certain not to appear again. “And a warning for dessert.”

Mahir let out the breath he had been storing for another life. He set the sail, and the felucca shrugged into motion, nose pointing toward the pale low ridge where noon had put a ring of too-bright light, like breath frosting glass from the other side. The reeds on either bank rattled their applause, or their envy, or both.

Cassandra sat back on her heels and shook the tin. One biscuit rattled at the bottom, the last of the vintage. She considered saving it and, in the same thought, considered eating it immediately and leaving no relics for the future to argue with. Instead, she reached into the pouch at her waist and pressed a small copper token against the rim of the biscuit tin. The metal warmed, took a quiet imprint of a cat and a spiral of five-ten-five. Insurance. Or superstition. Or the necessary middle ground between them.

“Shall I add ‘don’t feed your name to anything with good posture’ to our list of rules?” she said, because someone had to lace humor back into the air before it went brittle.

“Put it below ‘do not admire architecture that admires you back,’” Nebu said. He had resumed his usual position at the prow. But his tail did not move, and his ears - it surprised her - were not pointed toward danger. They were pointed toward her, as if confirming that she had not misplaced herself.

The felucca slid forward, each ripple a small agreement. The sky directly ahead paled in a way that did not belong to weather, and somewhere under her collarbone the hum adjusted to it, like two throat singers finding a shared pitch. The ferry and its hyphen were gone. The riddles had gone with them, having eaten their crumbs and taken their notes.

Cassandra looked at her companions: Tarek, making a neat notation on the inside of his mind; Mahir, pretending all rivers did this; Rahetep, dignified and quietly altered; Nebu, absurd and solemn like a court jester in the presence of a prophecy. She put the tin away. The wind found them. The floodplain opened its mouth. And because they had been warned, they did not speak their names.

The floodplain leaned away from them as if remembering an appointment with the horizon, and the river loosened its grip, letting the felucca nose into a sheet of water where distances misbehaved. Ahead, the low ridge that had been a rumor all morning resolved - not higher, not darker, simply more itself. The light around it blanched to a threshold color. The nearer they came, the fewer birds there were. Even the insects reconsidered, thinning until the air felt undecorated.

“Here,” Mahir said softly, as if the river might spook. He swung the rudder and angled the boat toward a narrow inlet where reeds ended abruptly in open mud. The felucca slid, grounded with a sigh, and stilled. In the silence that followed, Cassandra heard her own breath as if it belonged to the landscape.

They disembarked without speaking. The mud took their weight, released it. Beyond the smear of shore, the ground lifted in rises of paler sand and then in darker, glassy humps that caught the sun and returned it as a bruise of light. The hum under Cassandra’s collarbone adjusted, as if tuning to a chamber with better acoustics.

They climbed. The ridge was not far. It simply collected every step into its idea of distance. The sand was firm underfoot; not dunes, exactly, but drifts that had learned how to hold. Fragments of stone pushed up among them - angles and edges that, once seen, invented patterns for the eye. A broken lintel here, a bevel that only temples bother with there, lines that refused to be random. On one shard a spiral of tiny holes had been pecked: five, ten, five. She touched it with two fingers and felt a faint coolness, as if the stone had remembered shade.

“Do not feed it names,” Nebu said from beside her ankle. He did not look up at the lintel. He did not need to. His voice had gone thinner with heat or concentration or both.

“I wasn’t offering,” she said, though the tightness in her throat had been preparing a word before she knew it.

“Good,” he said. “It likes appetizers.”

Tarek, a little ahead, knelt by a half-buried block the size of a desk. He brushed at the sand with his palm until a groove appeared and then a row of shallow signs. They were not hieroglyphs. They were not letters. They were something older than the argument between picture and sound.

Cassandra crouched beside him. The marks curled and hooked in ways that made the eyes ache - not because they were complicated, but because they insisted on being looked at with a part of the mind that did not read.

“I don’t know this script,” Tarek said, reverent, appalled. “Which is to say it is not a script.”

“It’s not meant for us,” Cassandra murmured. The strokes weren’t strokes. They were the ledges a particular breath would catch on, if breath could be made to stumble in a useful way. The hum along her collarbone recognized them the way a throat recognizes a yawn. She pulled her hand back as if from a hot pan, angry with herself for having let recognition get that far.

Rahetep stood at the windward edge of the block, linen whispering against his ankles. He did not bend as Tarek had; he did not look down. He looked through, or past, or into. “We borrowed this once,” he said, so quietly that the sand kept the sentence to themselves. “Not the stone - the idea that stone could be taught to remember air.”

Cassandra turned. “Borrowed,” she repeated, careful.

He did not flinch. “Stole,” he amended. “What is the difference, when one does not return a thing until it is broken.”

Nebu’s tail flicked twice. He had taken the lead without announcing it, moving ahead in short, precise darts, then stopping with his ears pricked as if reading scent from sunlight. “Left,” he said. “Not because it is safer. Because the right wants you to think it is a path.”

They angled left around a shallow dip in the ground where the sand shivered without wind. The texture there was wrong, fine as flour and active. It flowed, not toward a low point, but toward a particular shard of black stone that protruded like a tooth. In the flow, the grains formed ridges, then letters, then not letters - faint, transient shapes that repeated as if teaching themselves muscle memory. Cassandra could not help it - the curse-breaker in her leaned into the pattern, trying to anticipate, to catch it mid-gesture. On the third repetition she understood: the sand was practicing her name.

She stepped back so sharply her boot scuffed the brittle crust of shade and broke it. The sand erased itself without drama, as if embarrassed by enthusiasm.

“Do you see it?” she asked, useless question, because they were all seeing versions of the same wrong.

“I see sand learning to be polite,” Nebu said. “We should disappoint it.”

Tarek’s hand hovered near his amulet and did not touch it. “This place remembers people the way a mirror remembers faces,” he said. “One glance is enough to make a habit.”

“Then let us be unmemorable,” Rahetep said, with a courtier’s steady irony, and took the next slope as if rehearsing discretion.

At the crest, the ridge settled into architecture. It had been pretending to be geology for as long as it could bear. Now it declared itself: a facade of black stone fitted so perfectly that the seams were less gaps than pauses. The surface was not smooth. It was the opposite of smooth. It was so exact a plane that the sun could not decide how to rest on it; the light skittered, pooled, fled, returned as if testing the rules of reflection. Veins of a dull, warm gold wandered through the black at unhelpful angles. When Cassandra narrowed her eyes, the gold lines were not random either. They were the five-ten-five spiral exploded and laid flat over a wall.

She did not touch it. She wanted to with an ache that felt like thirst, but the hum along her collarbone had risen to a pitch she recognized from the second before a trap resets.

The air here was different. Cooler, despite the sun. Thinner, despite the open sky. Cassandra felt it in her boots first - an intermittent pressure that lifted her soles a fraction, then released. Not tremor. Respiration. The ground had a pulse. It was not in time with her own. When she tried to adjust to it, her lungs stumbled. She made herself breathe the way she had on the river: in as the deck rose; out as it settled. The rhythm offered by the wall ignored her, which helped.

“Obsidian,” Tarek said, confirming what she had already named. He placed his palm near the surface, withdrew it before contact. “Not quarried. Melted and told where to stand.”

Mahir had remained a few paces downslope, as if that were the bargain he could make with his soul. He spat without malice. “I will wait with the boat,” he said, which meant: I will be where you run when you remember running is an option.

Cassandra nodded. She did not want him near the wall either. “Listen for us,” she said, and he grunted, which was agreement and a prayer.

They walked the length of the facade, feet whispering in sand that had been taught to yield with dignity. At intervals, slabs had been set back the depth of a hand, faking the idea of a doorway without the weakness of one. At each recess, the gold veins gathered like the ribs of a fan and then splintered into ticks not meant for eyes. Tarek breathed soft commentary without translating. He was not translating because there were no words.

“What do they say?” Cassandra asked anyway, because questions were a way to spend fear.

“Not speech,” Tarek said. He angled his head, listened with his mouth. “Instruction. Ritual. As if you carved into the air the proper way to exhale when saying a god’s name and then decided names were too generous a technology.”

“Do you understand it?” Rahetep asked.

“No,” Tarek said. “But my bones admire the grammar.”

Nebu had gone very still at one of the recesses. His whiskers had turned forward, their tips aimed at a crack no wider than a fingernail. “Here,” he said. Not loudly. He did not need to be heard. He needed to mark. “This is the place where memory pinches.”

Cassandra leaned. The crack was not a flaw. It was a kindness: a line that allowed the wall to flex. On either side of it, the black reflected her not as a figure but as a bright smear without edges. When she moved, the smear delayed half a heartbeat before it followed. The delay was honest about what it cost to be seen.

She became aware of Nebu’s breathing. He did not often sound like an animal; he made a point of it. Now his breath came thinner, lighter, a pair of quick brushes against the air. “I brought him here,” he said.

No one had asked anything. The confession found its own surface.

Cassandra did not look away from the wall. “When?”

“When I still believed the Order were scholars,” Nebu said, in a tone that carved the sentence into two permissions and an apology. “When we came to measure what should not be measured and to fold it into a scroll and call the scroll wisdom.” A pause that acknowledged the cost of sharing memory without shame. “When he was not yet a king and I was not yet a pet.”

Tarek’s hand lowered from his amulet. He let the silence take the weight of it. Rahetep, who had made empires rally with less, said nothing for longer than any court could tolerate.

“I remember there was a door then,” Nebu added, almost conversational, which made it worse. “Or rather, I remember believing there was a door. It is possible I mistook an invitation for an opening.”

Cassandra felt his gaze on her, bright and exact, like a blade set on a table so that it could be discussed. She kept her own eyes on the gold veins. “And now?” she asked. “Do you believe there is a door?”

“I believe there is a breath,” he said. “Doors are a courtesy of architecture. Breaths do not need permission to pass.”

A slow pressure pressed against her boots again - up, down, measured, indifferent. She realized with a clarity like cold that the rhythm they had felt all day was not the temple’s. It was the absence inside it moving against stone.

Rahetep stepped forward. He did not attempt to touch the wall; even he was not that proud. He bowed, with the courtliness of a man greeting an adversary who taught him the rules. “I sealed you,” he said, not loudly, not to be dramatic, but so the stone could decide whether to remember. “And the sealing was a mercy my vanity required. I am here to ask for a more honest mercy.”

The wall did nothing. Which is to say, it continued to be a wall. The gold lines did not flare. The pulse did not match his words to humor him. The silence was not disdain. It was structure.

Tarek moved along the recess until his fingers hovered above a cluster of ticks arranged like a small constellation: five points, then ten, then five, then a gap that was not the absence of a mark but the mark of an absence. “Here,” he said, unable not to teach. “This is the breath held. This is the place where the mouth should close and does not.”

Cassandra’s throat ached with the desire to put her mouth where the absence had been carved. She held the ache as one holds a coin too tight: until the heat warned, but did not blister. The ferryman’s counsel walked beside her heartbeat - leave breathing to what breathes. She kept her hands by her side.

Nebu had flattened himself against the sand, not in fear but like a cat becoming geometry to better consider it. “It is listening,” he said, and of all the frightening things today had offered, that simple sentence was the first to make Cassandra feel small and, in the feeling, safe. If it was listening, then they did not have to fill the air with their wanting.

The wind came in across the floodplain - slow, without appetite. It passed over the black stone and did not find purchase. It found the sand and lifted only what had agreed to go. The drift of it hissed, not a word, not a warning. A signal that could be taken for either.

Mahir's silhouette was a dark comma against the water below. It was good to have a comma in a sentence like this.

Cassandra closed her eyes and counted the five, then the ten, then the five in her head. She did not give the numbers names. She let them be lengths of breath - in, out, pause - until her heartbeat slowed enough to stop confusing urgency with purpose. When she opened her eyes again, the wall had not changed. Of course it had not. The change was a correction inside her: the understanding that they were not here to break anything. They were here to qualify for an audience.

"Shall we mark the threshold," Tarek said, practical as ever in ritual, "without crossing it? We came to the right place and that counts for something."

Cassandra took out her chalk with steady hands. She glanced at Rahetep, at Nebu; neither moved to stop her. On the sand before the recess she drew three simple sigils - no Gringotts nonsense that demanded obedience, no brittle scaffolds of control. The first was a ward against invitations that imitated necessity. The second was a keeper's sign: *We will guard what we learn.* The third was nothing more than a circle with five tiny points on one arc, ten on the next, five on the last, and a clear, deliberate gap at the top that even a god could see and respect.

She set the chalk down. It rolled twice, found a small groove, and rested.

Rahetep breathed - a sound mostly habit, some part conviction. "We ask to enter," he said to the wall, to the pulse, to the listening absence. "Not as thieves. Not as priests. As those who have been warned and came anyway."

The gold veins did not brighten. The sand did not draft itself into welcome. But the hum along Cassandra's collarbone dropped half a tone, as if the tuning had favored them by a fraction. It felt like being allowed to wait inside, rather than outside, a silence.

"Back," Nebu said quietly, not as command but as care. "The door is waking."

"There is no - " Tarek began, and then he felt it too, the subtle reshaping of air that precedes a thing remembering how to open. It was not a movement she could have pointed to. It was the moment between intention and action, made stone. The recess deepened because their bodies decided it had.

They stepped away together. The sand behind their heels made a small, grateful sigh. A pulse climbed one rung closer to their own.

"Every seeker meets their reflection at the end of the journey," Rahetep said, and the old warning now sounded like a mercy he was offering in advance. "Be certain you will like what you see."

Cassandra did not answer. She watched the wall not move. She felt the ground breathe. She thought of the ferryman’s second smile, of the way stars had waited under the water at noon, of ginger snapped cleanly into halves. She thought of the five, the ten, the five. She placed her palm - not against the stone, but against her own chest where the ward hummed - counted to the gap, and kept the gap.

“Ready,” she said, and meant: ready not to take. Ready to be admitted or refused without lying about which she preferred.

Nebu sighed, which for him was agreement. Tarek’s mouth found its careful line. Rahetep lifted his chin the height of a last courtesy.

The temple did not open. It inhaled. The sand at their feet drew in a fraction, as if listening required room. The gold veins along the black stone held their color, then - no more than a deepening of shadow - gathered themselves, preparing the curve of a door that would, for a breath, be exactly their size.

The door was not a seam; it was a breath deciding to become an opening.

At first it was only a thickening in the air before the recessed slab, a pressure that made the skin on Cassandra’s forearms lift as if a storm had sat down and asked her name. The gold veins along the obsidian pulled taut; not brighter, not moving - merely arriving at the shape that would allow movement. The sand just in front of the recess - where she had drawn her three modest sigils - trembled, then settled as if it, too, had remembered something about posture.

“Gently,” Tarek murmured, not to her, not to anyone, to the habit in his own body that wanted to lean forward.

Cassandra understood. She had spent her adult life with her shoulder to doors that lied about being closed: vaults, tombs, bureaucracies. She had prided herself on leverage. This door did not want leverage. It wanted etiquette.

She put away her chalk with deliberate care. She unbuckled the leather guard from her wand, the old ash handle smoothed to her grip by hundreds of hours of work. The hum under her collarbone steadied; it met her palm through the wood. The wand felt too young for this.

Rahetep stepped to her left. His wrapped hands were a study in restraint. He inclined his head to the recess as if greeting a host who was also a judge and a memory. “We will enter as we did when the city itself was an oath,” he said, half to them, half to the stone. “Wards of the living, rites of the dead. Neither presuming to be the other.”

“I will preside,” Nebu said, settling on the chalked threshold with a proprietary elegance. “As an expert in both.”

Mahir remained downslope near the boat’s line of sight, the shape of a man who kept a promise to wait. Cassandra took comfort in the angle of his shoulders, which knew how to turn a boat and would therefore remember how to turn people.

Tarek drew a small knife - jade-handled, not for blood - and with the tip scored a shallow line in the sand parallel to Cassandra's sigils. He whispered to it. The cut filled with a darker shadow than it should have in this glare. He put the knife away, stood with hands open, and nodded.

Cassandra breathed once - counted five, ten, five - and raised her wand. She did not attempt to command. She offered. A simple Gringotts lattice of safety, the kind curse-breakers used when approaching a working ward: a weave that created an antechamber in the air, a pause where permission could be negotiated. The lattice unfolded invisibly from her wand-tip, but she felt it deploy: cool filaments arranging themselves like a spiderweb that had read a treatise on humility. It would not stop force; it would encourage courtesy.

Beside her, Rahetep began to speak. The sound was lower than speech, freer than chant. A rhythm without words, patterned breath dressed in tone. It was not the priests' call-and-answer; it was the shape the priests had borrowed and then laboriously explained to themselves. The pulses underfoot met his voice with the interest of an old friend who had not forgiven him and might, if he kept speaking, try.

The gold in the obsidian shifted a fraction - no brighter, still not moving - but the eye found more of it as if the wall had tilted to be generous. Cassandra's lattice settled in place, a polite vestibule of air. Her collarbone hummed down a note; her ribs unclenched. The door-length shadow within the recess grew denser, which was ridiculous - shadows did not gather - but here they did.

Nebu cleared his throat. "The following notes," he said in his best magistrate voice, "are advisory. First: do not say 'open' as if you have invented the concept. Second: do not call anything within by its grandmother name, even if you know it. Third: if you are offered perfection, ask for a chair."

"Fourth," Tarek said, mouth barely moving, "remember we walk on other people's oaths."

"Fifth," Rahetep said, and there was grief in it, unwillingly kind, "require that we leave as the same number that arrived. Require it with your whole, stubborn soul."

Cassandra half-closed her eyes to reduce the tyranny of light and let her other senses drink the space. The recess exhaled, just once. Warmth feathered across her face, carrying a smell that made her mind stumble: honey-wine left too long in sun, stone dust wet with prayer, jasmine that had forgotten to be floral and now was only a concept of sweetness. Under it, the faintest trace of stagnant water, which somehow comforted her. Even ancient power had the decency to mildew.

The exhale ran fingers across the lattice she'd set. It did not push. It tasted. It interrogated the pattern and found a gap, the gap she had deliberately left at the top of her circle sigil: a place for refusal to enter without being asked. The exhale paused there as if surprised at the courtesy. Cassandra heard the smallest sound - like a glass coin set carefully on a table.

Rahetep's voice altered. He dropped a tone and let the end of each phrase fall into silence like a punctuation mark whose rules everyone had agreed upon in advance. The pulses under their feet matched step, then deliberately broke time, then matched again, a compromise disguised

as rhythm. The wall did not brighten; it became vaguely luminous not with light but with attention.

“Now,” Nebu breathed, and for once did not explain what he meant.

Cassandra stepped forward to the very edge of the chalked threshold and raised her left hand, fingers loose, palm tilted to the stone. The lattice shivered, ready to give and ready to hold. “We ask to enter,” she said, and for the first time that day her voice was not clever. “We ask with what we can offer: our care, our silence when silence is due, our willingness to leave when asked.”

The recess inhaled again - not air, exactly. The sense of space drew back as if making room for something to approach from behind. The gold veining sharpened into lines her eye had pretended not to see; they connected into a geometry with a deliberate omission at its heart. The shape was a door the way a melody is a door - walk through it, and your body changes the pitch.

The surface of the wall within the recess altered with such restraint that Cassandra doubted herself even as she saw it: a slight concavity where flatness had been. It was the difference between a palm poised to press and a palm poised to receive. She did not reach out. She let her own hand hang there, skin remembering heat, memory remembering an older, darker room where she had done something clever and regretted it.

In that careful inch between her palm and the obsidian, the temperature shifted. Warm first - human warm, throat warm - and then cooling, like breath moving past a cup of tea into a courtyard. The hum under her collarbone synchronized - no longer fighting, no longer trying not to match. For a heartbeat the vibrating ward and the thing in the recess sang the same note. The note had weight; it settled into her bones like a tool placed in a worker’s hand with the instruction: “Be worthy.”

Her hand tingled, then prickled. The sensation was not on her skin. It was under it, along tendons and the thin muscles that had learned to flick and flick again while chalk finished making a spell. Her wand jumped in her right hand - a hiccup - and then steadied. She felt a line form, not visible, a seam of permission that ran from the base of her left thumb to her wrist. Her palm remembered how to become a key.

“Cassandra,” Tarek said, warning and trust and love, all wrapped in a scholar’s refusal to interfere. “Easy.”

She nodded. She could not have nodded and yet she did. She lowered her hand until her skin’s warmth met the wall’s cool in that precise space where two honest temperatures agreed a third existed. There was no thunderclap. There was no crack. There was simply a meeting: her pulse against the stone’s slow respiration, her lattice kissing the temple’s memory of vestibules. The gold lines near her palm deepened the smallest fraction, as if a filigree under soot had taken heart from being touched.

Rahetep’s voice, still making its sensible phrases, thinned and then thickened again, like a rope showing where it had frayed and been mended. “Every seeker meets their reflection at the end of the journey,” he said. “Be certain you’ll like what you see.”

The recess answered with a whisper. Not in words. In increased space. The concavity relaxed into an invitation exactly Cassandra-sized. It would be exactly Tarek-sized and Rahetep-sized and even Nebu-sized when it needed to be, she understood; that was what it meant to be older than architecture. Her chalk marks held. The small circle with its five-ten-five points and its deliberate gap sat untroubled at the threshold, a child's coin at the mouth of a well that had decided, for the moment, not to swallow.

“Before we go,” Nebu said, not looking at her, “we should leave something of ourselves here that does not speak.”

“Hair?” Tarek asked, surprised into a smile despite the strange gravity.

“Too speaking,” Nebu said. He looked into Cassandra’s satchel as if it were his purse and he were allowed. “The tea tin.”

She blinked at him. “You want me to - what? Tip the gods?”

“The gods,” he said, “do not need your money. But they respect rituals that cost a little dignity.” He flicked his tail toward the chalked circle. “A single biscuit, the last, for the lesser aristocracy of thresholds. And the tin stays. A small, stubborn mortal thing that smells of afternoons and argument. Let the temple learn what it feels like to be small and generous.”

Cassandra found the biscuit tin and, sure enough, the final ginger snap. She felt foolish and correct at once. She set the biscuit in the circle’s center and laid the tin upside down beside it, so that the stenciled blue cat on its lid met the sky.

She half expected the biscuit to sink, the sand to perform satisfaction. Nothing happened. The gift sat. The temple watched. That felt right. This was not a place that devoured courtesy.

“Ready,” Tarek said, and then, because he was a better man than he pretended, he touched his shoulder to Cassandra’s for the briefest beat. The contact was an anchor thrown and retrieved in the same motion.

Rahetep took one step forward and paused. The pause held a lifetime; inside it, a radiant embarrassment for everything vanity had made of the word king. He lifted his chin. “Let it not be said,” he murmured, “that we lacked manners.”

They crossed together.

It was like walking through a breath that had belonged to someone else for so long it had learned to be a room. The cool slid across Cassandra’s cheeks and scalp and along the small bones of her ears; her lungs questioned and then agreed. The lattice she had set touched the interior space and dissolved with relief, as if it had been waiting all its brief life to become irrelevant. In the first pace inside, sound changed - no echo, not yet, but a careful attention to footsteps, as if the floor wanted to know their cadence before deciding how to answer.

Light did not fail. It thinned to a honeyed dusk that carried its own clarity. The corridor (call it that, though it had been caverns before corridors were invented) ran forward and then of course it didn’t, because nothing here was content with simple vectors. The walls were the

same black as the facade, veined with the same quiet gold, but the veins were thicker here and the pattern more overt: five, ten, five, again and again, pushed and pulled to induce breath to behave. Cassandra felt her own chest unconsciously adapt to the beat. She overruled it gently, the way one refuses to sway with a charm.

Behind them, the threshold closed with no more sound than silk knowing what to do. Not sealing them in - no clank, no prison - but completing the intake of breath. The hum under Cassandra's collarbone went down again, settling into a patience she did not know she had cultivated. The air smelled deeper here: resin and book-spine, cedar that had outlived its trees, ash that had turned its memory to sweetness. Somewhere in that scent was the cool of water stone had once kissed and then forgotten.

They walked with care that did not feel like fear. Their footfalls found the same points; their shadows marched and did not wander. At intervals small alcoves opened on either side, niches that held bowls, empty, and shallow basins crusted with the ghost of something that might once have been milk or moonlight. Tarek's fingers hovered over one and then - good man - did not touch.

The corridor widened by a hand's width and the floor dipped the thickness of a breath. In that depression, grains of sand had arranged themselves into an accidental spiral. The sight made Cassandra's ribs go tight. Not because it was a trap. Because it was a welcome applied by a mind that had never been taught the word.

"Cassandra," Nebu said.

"I know," she said.

At the second turning, the air altered in the way a room alters when a door opens elsewhere in a house. A draft that did not move a hair lifted the temperature half a degree and lengthened the gold veins. Cassandra's skin went electric with recognition. The hum below her collarbone answered, uninvited, in a voice that had no business being hers.

Rahetep stopped. His wrapped hand came up and hovered near her shoulder - a gesture of protection he had not allowed himself before. Not because she needed it, she suspected, but because he did.

"This is the part," he said, soft and even and tired, "where people tell stories about what they deserve."

"Then let us not," Tarek said, with a steadiness she wanted to put in a bottle and open later when she forgot to be wise.

A last stagger in the floor, a humility in the walls, and the corridor opened.

The chamber was not large; largeness would have been indulgence. It was a heart, unfinished, waiting. The black stone softened into curves; the veins of gold converged toward the center in arcs that made the air itself look like a diagram. There, just above a shallow dais - no more than a foot high, the height of a kneeling - swam a faint aureole as if the idea of light had curled up for warmth. Not bright, not even luminous, simply… present. The hair on

Cassandra’s arms lifted for the thousandth time that day. The hum under her collarbone held a note she could not match, as if someone had struck a tuning fork inside her bones and then hand over hand stopped it from ringing out of kindness.

“Do you feel it,” Rahetep said. He did not make it a question. His voice was wonder stripped by grief until it behaved.

Nebu did not speak. His head was up, ears pricked to the something that was not sound. His tail had become a metronome held still halfway through a tick.

Cassandra’s wand warmed against her palm. Her left hand - the one that had touched the door without touching - tingled from thumb to wrist in the exact line where the permission had set. She lifted that hand without thinking, then stopped it with thinking at the height of her heart. She had the sudden, embarrassing urge to apologize. To the room, to the thing in the room, to the part of herself that had complained all the way here that knowledge was a cathedral and secrets were its stained glass, and now was being asked to kneel outside and admire the masonry.

“We came,” she said, to whatever was listening. “And we will leave if told.”

In the breath that followed, the faint aureole above the dais shimmered, not larger, not closer - more articulate. The gold in the walls gave back its color as if breathing had deepened. Far behind them, the threshold remembered their tea tin and did nothing to it, which was an act of perfect politeness.

A tremor moved through the floor. Not seismic; moral. The sensation of a scale acknowledging added weight. The chamber adjusted its offer: a presence leaning forward to sniff a palm. Cassandra thought of the ferryman’s second smile, of stars under noon water, of a cat on a tin lid. She thought, with desperate, liberating clarity, that she could love a thing without wanting to own it.

She lowered her hand and let her wand tip tilt downward half a degree. It felt like bowing.

“Thank you,” Rahetep said to the room he had once tried to master. It took the shape of prayer without the arrogance of address.

The faint aureole pulsed once. The pulse was not a yes. It was not a no. It was the sort of acknowledgment one gives a child who has finally asked the right question: Now we can begin to talk about what you cannot have.

Behind them, from somewhere far outside, the slightest clink reached them: the sound of a biscuit settling under the inverted tin lid. It should not have carried. It carried perfectly.

Cassandra smiled without showing teeth. The smile felt like a wedge set between fear and awe, keeping the door between them honest. “Well,” she breathed, very quietly, into the humming dark. “Hello.”

The chamber breathed back. The gold lines along the walls drew themselves one measure closer together, tracing a curve that was not yet a circle. The air cooled by a patient degree.

Somewhere in the stone, very far and very near, something finished its inhale.

The temple woke.

Chapter 12: The Order’s Gambit

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The Order’s Gambit

The temple’s mouth exhaled river-cold breath as they stepped inside, a draft that smelled of wet stone, myrrh, and something older than language. Basalt walls rose around them in planes so black they drank torchlight; threads of gilded sigils ran through the rock like veins, pulsing faintly as if the place kept its own heartbeat. Cassandra lifted her wand and the hairline crack along its shaft glimmered - an ember caught in wood - humming in a pitch she felt behind the eyes more than heard.

“Do you feel that?” Tarek whispered, voice swallowed by the corridor. “As if the air thinks.”

“It remembers,” Rahetep said softly. The wrappings at his throat rustled when he spoke; papyrus-scent and a courtier’s restraint. “Temples keep better ledgers than bankers.”

Nebu padded ahead, tail held like a pennant, golden fur haloed by the torch’s wavering glow. “If this mausoleum starts charging admission, I expect a family discount,” he announced, claws ticking on stone in neat, precise clicks. He sniffed at a seam where the wall met floor, whiskers quivering. “And if it begins *speaking*, I reserve the right to be ruder than usual.”

Cassandra smiled despite herself. Nerves wanted to chatter in her hands; she let the motion become work, tracing the edge of the nearest sigil with the tip of her wand. The glyph - three slanted strokes wrapped by a spiral - thrummed like a plucked string. “Not wards,” she murmured. “Respiratory runes. Inhalation - exhalation. A circuit.”

“An organism,” Tarek said, and she heard the scholar’s awe in him. “Rahetep, was this your doing?”

The mummy’s eyes - lamps behind gauze - searched the dark that narrowed ahead into a vanishing point. “No. Mine was a temple of sunlight. This… this was carved for the hour after dawn, when the world decides to keep living.” He paused, and the humor in him, that ridiculous dignity that had so charmed her at first, shrank like a candle in wind. “I asked to forget this place. My priests refused to let me.”

They followed the corridor’s slow curve, boots and paws sounding too loud. Water dripped somewhere with metronome regularity; every fourth drop echoed twice, as if a second space were rehearsing their steps. Cassandra kept their pace measured, counting breaths. The crack in her wand gave off a faint, intermittent buzz - like a mosquito trapped in amber. Every time it thrummed, the sigils in the walls flared, then dimmed, in sympathetic rhythm.

“Do not let it call you,” Rahetep said, not looking at her. “If it offers you a mirror, look at the frame.”

“When I need aphorisms,” Nebu drawled, “I lick my paw and write my own.”

The corridor opened without warning into a chamber that felt like the inside of a rib cage. Arches swept overhead in nested ribs of black stone, gold filaments webbing between them like nerves. At the center of the floor lay a sunken disk - a shallow bowl the size of a ballroom - etched in rings of glyphs like ripples from a single vanished stone. Someone had once set braziers evenly around the perimeter; the stands remained, shaped like lion-paws, empty and cold.

Cassandra knelt at the rim. Dust lay in soft drifts broken by tracks. Torch soot touched some of the gold. “We’re not alone,” she said, voice low.

Tarek crouched beside her. “Boot treads. European cut. And - see - scuffs from a box dragged, not lifted.”

Rahetep, standing with his hands clasped, looked for a moment like a statue installed in his proper place. “A ritual needs its instruments.”

“And an accountant to balance it,” Nebu said. He peered into the shallow bowl, pupils widening to molten coins. “If you jump in and swim, I’m not rescuing you.”

“Don’t,” Cassandra said reflexively, then flushed at herself. She reached out and splayed her fingers on the gold-inlaid ring. The metal was cool, but beneath it a low vibration traveled into her palm and up her arm, a purr too steady to be animal. The glyphs along the nearest arch lit with the softest increase in brightness, then subsided - as if the room had sniffed her and decided she was not yet food.

She stood, dusting grit from her knees. “Someone’s activated outer circuits recently. Not fully awakened, but…” She groped for a metaphor and found a horrible one. “Like a patient prepped for surgery.”

Tarek’s mouth thinned. “And we’ve come in with the wrong doctors.”

“Wrong *bank*, more to the point,” Nebu said airily. “One hopes your employers itemize hubris under ‘miscellaneous expenses.’”

“Gringotts doesn’t spend on hubris,” Cassandra said, and wished the joke felt like armour. “It simply invests.”

The chamber had three exits besides the corridor they’d used - narrow throats leading deeper. Soft draughts moved through each, carrying different scents: crushed resin; the bite of singed metal; a sweetness like figs left too long in sun. Cassandra closed her eyes and let the air map itself. The fig-sweet wind carried faint ash - recent fire. “Left,” she said. “They’ve been burning something. Charms, or incense to bind them.”

Rahetep inclined his head, courtly even now. “After you, Curse-Breaker.”

They went left.

The passage narrowed, the walls coming close enough that the gold veins grazed Cassandra's shoulders if she forgot to hold them tight. The sigils here bore different shapes - eyes half-lidded, a hand turned palm-up, a single feather with its barbs ruffled. Writing in the margins of world-laws. Tarek murmured translations under his breath without meaning to. "Listen, weigh, breathe, forgive." He touched one sigil - the feather - and it flickered. "These are… procedural. The mechanics of mercy."

"Or the bureaucracy of it," Cassandra said. "Forms for gods to fill."

Nebu sneezed delicately. "I have never trusted divine paperwork. It always ends with someone being 'archived.'"

The passage kinked and dipped, and they descended a run of shallow steps. The drip they'd been hearing since the entrance grew louder here, then split into two pitches, neither quite water. Cassandra's light fell on a low lintel carved not with glyphs but with a relief: a lioness-headed woman inhaling, exhaling; from her mouth in either direction streamed hieroglyphs that became birds midflight, then dust, then birds again.

"Sekhmet," Rahetep said, voice gone reverent despite himself. "Not as devourer but as physician. The breath that heals by making true what must end."

Cassandra's skin prickled. "The Breath of Amun isn't an object," she said. "It's a function. A… a spell with lungs."

"And with accountants," Nebu added, nose wrinkled. "I can smell ledgers. And terrible perfume." He flattened his ears. "And - oh, curses - clove cigarettes. That ghastly modern affectation."

Cassandra felt the words before she heard them, a pressure change that shaped silence into syllables. Voices ahead: a low murmur in unison, measured and confident, counting beats - one breath, two, three - then a single voice giving answers in Old Egyptian with an English cadence too crisp to be native. Her stomach dropped, clean as a lever pulled.

Araminta.

The present packed itself tight around Cassandra's ribs. She forced air out, measured, drew it in again. Control was a structure. You built it out of breath. She looked back at Tarek, whose eyes had sharpened like flint, and at Rahetep, whose gaze had gone to the floor, not in shame but - she realized with a twist of sympathy - in reminiscence: the look of a man returning to the scene of his most brilliant crime.

"Stay behind me," Cassandra said, voice steady. "And if I tell you to stop talking, *stop talking*. Every word may be fuel."

"Under protest," Nebu said. "My contract stipulates commentary."

"I'll annotate later." She let the corner of her mouth lift for a heartbeat - humanity on credit - then turned back to the lintel.

Beyond it, the passage opened into another chamber, smaller than the first and hung with chains of bronze charms that tinkled without moving. The floor patterns here were different: not circles but interlocking squares, a puzzle inlaid in bone-white stone. On the far side stood three braziers now lit, their smoke drifting not upward but sideways, pulled along lines no eye could follow. Between the braziers, outlines of crates and a long, low case stamped with a familiar sigil - a goblin seal with the Gringotts cipher braided through it.

Cassandra's pulse thudded once, hard. Her research. Her maps. Her clearance codes, the ones Araminta had smiled at - *Your initiative is so refreshing, Miss Blythe* - and filed without comment.

Figures in dark robes moved with choreographed economy, hands rising and falling in the air, placing, shaping, never hesitating. At their center, a woman in tailored travel clothes held a cigarette between two gloved fingers like a metronome. The smoke curled in disciplines; it refused to waft.

Araminta Voss did not turn when Cassandra's light crossed the threshold. She did not need to; she had already timed their arrival. She lifted the cigarette, tapped ash into an onyx dish, and the ashes arranged themselves into a tidy little pyramid.

"Miss Blythe," she said conversationally to the air, and the gold threads in the walls brightened in answer to her voice. "How punctual of you. We were just about to begin."

Araminta exhaled, and the smoke obeyed her like a diagram - unfurling into a neat helix that slotted itself between two dangling bronze charms. The charms rang once, not with the clatter of metal, but with the pure tone of a struck glass. Around her, the robed acolytes - half a dozen, perhaps more - held their hands over the floor's inlaid puzzle, fingers splayed as if warming themselves at invisible coals. Each wore a narrow brass torque at the throat, etched with a sun that had been scratched through the center, a spoke blotted out.

"Don't step on the white insets," Araminta said without turning. "They're still temperamental. Griphook al-Azhari's men dragged the calibration box in on a diagonal, and I've had to compensate."

Cassandra took another pace into the chamber, keeping her boots on the obsidian paths that braided between the white squares. "Using my survey griddings," she said. Her voice came out cool, as if it had picked up frost from the stone. She tipped her chin at the Gringotts case. "Did you forge my signature or simply help yourself?"

"Paperwork is a kind of sorcery," Araminta said mildly. She flicked ash; the gray flecks flew, then froze in the air as a line of runes slid through them like fish under ice. "It is often cleaner to rearrange the runes than to argue with them." She turned at last.

Her face, always a study in well-lit composure, was luminous in the glow from the sigil veins. Silver pince-nez bridged her nose; their lenses reflected Cassandra back to herself in miniature - freckled, wind-burned, hair disobedient, wand split with a healed crack. Araminta's travel coat fell in a precise line from shoulder to heel; the cut made everything else in the room look untidy by comparison, even the bronze chains that swayed without air.

“Rahetep,” she said, acknowledging the mummy with an incline of her head so perfectly judged it could have been set by a spirit level. “Your Majesty. An honor to meet my most controversial case study standing up.” Her gaze slid to Tarek. “Mister el-Farouk. Your letter to the Ministry was passionate. Misguided, but moving.”

Tarek’s fingers flexed once at his sides. “I stand by every word.”

“I do hope not,” Nebu said brightly, wrinkling his nose. “One never knows where some people’s words have been.”

One of the robed figures - small, nimble hands, a certain graceless hurry in the way they held their wand - half-turned at the cat’s voice. Cassandra marked three things in a heartbeat: the wand’s grip (continental), the boots (English cobbler, Cairo dust), and the charm pinned inside the robe’s lapel when the fabric shifted (a goblin tally bead, polished by worry). Not zealots only, then. Employees. People with bills and rationalizations.

“Let them go,” Cassandra said, and she surprised herself. She had meant to begin with a question, to peel at Araminta’s logic until the arrogance underneath showed like bone. But standing here - in a chamber whose very geometry had been bullied into neatness - she understood that the argument had already moved beyond words into drafting.

Araminta regarded her for a long, faintly amused beat. “We will all go, Miss Blythe. Forward.” She gestured to the ring-braziers across the room. “The Order’s chamber had to be reconstructed; the original was silted over, as Tarek could have told you if he’d been allowed near the site before Gringotts walled it off with a polite fiction about ‘safety protocols.’ So we built a cleaner version. That is what institutions do with the past.” Her mouth softened into something like pity. “They make it efficient.”

Rahetep stepped beside Cassandra, the dry whisper of his wrappings like a page turned. “Efficiency is a poor altar,” he said. His voice filled the chamber without effort, polite, inexorable. “It spares the worshiper the labor of reflection.”

Araminta’s smile did not move. “Majesty, you presided over a state project to cage death itself, and then, if the records are to be believed, you walked away and called that mercy.” She tapped her cigarette, and the ash fell into the onyx dish; the flecks arranged themselves into a little cartouche for *Rahetep* before dissolving. “We are not walking away. We are *finishing* your work.”

Rahetep’s hands tightened, the linen at the knuckles whispering. “I sought a door that led back to mortality. Your Order seeks a revolving one.”

“Ah,” Nebu yawned, showing perfect, irritable teeth. “The moral geometry portion of the tour.”

Cassandra’s wand buzzed against her fingers. The floor’s inlaid puzzle - the bone-white squares, the obsidian braids - wasn’t static; lines shivered beneath the surface as if something were breathing there too, counting along with them. The bronze chains overhead chimed once, again, then held their tongues. Each sound was logged in her mind with professional reflex, but beneath that ledger another column opened: the cost.

“Explain it,” she said. “Explain the ritual. To us, or to yourself. Whichever you’re doing.”

Araminta’s head tilted, conceding the point with the grace of someone who still holds the winning hand. She gestured to the braziers, where incense smoldered with a scent like cloves trampled into warm dust. “The Breath of Amun is not a trinket. It is a protocol,” she said, echoing Cassandra’s thought so precisely it felt like theft. “A governance of transition. The ancient version bled power as heat, as light, terribly wasteful - your Majesty preferred elegance over economy. We intend to update the enchantment. Fewer losses. Greater stability. A closed loop.”

“A closed loop,” Tarek repeated, the words tasting wrong in his mouth. “For souls.”

“For legacy,” Araminta corrected gently, and something cold flickered in Cassandra’s chest at the word - how soft it could make cruelty sound. “We invest in vaults to secure wealth across generations; this is no different. Think beyond sentiment. Imagine a class of custodians - thinkers, artists, statesmen - preserved to advise posterity. Imagine the end of the random waste of brilliance. Girls like you would not have to reinvent their ladders every year.” Her eyes warmed by a professionally calculated fraction. “You were always building alone, weren’t you, Cassandra?”

The old prickle - humiliation disguised as competence - rose in Cassandra and burned away as it met her anger. “You can call it ‘advice’ all you like. It’s ownership.”

Araminta’s gaze darted to Cassandra’s wand, noted the thin fracture glowing along the grain. “And yet here you are, making a moral argument with a damaged instrument. Did you crack it in the tomb or in the market? No, don’t tell me; keep a secret if you need to feel powerful.” She turned to the acolytes, making a small slicing motion with two fingers. “Positions.”

They moved without looking at one another, taking up the compass points at the edges of the puzzle. Their wands angled down; threads of ink-black light - thinner than hair, taut as wire - ran from tip to tip, outlining squares that snapped into prominence. The white insets darkened, the obsidian brightened, as if the board had decided which side it was on.

Nebu’s fur rose in a ripple down his spine. “That would be a net,” he said conversationally. “Delightful. Someone plans to go fishing for something with teeth.”

“Back,” Cassandra murmured, and the cat flicked his ears in offended compliance, retreating until his flank touched Rahetep’s ankle.

Tarek took a half step, then halted as the bronze charms overhead sang again, just once, as if warning them that the room had begun to notice. “They’ve braided resonance through the chains,” he said under his breath. “Harmonics as locks.”

“Of course,” Araminta said, overhearing; she always overheard. “Your enthusiasm for living history would be touching if it weren’t so naïve, Mister el-Farouk. Look.” She gestured toward the far wall, where a slab of black stone waited like a blank page. At her flick of ash, a vertical column of glyphs blazed into being - not carved but hung in light, each sign rotating slowly as if examining them back. “The temple’s lungs. Inhale on the left, exhale on the right.

Amun’s priests yoked breath to law: what was named could be kept. What was kept could be counted.” Her eyes found Cassandra’s again. “All I have done is sharpen the pencil.”

Rahetep spoke in a voice like cloth torn carefully down the grain. “The last time this breath was loosed, the living began to forget how to die.”

“And with it, how to plan,” Araminta answered briskly. “You call it hubris; I call it governance. Death is the least efficient of institutions, and no one has thought to audit it.”

“Except the colonizers,” Tarek said, the word landing in the cold room like a coal. “You make a vault out of a people’s grave and call it stewardship.”

Araminta’s smile did not reach her eyes. “Dear boy, one can be both colonized and careless. Where was your outcry when Rahetep was packed onto a cart like a conversation piece?” Her gaze cut to Cassandra with surgical precision. “Where was yours, Miss Blythe, when you totted up your hazard pay and called it academic grit?” She flicked ash; it fell and froze into a tidy figure - ₲ - before dissipating. “We are all beneficiaries of theft. The only difference now is that I intend to *pay dividends.*”

Nebu’s tail lashed, but his voice came out soft. “And the cost?”

Araminta took a final draw on the cigarette. When she exhaled this time, the smoke shaped itself into a ring that did not disperse. It descended and clicked neatly into a groove Cassandra had not seen before at the stone’s base. The room vibrated, a cat’s purr scaled to cathedral size. The acolytes began to chant - not words yet, but numbers. Counting. The puzzle floor brightened, and the spaces between the brightened lines went a shade darker than black.

“The cost,” Araminta said, her tone the one she used in briefings when she was being especially reasonable, “is the end of luck. The end of waste. The end of losing your Raheteps to accident of birth and plague and treachery.”

Rahetep looked very, very tired. “And the end of relinquishment,” he said. “The end of gift.”

Cassandra’s wand thrummed hot, stuttered, steadied. She could feel the temple’s lungs in her own chest now, training her breath to their measure. In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. The rhythm wanted to write itself into her nerves. She broke it, on purpose, coughed to ruin the count, tasted clove and iron.

“You’re not just waking it,” she said. “You’re feeding it. Every syllable a calorie.” She made herself meet Araminta’s eyes. “Every justification a feast.”

“Then do be quiet, Miss Blythe,” Araminta said, and the calmness in her voice frightened Cassandra more than any shouted command could have. “It isn’t you I need. It’s your presence. Consent is so much tidier than conquest in the paperwork.” She raised her free hand, palm up toward the black wall where the inhalation glyphs wheeled. “Breath is a contract. Witnesses matter.”

Nebu’s voice was a thread. “Cassandra.”

“I know,” she said. She swallowed; her throat clicked. “I know.”

The acolytes’ counting tipped over into language - Old Egyptian, the vowels grown long and honey-slow, the consonants cut with a clerk’s neat knife. The bronze chains above them quivered in sympathy and began to hum. The hum gathered into a note so pure it dissolved thought into listening. From somewhere far below, a second sound answered, lower and older - the river through a stone throat, the tide pulling on a buried bell.

Araminta extended her cigarette to the onyx dish. The ash fell one last time, and the ring of smoke sealed itself. The wall’s glyphs inhaled.

“Begin,” she said.

The floor exhaled.

The floor exhaled - and the room cooled as if a cloud had passed over a sun that wasn’t there. The white insets fogged with hoarfrost so fine it looked like breath made visible, each square blooming a tiny fern of ice that spread, paused, spread again in time with the acolytes’ chant. Cassandra felt the change hit her teeth first, a pressure that turned enamel to tuning fork; her cracked wand answered with a faint, frantic hum.

The bronze chains overhead vibrated until they blurred into coppery rivers; the charms strung along them chimed single notes that stacked and locked, harmonic on harmonic, climbing a ladder of sound. Smoke from the braziers abandoned the air and began to crawl along invisible rails, curling into sigils that hung like moths pinned to glass.

“Don’t breathe with it,” Cassandra said, the words rasping. “Set your own pace. In two - out three. Break the count.”

Tarek nodded, jaw tight. He dragged a hand across his sternum as if to remind his ribs who was in charge. Nebu’s ears flattened against his skull. His mouth opened and closed twice with an indignant fish’s disbelief that the world could do this to oxygen.

On the far wall, the vertical column of glyphs inhaled. The signs dilated from thread-thin to palm-wide, as if lit from behind by a slow lightning. The left-hand column brightened, the right dulled, and in the between-space - on that seam of decision - a bead of gold light gathered like sweat on skin.

Araminta’s gloved hand rose, palm up, fingers together. The acolyte nearest her mirrored the motion. The bead trembled.

“Anchor,” Araminta said quietly, and the bead leapt from the wall to the air and hung, a perfect sphere the color of hammered noon.

It wasn’t a light; it was an idea of light - the memory of a sun reflected in someone’s pupil. Cassandra’s vision haloed with it; shadows in the room sharpened as if they’d been oiled. Her own shadow drew itself into fidelity along the floor, each curl of hair and torn hemline rendered with a courtroom illustrator’s malice. Tarek’s shadow slid across the white insets and paused at the obsidian braid, as if sniffing its boundary.

“Do not - ” Tarek began, and his shadow finished: move.

It stepped away from him.

Cassandra’s breath stuttered; she forced it smooth. Tarek’s silhouette - flat ink suddenly given motive - rose from the floor like a stain turning into smoke, then condensed, in black relief, a man made of night and edges. When he turned his head, his profile went absent for an instant, a slice of nothing against the gold glow. He was Tarek, but without the slight asymmetry of laughter or the softness of blinking - precision without error or mercy.

“Lovely craftsmanship,” Araminta said, admiring as a curator at a private viewing. “An externalized conscience. So much easier to negotiate with oneself this way.”

Tarek set his feet, wand hand low, the way Cassandra had seen him hold a blade of argument. “You made it from the temple,” he said to her without taking his eyes from the likeness. “You didn’t conjure it. You *extracted* it.”

“Allocation,” Araminta corrected. “Of resources. You do it with water and grain; we do it with souls.”

The shadow-Tarek moved first, not attacking, but aligning - stepping so that he stood between Tarek and Cassandra, a knight taking the square. His silhouette-wand lifted. The air around its tip sank into a deeper dark, a promise of subtraction.

Nebu launched.

He went from stillness to gold streak with no intervening verb. He hit the shadow just above where the clavicle would be; his claws tore three perfect commas through nothing. The commas did not bleed. They widened, hung, became eyeholes. Nebu skidded off the curved side of a silence and landed, fur standing in shocked static.

“Rude,” Nebu panted. “You are *rude.*”

“Don’t touch it again,” Cassandra said. “You’ll slough.” She didn’t know how she knew that word in that context, only that it was right: a cat’s soul might come away from its bones like damp paper from stone.

Across the chamber, the sphere of light split like a seed. Two halves rotated in place and budded a third. The new beads shot toward opposite corners and stopped, pinned by angles only the floor understood. The white squares flashed, a chessboard blinking to new rules.

“Net tightening,” Cassandra said under her breath. Her wand shook her wrist with a small, violent buzz and then went very still. She felt the old training spool up inside her - the Gringotts protocols for ritual environments: Map. Interrupt. Divert. *Protect.* The last verb wasn’t in the written manual. It ought to have been.

“Majesty?” she said without looking back. “If the temple remembers you, ask it to value lungs.”

Rahetep’s wrapped hands lifted, palm forward, one to each column of glyphs. He didn’t chant. He inhaled and let the breath go with such exquisite control that it came out like a line from a singer’s throat. The gold veins in the walls flared - a courtesy light, a listening. He spoke then in the language of his making; Cassandra felt the words more than heard them: a series of perfectly balanced names, the kind you lay under foundations to keep them from envying the sky.

The chains answered in a lower register. The pitch of the hum shifted, a half-step down. The acolyte at the north point faltered on a vowel, recovered. Araminta’s head turned a fraction. Annoyance skated through her composure like a fish through clear water. She adjusted, two fingers pinching the air, and the bead of light in front of her swelled to the size of a heart.

“Cassandra,” Tarek said, still tracking his living absence, “if I fight him, I feed it.”

“Yes,” Cassandra said. “So we let him win the wrong game.”

The silhouette moved as if it had been waiting for that line. It pivoted, all economy, and drew a curve in the air with its wand. The curve stayed, an inked parenthesis. Inside it, things dulled: the shine on the obsidian, the highlights on Araminta’s glasses, the tiny sparks in the braziers. A bell-curve of less.

“Don’t let it bracket you,” Cassandra snapped. “If it closes, it will average you out.”

“How reassuring,” Nebu said faintly. “Death by statistics.”

Cassandra took two quick steps, heel-toe, heel-toe, along the obsidian braid, feeling for edges with the soles of her boots. The floor was not stairs, not exactly; it was an argument made walkable. She found the seam she wanted - where two lines met and made a hinge - and slammed the end of her wand into it, a percussion rather than a spell.

“Seal-breaker’s knock,” she said, and the gold veins underfoot startled. The chains hiccuped a note. The parenthesis the shadow had drawn shuddered, then slumped, like a tired eyelid.

Araminta’s voice cut cleanly through everything. “Counterpoint.”

The acolytes turned their wands from the corners to the center. The beads of light called to each other and, in obeying, made a triangle, thin as a spun web. The triangle began to rotate on no axis at all. With each quarter-turn, gravity in the chamber leaned a few degrees; Cassandra had to widen her stance to keep from drifting sideways. Sand, ancient as a dead king’s promise, hissed from between the stones and rose to meet the triangle’s edges, caught and held like sugar on a wet rim.

Rahetep took a step forward, calm disintegrating into something sharper. “You cannot turn breath into a wheel,” he said. “It was never meant to go back on itself.”

Araminta’s eyes took on a winter brightness. “What a luxury it must be to live in the age of intentions.” She lifted her cigarette hand and pinched out ember and ash in one neat movement. The scent of clove deepened, as if the extinguished spark had released its memory. “We improve on history; that is civilization’s only honest boast.”

The rotating triangle threw a razor of light across the chamber. It shaved pale the edge of Cassandra’s sleeve and left the fabric smoothed, threads aligned, color muted - the average of itself and nothing. She yanked her arm back with a hiss. The wand in her hand went hot enough to sting. Power surged along the crack as if a river had found a fissure in rock.

It wanted to cast.

“Not yet,” she whispered to it, breath refusing the temple’s count. “Wait for the floor to want me.”

She raised both hands, palms out, the way Rahetep had, and spoke - not a spell, but a bank instruction, one she had been taught to use when vaults had been overwritten by amateurs with pretty sigils and no sense of drainage. “Diversion protocol,” she said clearly. “Reroute to ground.”

The puzzle underfoot flexed. A line of white squares grayed, then softened further, until their edges fuzzed like wet flour. The obsidian paths beside them brightened to mirror-black, all depth, no substance. For a breath - their breath - the floor stopped arguing and listened.

Cassandra slammed the heel of her hand into the nearest bronze chain. The charm there - an open palm worked in copper - rang like a struck bowl. The note it made wasn’t the room’s key. It was the river’s. The sound shivered out along the chain and down through the floor into the pale, softened squares. When the rotating triangle’s edge passed over that patch again, it skidded as on mud. Its perfect geometry bled blur. Sand gathered on it in a ridge, and the ridge refused to rotate.

Araminta’s composure drew breath and held it. “Annoying,” she said, as if remarking on a squeaky hinge.

“Divert,” Cassandra said to Tarek, not taking her eyes off the triangle. “Don’t strike. Make him step where the floor is ours.”

Tarek nodded. He stepped forward on the braid, no wasted balance, and feinted with an old duelist’s lie that admitted it was a lie. The shadow parried, elegant, and in so doing moved half a pace left - onto the softened squares. The floor took him an eighth of an inch. It was nothing. It was enough. His wand dipped.

“Now,” Cassandra murmured.

Rahetep did what kings do when a breach opens: he poured authority into it. He spoke a name that had been buried with him, a title so old it was more map than word. The glyphs on the wall shone not brighter, but truer; their edges stopped trying to please new masters. The gold veins in the basalt writhed - reminding the temple it had a spine and should stand up.

The chains overhead fell silent. That silence had a weight like velvet. The acolytes’ chant stumbled, a chain of numbers catching on a bad link. One of them - young, Cassandra thought suddenly, the way a voice cracks on a high note - looked down, saw his toes inside the rotation’s light, and flinched. His wand wavered.

Araminta was there in a heartbeat. She did not touch him. She placed herself where his fear could borrow her poise, and the boy steadied as if he had taken a sip of her. “We continue,” she said, and the triangle shuddered into smoothness again, shaving away the blur Cassandra had bought.

Nebu darted to Cassandra’s ankle and pressed against it hard. She spared half a glance. His pupils were thin knives. “Your trick bought us breath,” he said. “But breathing is exactly what they want.”

“Then we hold our breath,” Cassandra said, and smiled without humor at the absurdity. “Or we teach the room to do it.”

She lifted her wand. On the crack, light gathered, a tiny, terrified sun. She didn’t aim at Araminta or at the acolytes or at the shadow with Tarek’s steadiness and none of his refusal. She aimed at the seam where the triangle’s edge nicked the net of lines - where arithmetic met architecture and got along too well.

“Gringotts field seal,” she said, a charm designed to collapse latticework without detonating it. “Not in the manual.”

The wand sang. It was a wrong note in a right place - like striking a minor chord in a hymn so carefully that the congregation thought for a moment that the composer had intended it. The triangle hiccuped, not a break but a breath that did not belong to it. The beads of light faltered, re-evaluated, adjusted their accounting.

“Again,” Araminta said, voice clipped, and for the first time Cassandra heard something alive in it that wasn’t certainty.

The shadow, impatient with strategy, cut. Its wand drew a second parenthesis, closing the first into a perfect oval. It stepped into the oval and invited Tarek with a tiny bow that would have been gallant if it were not an invitation to be averaged out of existence.

Tarek did not enter. He raised his wand and recited in a soft, furious voice a list of family names and teachers and the color of Cairo at four in the morning when the call to prayer braided with birds. He named places where water slowed to think; he named the sound his mother’s ankles made in the kitchen when she cooked. He laid them on the air like titles.

The oval couldn’t average those. It tried. It made a gray out of them that had no place to go and dripped it onto the floor, where it sizzled and turned into smoke that smelled like bread.

“Very pretty,” Araminta murmured, and if there was admiration there it had the acid sting of theft. “But we are not writing poetry, Mister el-Farouk.”

“Then you have chosen the wrong temple,” Rahetep said.

The gold bead at the wall, obedient as a clerk, swelled again, formed a fourth point, and the rotation changed, edges multiplying into a star. Gravity leaned the other way. Sand rose from the cracks in a slow, circular storm, each grain catching light and becoming, for an instant, a letter in a language Cassandra almost understood and must not.

The pitch of the chains climbed. Something below them woke like a sleeper who had been taught to wake angry.

Nebu's voice threaded up through the storm. "Cassandra."

"I know," she said, and this time her voice did not tremble. She had mapped enough, bought seconds with borrowed notes and a soft patch of floor. The ritual wasn't a spectacle. It was a ledger. Lines were being added up. She could not win at their arithmetic, but she could refuse to balance.

"Time to stop the count."

She lifted her wand in both hands so the crack lay along her heart line. The star's nearest edge kissed the air above her and took a hair from her head as cleanly as a lover's knife. She let the hum rise until it blurred into a whine and then into a tone beyond hearing, beyond agreeing.

"Seal," she said, and drove the wand down into the pattern at her feet, writing a letter in the floor's language, old as vaults, older than banks, a character shaped like a hinge closing.

The room flinched.

The rotation jerked a degree off true; two beads of light collided and stuck, not fused so much as embarrassed into adjacency. The sandstorm kinked. The shadow misstepped, only an inch, only enough. The world decided, for the length of a drawn breath, to trip on its own hem.

And in that wobble, where running became stumbling and a wheel thought about being a door again, the temple remembered it could refuse. The breath that was not theirs to call in filled its lungs the wrong way.

The ritual opened its mouth to swallow, and choked.

The ritual choked - and the temple gagged on its own precision.

Sound fell out of key. The humming chains gave a sick, elastic twang; the braziers guttered sideways, their flames suddenly unsure of which way was up. The rotating star of light hiccuped and left a hairline seam in the air, as if reality had been misprinted and the pressman hadn't noticed.

Araminta moved first. She didn't flinch. She laid two fingers across the seam and pressed, her will a paperknife. The star recovered, edges snapping back into place with an audible *click.* "You see?" she said, voice clipped but not raised. "Systems correct themselves."

Cassandra was already moving, heel over toe on the obsidian braids, turning the room's geometry into handholds. "And users corrupt them," she answered, and scored her wand along a golden vein in the floor, not to sever it but to smudge. The glow smeared like gilt leaf under a thumb. The smudge confused the pattern; two white squares flickered to gray, and for one heartbeat the star's nearest point bit uselessly at fog.

"Countermand," Araminta snapped.

Her acolytes obeyed. Wands tipped; the counting returned as words. Old Egyptian thickened the air with honey and office dust. The bronze charms overhead chimed in rows, an abacus striking itself. Ink-black filaments climbed from corner-points and made a lattice under the star, a net that flexed and held, flexed and held.

Tarek stepped in front of Cassandra without looking back - instinct as old as a door - and sent a fan of mirror-light charms skittering along the floor. They ran like silver beetles, lodged under the acolytes' feet, and threw up flat reflected copies of the room, a secondary chamber where nothing was in exactly the right place. The copies confused the net; one filament missed its socket and sang a faint, pained high C.

"Excellent," Nebu said, breathless, pupils narrow as needle-holes. "We are making them play two pianos with one hand."

"Three," Tarek said, and flipped his palm so the reflective beetles showed not the room but sky: dawn over Cairo, the pink-gray hour when birds and prayers make a duet. The vision diluted the clove-thick air. The acolyte at south-by-east stuttered on a consonant, thinking of home. The filament above him sagged.

"Stop feeding it," Cassandra hissed.

Every syllable, she heard it in her own voice now - the way the Breath sipped at language, how sentences came away lighter than they should, as if meaning were being skimmed. Even the scrape of her boot on stone added a measure to the ledger.

Araminta's glasses flashed. "On the contrary," she said, and her words carried the clean ring of a receipt. "We will bring it to appetite and then discipline the hunger."

She traced a curve in the air - elegant, exact. The curve settled over the braziers like a lid, and the smoke they produced ceased to behave as smoke. It marched in lines, the way ink behaves when a steel nib is new and the hand above it belongs to a woman who learned penmanship from a governess with opinions about posture.

Cassandra answered without thinking. She cut a diagonal across Araminta's curve, a clerk slashing a bold **X** through an order that had arrived unsigned. Sparks crawled along the intersection, bright as new coins. The lid buckled; the smoke escaped and found its own opinion again, scribbling over the perfect lines with rude loops.

Araminta raised one eyebrow. "Do you plan to redline me to death?"

"If I must," Cassandra said.

The star slipped its orbit. A blade of light kissed the floor, shaved a curled shaving off the stone as neatly as a carpenter planing oak. The shaving did not fall. Gravity yawned. The shaving hung in the air, rolled, and unrolled, an ivory ribbon trying to read itself.

Rahetep lifted his hands and made no magic at all. The gesture was pure theater - a king at court reminding the room what dignity looked like - and the room remembered. The gold veins brightened reverently; the chains lowered their pitch as if a guest had entered and

everyone should stand. When he spoke, it was not a spell, not in the sense Gringotts would recognize; it was a protocol older than vaults, a list of obligations sung to a house so it would not forget the kindnesses done within it.

“Hall of Breath,” he said in his own tongue, each syllable a bracket that held the next, “remember the children brought to shade here from heat. Remember the crushed mint on thresholds. Remember the old women who mended sandals on your steps. I am Rahetep, who asked to be smaller than his tomb. I ask again.”

The lattice shivered. The star slowed one degree. The world allowed, for an instant, less sharpness.

“Sentiment,” Araminta said crisply, “is a leak.”

She drew her cigarette case - not to smoke, Cassandra realized, but to use the mirror-polished silver as a wand focus. She tilted it so that the light-sphere over the far wall saw itself. The reflection bounced, multiplied, and the star took heart, edges re-honing.

“Then patch it,” Cassandra said, and slashed her wand at the nearest bronze chain. The charm hanging there - a tiny worked feather - rang. The pitch it made matched the vowel Rahetep had just sung. The room decided those two things belonged together and moved to accommodate them, which meant moving away from Araminta’s angles.

“Admirable, Miss Blythe,” Araminta said, stepping cleanly around a jag of machining sand as if avoiding a puddle in Mayfair. “You were wasted in fieldwork.”

“And you were wasted on ethics,” Cassandra shot back, too fast, feeding the room. The star swelled greedily. She shut her mouth until her teeth clicked. No more quips. Words were calories. Silence was a diet.

Nebu darted past her boots and launched at the slender pillar beside Araminta’s case - the only freestanding object in the chamber that wasn’t strictly part of the ritual geometry. It supported a wide-bellied urn of greenish stone, banded with copper - inscribed all over with microscopic hieroglyphs so tight together they read as texture until you knew how to see.

“Nebu - !” Cassandra snapped.

He hit the pillar with both forepaws, claws deployed, and pushed. The urn tipped a fraction. Araminta’s head turned - too late. Nebu shoved again, sharp, efficient. The urn slid, balanced on an edge for a heart-stopping breath, then toppled.

The world inhaled.

The urn struck stone and did not break. The lid jumped; the seal line cracked with a tiny, obscene pop. From the gap poured sand the color of twilight - a gray with too much weather in it. The grains did not fall. They *left*, as if the urn contained a pressure system and someone had opened a valve.

Sand gushed up, not down, fountaining in a column that forgot gravity and then refused to remember it. Each grain caught light and showed a picture inside itself: a boy running under date palms; a woman laughing with her jaw turned toward shade so her teeth wouldn't burn; an ox breathing steam into winter air; the Nile the color of hammered tin - images tiny as mites, complete and apart. They rose and expanded and slowed, slowing more, until the whole column became a tree of moments suspended in clear air.

Time stopped.

It did not *end.* It congealed. The braziers' flames froze in mid-leap, painted with razored detail like brushstrokes on lacquer. The chains became lines without vibration. The star held still, not because it had finished, but because finishing had been removed from the list of options.

Cassandra's last breath went in. It did not go out.

She stood in a room of glass wind.

Her body wanted to panic. Panic would spend words. Panic would feed the very thing that had learned to live off the stuff between syllables. She let the panic pad up to her ribs like a cat begging for attention and did not look at it. On either side of her, Tarek's cloak hung in an argument with inertia, halfway through a swirl; Rahetep's wrappings lifted infinitesimally at the knees, halted at the point of taking a step. Nebu, four feet off the tiles, hung in air, all four legs splayed in the indelicate angles of triumph, whiskers starbursting outward. An acolyte's eyelids were mid-blink, lashes painted with dust, a sculpture of someone about to choose.

Only one thing in the room moved.

It was not the star. It was not the smoke. It was not Araminta - her head tilted, her chin lifted, a portrait by a realist whose patron had demanded a likeness that flattered and damned. No. The only moving thing was the sand that had erupted from the urn. Not moving because it traveled, but because each grain *changed.* Images inside grains developed, like photographs in chemical baths. The boy under the palm-tree aged a day. The laughing woman's jaw turned another degree toward the shade. The ox took one more breath. Each grain, a private clock.

Cassandra understood the urn with the certainty of someone who had studied too many vaults: a time-keeping reliquary, a priest's tool for measuring sacred speech. Every hour that had ever been counted in this temple had been stored in that stone, finer than flour, ground prayers and seconds and silence. Nebu had let it into the room all at once.

She couldn't swallow. The swallow would not swallow. She tried to move her eyes; they moved as if wading. Her wand, in her hand, hummed ovate and urgent against her palm - alive in a room where aliveness had been put on pause.

Araminta's gaze, when it finally crawled to meet Cassandra's across the frozen air, glinted with something almost like admiration. Her lips formed words that took an age to get out.

"*Resourceful.*"

The syllables moved like boats broken free of their moorings, bobbing in gelatin water.

Cassandra gathered what the room still allowed. The only verbs left were *notice* and *intend.* Everything else had interest charged on it. She intended, very quietly. She noticed: the net under the star held because each filament was a promise written in numbers; the promise had been made to time. Time was currently in pieces, everywhere at once.

If she spoke now, she would feed the Breath through a tube.

She couldn't. She wouldn't. She let her mouth close. She lifted her wand and *wrote,* not a spell but a ledger notation, the most silent mark a Gringotts curse-breaker learns to make: a closure symbol that says, *no more entries on this line.*

The crack in her wand answered. Light crept along it like mercury agreeing to an experiment. The mark she wrote in the air sat there and did not glow. The room did not acknowledge it. That was good. The best charms are the ones the environment assumes it invented.

Nebu descended a fraction - enough to set one claw-tip against the stone. He hung there, scandalized by physics' unbecoming behavior. His eyes cut to Cassandra. He did not speak. For once, he did not even smirk. He looked… worried. As if he had tried to buy them a minute and accidentally purchased a century.

Rahetep's hands, still lifted, shook a line narrower than linen. He was straining - she saw it now - not to command the temple, but to prevent his body from exhaling the wrong way, from lending his breath to the wrong book. The first time in all their strange days together that he looked properly dead.

Araminta moved again, a millimeter at a time, forcing motion through honey. She bent her gloved wrist and drew a single symbol with the cigarette case - two short strokes, one long. *Continue.*

The star quivered.

Cassandra felt the choice arrive.

If they started shouting now - if they cast, argued, pleaded - they would juice the ritual until it learned to breathe without them. If they did nothing, the star would bide until the sand finished falling in slow motion and then start again, patient as bureaucracy.

"*Cassandra.*"

The name took a lifetime to cross the crystal air, but it reached her. Tarek's voice, shaped by a mouth that was barely allowed to move. He had risked the calorie.

She tilted her head infinitesimally. *Don't.* A plea and an order. The breath in her chest burned like a held confession.

He understood. His eyes softened. He closed his mouth and gave the room nothing.

Araminta’s eyes narrowed. She understood too. She smiled - heroically small movement - and tried to give the room everything. Her jaw eased; her tongue lifted; the beginning of a spell climbed her throat like a clerk carrying a tray of figures to a partner’s desk.

Cassandra moved.

Time would make her pay later for the trespass; that was fine. She crossed one obsidian braid to the seam she had smudged before and drove her wand down into it like a gavel, striking the case, not the argument. The blow made no sound. Sound was furniture wrapped for moving. But the floor *felt* it. Floors always do. The smudge completed itself, spreading a grayness that diagrams hate.

A single grain of sand from the ruptured urn reached her mark and kissed it. It hung there like a bee finding the only flower in a winter room. The image inside that grain - someone setting a cup of tea on a stone lintel - completed. The cup stopped steaming. The act ended. That ending pulled at its neighbors, small, polite gravity.

The star twitched. One edge found itself caught on a burr that had not been there a moment ago, a sentence written in the margin that an editor could not erase because he had forgotten what it annotated.

Across the chamber, Nebu made his decision without consultation. He pushed off the stone with all four feet, sailed like a thrown sunbeam, and hit the onyx dish that held Araminta’s neat little ashes. The dish flipped. Ash flew. Even frozen, it went everywhere - settling in a constellation across the acolytes’ sleeves and faces, dusting Araminta’s coat, stippling the bright lines of the net.

It broke the picture. It didn’t shatter it. It *dirtied* it.

Araminta’s mouth opened on a hiss so long it would take an hour to finish. Her eyes were thunderheads.

Cassandra’s lungs clawed for air. Every muscle in her back wanted to arch, to cough, to reset. She held. She thought of cups of tea set on lintels and the politeness of ending things at the correct sentence. She thought of Rahetep asking to be smaller than his tomb. She thought of Nebu, outrageous little god, hanging in a room that had forgotten mercy and choosing to be petty in the holiest way.

When time came back - and it would; nothing this exquisite could be allowed to last - the room would roar. The star would lunge. The net would bite. Words would want to pour out of every mouth, their own and their enemies’, and each word would sweeten the Breath like sugar tamped into a spoon.

So she did the only loud thing that cost no language at all.

She lifted her wand and hammered the floor’s hinge again, not with a spell, but with the body’s old insistence, a blunt percussion that told the stones, *close.* The mark she had written in silence brightened a fraction, noticed by no one but the earth.

The column of sand reached its apogee, quivered, and began, impossibly, to crystallize. Not to fall. To *hold.* Grains touched and fused, image to image, hour to hour, a glass of time grown out of minutes. The room took that as permission and froze harder.

Cassandra let the fraction of air she had been hoarding leak out through her nose - no sound, no word. She set her feet. She met Araminta's eyes across the paralyzed bright. In the space between their two stillnesses, a decision sharpened like frost.

Enough containment. Enough cleverness. The temple had learned their shapes.

When motion returned, it would be in a single slam. And when it did, she would have one chance, exactly one, to end the accounting.

She curled her fingers tighter around the cracked wand. The hum under her skin steadied into a held note.

"Ready," she did not say.

The room listened anyway.

Time returned all at once, like crockery swept from a table.

The frozen column of hours liquefied into sand midair and crashed. The braziers roared straight up. The bronze chains leapt and sang an octave of alarms. The rotating star found its appetite again and lunged, carving a luminous gouge through the smoke. The net below it snapped taut; the filaments thrummed with numbers the way bowstrings thrummed with threat.

Cassandra's lungs burned. She didn't inhale yet. She used the burn.

Araminta completed the hiss she'd begun inside the stillness. It became a word with too many syllables and too many permissions. The star brightened like a yes. Acolytes caught the count, their voices crisp, the tone of people reciting policy. A breath-shaped machine descended to clamp across the chamber's mouth.

"Down!" Tarek's shout rode the first shatter. He flung a ward that didn't shine so much as *thicken* the air in front of Cassandra - a clear pane where things slowed when they touched it.

The star shaved it like ice and moved on.

Rahetep stepped between Araminta and the room's center, linen trailing a clean white comet-tail. He did not raise his voice; he raised his authority and laid it across the floor like a carpet in a house you could no longer afford to impress. "You will not pass," he told the ritual - not Araminta, not the acolytes, but the shape itself. "Not as a king, but as a host whose guests have mistaken themselves for gods."

It faltered, a heartbeat. The temple recognized hospitality. Araminta's mouth tightened. She turned her mirror-bright case and caught the falter, polished it into purpose, fed it back to the star.

“Cassandra,” Nebu said - not a warning, a summons. He was at her calf again, eyes blown wide, tail beating staccato against her boot. In the chaos, she saw him as Araminta would classify him: a variable, an incidental. In the chaos, she understood the cost of letting the room continue to count.

Every word *was* a calorie. Every clever little defiance, every spell shaped like an argument - it all stuffed the ritual full of proof that they deserved to exist forever.

Silence or ending. Those were the economies left.

Cassandra breathed *in* and held it.

She slid along the obsidian braid, low, head down, the way she’d learned to move when vault ceilings came loose and truth had to be retrieved beneath falling stone. The floor bucked once under her - geometry objecting - then gave her the foot-width necessary for someone who already knew where she was going.

Araminta saw her, of course. She always saw the piece on the board that looked most likely to stop play. Their eyes met across a flicker of sand and flame. Araminta’s chin lifted a fraction. “Don’t be crass,” she said, and the *crass* thumped the ledger like a judge’s gavel.

Cassandra didn’t answer. She could feel the Gringotts sigil itching behind her right ear - the unlovely company tattoo of clearance and culpability - feel the year of coursework that had made it second nature to see how to open anything. And because she had learned to open anything, they had sent her here. And because they had sent her here, this temple had been compelled to explain itself to thieves.

She reached the seam she had smudged twice now - the hinge in the floor’s argument - and planted her boots. The star’s nearest blade whipped across, shaving heat off her cheek. The cut it left was neat, not blood but shine. She didn’t flinch. She placed the cracked line of her wand along that seam and closed her eyes.

Not a spell of conquest. Not a clever inversion. A closure.

“Field seal,” she said inside her chest, lips barely parting, the words not for the room but for the instrument that had survived her. “Emergency stop. Consent revoked.”

The floor understood *stop* long before it thought about *consent.* Veins of dull gold woke, as if shocked. The bronze charms above lost their place and clanged, no longer a scale but a cupboard full of pans. The net sagged in three places.

“Counter - ” Araminta began.

“ - mand,” the acolytes finished, admirable in their training.

The star adjusted. It would not be stopped by one hinge. It bent its light around her and reached for the wall, for the lung-glyphs, to pry them wider, to make breathing a habit instead of a courtesy.

“Now,” Cassandra said - not aloud; with the hammer under her ribs.

She broke her silence - not with argument, but with naming. “I close,” she whispered, more breath than voice. “I close this vault to loss. I close this ledger to lies. I close this door to *us.*”

The sealing rune she wrote wasn’t a line; it was a choice. She drew it with the wand’s crack over the seam, a sigil shaped like a hinge and a scar and the distinct hum you hear when a safe has finally clicked. The crack drank light and gave it back as a band of shadow that fit exactly into the floor’s language, as if it had been waiting centuries for this particular handwriting.

The temple inhaled to argue.

Cassandra refused to exhale.

Tarek felt it first - she saw it in the set of his shoulders - and then the room felt it, down to the tile, the chain, the bead of light. The seal was not elegant. It wasn’t supposed to be. It was a blunt instrument designed by goblins who hated waste and human improvisers who feared collapse and had made a treaty with both hatreds. It began to fold the room at the hinge she had drawn, not violently - no explosion, no heroism of fire - but with the ruthless affection of a book closing on a sentence it had chosen to end.

The white insets fogged again; the obsidian paths brightened; the bronze charms took a breath and then had it taken away. The star hit the fold and refused it; the fold held. Hairline cracks spiderwebbed out from Cassandra’s rune, delicate at first, exploratory, then decisive. They skated up walls, along ribs of arch, through the net, into the braziers’ iron that squealed like wet chalk and then bit its own lip and stayed quiet.

Araminta lunged. She was not a duelist by habit, but she was a woman who had learned to force systems to call her *necessary.* She drove her wand like a crowbar into the seal and pried.

Rahetep intercepted her, not with strength but with rank. He stepped into her reach, his wrappings smelling of linen and centuries and chamomile, and placed his palm on her wrist as if inviting her to a dance step. “This is a house,” he said softly. “Remember your shoes.”

For an instant, her body obeyed the old, old call to courtesy. His palm left faint dust on the satin of her glove. She snarled. It diminished her.

“Traitor,” she spat, and the room swallowed the word and burped hunger.

Cassandra’s vision narrowed. She had no space for anyone’s judgment now - not the Order’s, not the bank’s, not her own heart’s. The seal needed both hands. She put both on the wand. She felt the wood flex and feared for it and pushed anyway. The crack shone like a horizon.

The acolytes recovered and flung anchors - black cords of number that tried to stitch the floor back to their grid. Tarek stepped in front of Cassandra again, always in front of anyone who wasn’t braced to be hit, and lifted his wand. He didn’t fight. He *shaded.* Charms of shade, small and human, the kind you lay over a sleeping child - cooling, dimming, convincing light to nap. The cords hesitated when they entered those shadows, unwilling to tangle in nap-time.

Nebu was everywhere. He darted up a pillar and brought down a chain with the exact fall of a curtain at closing time. He swiped an acolyte's torque; it rolled away like a dropped coin into a crack that hadn't existed a second ago. He leapt for the onyx dish again and rode it like a saucer along the floor, knocking a bead of light into a corner where the seal bent space into an inconvenient little pocket. He yowled advice at everyone, mostly obscene.

The crack in Cassandra's wand deepened. She felt it fissure under her hands. It was like holding the fault line of a continent. She thought vaguely of tea cooling in shade and the fact that she would never drink it again if she failed here. She teased her breath out through her teeth, not a word, not a gift - just air, miserly and necessary.

"Miss Blythe," Araminta said. She had found a seam of poise again, the way a river finds an old bed after flood. "You have talent. But you lack *vision.* Do you understand what you are throwing away?" She gestured, and the star obliged her like a trained predator, slicing a braid of obsidian into tidy tablets. "An end to waste. An end to losing our best to chance."

Cassandra didn't let herself look up. "An end to endings," she said, just loud enough for Nebu to hear, and he answered with a sound between a laugh and a hiss - the cat's version of assent.

The seal began to eat the room.

It started with the idea of height. The arches seemed to lower, not by falling, but by deciding that grandness was extravagant. The bronze chains forgot links and became rods. The rods remembered they were ore. The braziers, deflated of ceremony, sank into their own ash. The net slackened. The star bucked, its points dulled by the absence of space.

The floor tilted. Not by degrees you could measure on an instrument - a banker's level would have insisted everything remained true - but the human sense of "down" found a new home. Dust slid. The Gringotts case slid with it, bumping over seams, breaking one latch, then another. It yawed open a hand's width. Inside, Cassandra saw the neat folders of her surveys, the tin of grease pencils she preferred, the polished goblin-made clamps that had made it possible to fix a ward long enough to learn how to steal it.

"I'm sorry," she told all of it, and meant it like a prayer.

Araminta's eyes flicked to the case. Calculation fired behind the lens glass. She made for it; Rahetep blocked her again, not touching this time, merely occupying. She was smaller than him and hated it. She cut at him with a charter like a knife.

"Out of my way, relic."

"And leave a lady to rummage unsupervised?" he said, appalled, and that was a laugh in Cassandra's throat if she had allowed herself one.

The seal wasn't clean. Seals never are. You don't shut a house without breaking a few things you meant to keep. A rib of the ceiling let go. Stone jumped like an animal startled in its pen. Tarek swore in a language that had learned to swear elegantly and threw a buttress of force

above Cassandra's head. It wasn't bright. It was dense. The rib hit it and slid aside and cracked somewhere expendable.

"Cassandra," Tarek said, not a warning now - permission.

She drove the wand deeper. The crack in it went from ember to thread of white fire. She felt something inside the wood surrender - a splintering not of defeat but of gift. The wand gave her its last. Heat hissed up her fingers and burned her palm in a pattern that would be a scar if she lived through it. The smell of singed skin threaded through clove and stone-dust.

The room took a panicked breath.

All of them fed it, reflexively - Araminta trying to cast, acolytes clinging to numbers, Rahetep defending courtesy, Tarek protecting bodies, Nebu spending his nine lives like small coins to distract a god from a treasury.

Stop counting, Cassandra told herself, and because she couldn't make the room obey, she made herself a boundary. She thought of nothing she would miss. She thought of duty done and debts called in and doors shutting at night in streets where people trust their neighbors. She thought of being *small.*

She spoke for the first time at full voice, and the room leaned to her because it had been starving for the calories she withheld and now she was offering a single, perfect morsel.

"All knowledge is borrowed light," she said, the phrase from a place older than Gringotts, older than kings, not the spell itself - no, that would be another chapter - but the seed of it, the moral of it, the phrase the wand would remember when it had nothing left to be but a conduit.

Araminta flinched as if slapped. The acolytes faltered. Even the star seemed to reconsider the flavor of the air.

Cassandra turned the seal.

There was a sensation like thread passing through cloth, like a stitch pulled snug. The temple's lungs closed on a last, unwilling exhale and then refused to open for anyone but time itself. The floor folded at the hinge and made a new angle of down. Walls kissed and held. The net went slack beyond saving. The star scraped its dulled points against stone and threw off sparks that refused to be fire.

A roaring began. Not in the ear - inside the bones. The whole place spoke *less.* The grandness bled out of the chamber, the ridiculous dignity of stolen breath, the pretend permanence. The sound made by that subtraction was a kind of mercy.

"Fall back!" Tarek shouted, because sometimes you have to feed the world a word to save a life. He wrapped one arm around Cassandra's waist and hauled, no gallantry, all leverage. Rahetep pivoted with absurd ballroom grace and shunted Araminta away from a seam that wanted to be a mouth. She spat a curse that had more spite than magic in it and stumbled, wrong-footed on a floor that had stopped being impressed by her shoes.

Nebu leapt onto the Gringotts case. He planted both forepaws on the open lid and shoved it shut with a clack, as if tidying before the movers arrive. “Terrible filing,” he yelled at no one and everyone, and then: “Left! The corridor!”

The corridor had become a throat. It pulsed with the effort of saying no.

They ran for it, or rather, they moved in the general direction of escape while the room attempted to convince their ankles that direction was an opinion. The seal did its work behind them, folding, compounding, closing accounts. Cracks starbursted ahead and behind, delicate lace that became rubble only when no one was under it. The braziers toppled and went out in embarrassed puffs, as if caught boasting at a funeral. Chains fell in curtains that had forgotten how to be metal and were cloth for the length of a sigh.

Something heavy - a pillar or another century - came down in front of them. Tarek threw his shoulder against it; Cassandra shoved with him; Rahetep pressed one measured palm to the stone and whispered to it about thresholds and how to behave in front of ladies. The pillar decided it had been mistaken and rolled, grudging.

Araminta shot a glance back at the center of the room where the star, trapped by the closing, spun on itself in a brilliant, useless fret. She looked calculating, then desperate, then something Cassandra had never seen on her: surprised by the existence of a boundary she could not litigate away. She darted sideways, clever even scared, and found another path the room hadn’t closed yet.

“Don’t - ” Cassandra began, and swallowed the verb. She did not command. She could not afford to.

They reached the first chamber - the ribbed hall with the lion-paw braziers now toppled, the central bowl buckled like a dent in a breastplate. The gold filaments in the arches guttered. Air moved in long, shuddering inhales that didn’t lead to exhales. The temple was holding its breath like a child under a table.

Nebu sprinted ahead and skidded, claws out, across a slick of dust. He vanished for a heartbeat, then reappeared with a proud, furious yowl, wearing a cobweb like a stole. “Stairs!” he announced. “And a very offended beetle.”

“Go,” Tarek said to Cassandra, and it wasn’t gallantry or command; it was geography. He planted himself in the doorway and turned, wand up, as the acolytes finally broke discipline and tried to flee through their own net, tangling themselves in numbers.

Araminta appeared at the far edge of the chamber, breathing hard, hair finally imperfect. She looked at Cassandra across a space full of buckling light and falling architecture. There was no time for debate, so Araminta reached for the only weapon in reach: contempt.

“You have doomed us,” she said. “For an idea.”

Cassandra, panting, sweat cold on her back, cheeks stung by radiant cuts, found she could still tilt her chin. “For a boundary,” she said. “Which you taught me to respect only when it served you.”

The ceiling sighed. A slab let go. Tarek yanked Cassandra through the doorway as the slab slammed where she had been standing. The shock punched dust into their mouths. Rahetep flowed after them - there was no other word - and turned back because of course he turned back, the idiot, the gentleman, because behind him there were still people in a house and he had always seen himself as their host.

“Nebu!” Cassandra shouted before she could stop herself, the calorie spent. The cat wheeled like a thrown coin and sprinted past her boots, then skidded to a stop and pivoted back toward Rahetep.

“Go!” she tried again, quieter, the plea squeezed almost into thought.

He did not. He launched himself up Rahetep’s leg, claws finding linen, and scrambled onto one bony shoulder like a general mounting a horse. “Left again,” he commanded his king. “Your *other* left.”

They stumbled into the first corridor, the one that had felt like a rib cage on the way in. Now it was the inside of a lung choosing to be still. The gold filaments in the walls blinked in gratitude and then dimmed; the runes along the arches curled their tails into themselves like sleeping cats. Behind them, the Breathing Hall’s last exhale went out with a sound like sand poured onto velvet.

For a heartbeat - ridiculous, tender - they could hear water somewhere above them, the Nile kneading stone the way a mother kneads dough, steady, patient, indifferent.

“Keep moving,” Tarek said, coughing once, wincing; the cough had a cost. He laced his fingers through Cassandra’s and towed - friend to friend, not hero to burden.

They reached the temple’s mouth. The breath from outside rolled in: cold, river and mud and the exhausted sweetness of lotus. Behind them, the corridor groaned, then relaxed in relief as the seal found the far hinge and clicked. The door - if you could call it that - shut on everything.

Not perfectly. Nothing ends clean. The last thing that squeezed through the seam with them was sound.

Breathing. Not human. Not divine. The inhale of something old enough to remember how the world had sounded when it was undecided and arrogant. The exhale of something learning their names like a hobby.

They tumbled out into night. The sky had come down while they’d been arguing with mathematics. Stars pinned it to the world with a clerk’s persnickety insistence on even margins. The Nile whispered past, black as unblotted ink.

Cassandra landed on her hands and knees in damp sand. She retched up air and a single, copper taste of blood. Her wand slid from her fingers and lay there humming like a thing asleep and dreaming badly. The crack down its grain glowed a soft, exhausted ember.

Tarek dropped beside her and then rolled to sit, chest heaving, eyes wide, laugh caught somewhere between horror and gratitude. Rahetep straightened slowly, the way old men do when they don’t want to make anyone watch them hurt, and adjusted his wrapping at the wrist as if the night were a drawing room and he had merely tripped over a rug.

Nebu settled, trembling, in the hollow of Cassandra’s back, paws kneading reflexively through her robe into the ache beneath. “Well,” he said hoarsely into the fabric. “That was *civilized.*”

Araminta emerged last, hair loosened, glasses askew, soot stippling her collar like freckles she would never allow herself to keep. She stood on the threshold because even now some part of her wanted to negotiate with a door. The temple said nothing. Negotiations were closed.

She looked at Cassandra, and for a sliver of a second there was something raw there - recognition? envy? - before it slammed back behind habit. “This isn’t over,” she said, but the wind stole the edges off the words and made them smaller than she meant.

Cassandra pushed herself upright. The world tilted and then obligingly straightened. She picked up her wand. It was warm and miserable in her hand. She lifted it, tested the hollow in the wood where certainty had been. It answered with a small, stubborn hum.

She turned back to the black mouth in the rock.

The seal had not only closed the temple; it had marked it. A fine, dark hinge line traced the entrance now, precise and unforgiving, a scar the size of architecture. If someone wanted to pry it later, they would have to admit they were breaking something that had decided to stay shut.

Cassandra let her shoulders drop a fraction. She was shaking. Her palms stung. Her throat tasted like iron and old paper.

Nebu butted his head against her wrist. “Tea?” he suggested, ridiculous, practical. It was the only prayer either of them believed in.

“Tea,” she said, voice roughened into the register of vow.

Behind the hinge, through stone that no longer wished to be porous, came that sound again. Inhale. Exhale. Not a threat. Not a comfort. A fact.

The night took it and filed it under *to be dealt with*, and the river went on writing the ledger of the earth.

The night felt indecently ordinary.

Cool air licked Cassandra’s sweat-salted face; the Nile muttered to itself, black silk over stone. Bullfrogs bargained in the reeds. Stars pinned the sky with the fussy neatness of a clerk who double-checks every margin. Behind them, the temple’s hinge-dark mouth sat in the rock like a completed sum - no more entries on this line.

Tarek leaned back on his palms and blew out a breath that trembled only at the end. Rahetep, fastidious even with his wrappings scuffed and his dignity dented, dusted ash from an immaculate cuff as if correcting a social error. Nebu, still panting, still electric, pressed his forehead against Cassandra's wrist until the shake in her hand stopped pretending not to exist.

Araminta stood at the threshold doing what she always did first: assessing the paperwork of the world. Her glasses were crooked; she leveled them with two precise fingers. Soot stippled her collar in a pattern she would never keep. She looked at the seam Cassandra had written into the living rock - the fine, unforgiving line where the temple had chosen to shut - and for a heartbeat something naked crossed her face. Not fear. Not yet. The grief of a woman looking at a locked door and imagining the tidy work she could do beyond it.

"You think this is finished," she said. The wind sanded the edges off the words, made them smaller. "How like a field agent: slam the lid and declare the dragon tamed."

Cassandra turned the wand in her hand, feeling the heat where the crack had burned itself into her palm's life-line. "Not tamed," she said. "Refused."

"Same theology, different hymn," Araminta replied. She squinted at the hinge. "It will pivot."

Tarek laughed once, dry. "On whose authority? Yours?"

"On precedent," Araminta said, and smiled with a briskness that, in a boardroom, had made men agree against their own interests. "Everything opens. Vaults. Tombs. People."

"Only once," Nebu murmured, "in the case of people."

Araminta ignored him in the way one ignores a valet who knows too much. "You have sealed us *out* of a sovereign instrument, Miss Blythe. The Order is not your enemy here. *Entropy* is. When it has finished with your hinge, I will be where you are not." She touched the rock with her gloved palm. The glove's satin rasped against stone. "And I do not intend to be on the wrong side of history because a junior curse-breaker developed a conscience at an inconvenient hour."

"My conscience is habit," Cassandra said softly. "It will be inconvenient tomorrow, too."

"Then let us make tomorrow," Araminta said - and lifted her wand.

Cassandra moved to interpose, a sharp reflex born of vault floors and bad decisions. Tarek caught her elbow. "Wait." He nodded at Araminta, not in deference but in curiosity. "What do you plan to do? Bribe a hinge?"

"Appeal," Araminta said, without irony. She straightened, drew breath - too much of it - and *spoke to the seam.* Not to the temple or to the night; to the logic of closure itself, the arithmetic that said *enough.* Her words were polished legalese shaped into magic: clauses braided to clauses, the grammar of loopholes.

"Open for audit," she commanded. "By authority of the Custodial Order and its duly appointed agents. For review. For improvement."

The hinge line shivered.

It was the smallest movement - merely the suggestion of a shrug - but it answered. Of course it answered. The temple had been made by people who built courts and kept ledgers and believed that procedure could keep gods honest. An appeal fit. The seam began to warm, a flush along stone like the first breath of an illness you told yourself was just the weather.

“No,” Cassandra said, and the word left her mouth like a coin tossed away from a beggar. She could not afford verbs, and she spent one anyway. She stepped toward the door, lifted her wand, placed its cracked line along the hinge.

Araminta cut her off with a glance that was all pupil and blade. “Stand down, Miss Blythe. You cannot out-argue me with a stick of wood.”

“I don’t intend to argue,” Cassandra said - and then, softly, to the hinge itself: “No more entries.”

The wand thrummed. The seam cooled. The temple chose, a little, to be stubborn.

Araminta’s mouth tightened. “Very well. If audit will not persuade - ”

She slipped her free hand into her coat and drew out a slim, unlovely object: a goblin-fabricated pry-wand, all leverage and no elegance, the kind issued to Gringotts directors and almost never used where anyone could see. Cassandra had held one twice in her life and felt unclean afterward.

“ - we escalate.”

Tarek swore under his breath in a way that made the night glance over its shoulder. “Don’t - ”

Araminta slid the pry-wand’s hooked end into the seam. It fit too well. Of course it fit. The bank sold the world the tools to undo itself, retail.

“Araminta,” Rahetep said, courtly even now, “there are houses one does not enter by the utility door.”

She met his gaze. For a fraction of a second the poise blew back and the ambition showed bare beneath - uncompromising, devout in the way only secular faiths manage. “Majesty,” she said, and this time it *was* a title and not a sneer, “you, of all people, understand that posterity must be administrated.”

She levered.

The hinge screamed.

Not in sound - sound fled - but inside their bones, in their teeth, in the place behind the eyes that hurts when you stare at figures too long in bad light. The seam split a hair; the night took a step back.

Water flexed. The Nile huffed against its banks, a sleeper turning over. The stars, beyond caring, held. The pry-wand bit a fraction deeper.

Cassandra laid her palm flat on the rock, against the hinge. The heat of work throbbed through the stone into the meat of her hand, into the burn the wand had left there. “No,” she whispered to the door again, to herself, to any god listening. “No.”

The temple answered with a patient, exhausted thing: *I said no.*

The pry-wand sparked in Araminta’s grip. She jerked; the spark ran up her sleeve and bit her shoulder. She flinched - annoyance, not retreat - and leaned her weight into the lever.

Cassandra did not think. She *knew.* She swung the cracked wand like a baton and traced, across the pry-wand’s polished shaft, the smallest seal she had ever made - no flourish, no signature, just a tick on the ledger.

The pry-wand seized. Not forever; nothing does. For a breath, it belonged to the door more than to Araminta. For a breath, it remembered that it was a tool and not a key.

That breath cost them.

The hinge, offended by the argument, stopped being a hinge.

It became a mouth.

Rock that had been stone a thousand years chose to be sand for a second. The seam liquefied. The pry-wand slid, jerked free… and took Araminta with it. She stumbled forward, one foot over the threshold, and the door *inhaled.*

“Back!” Tarek barked. He was already moving. He caught Cassandra’s sleeve and yanked. The intake caught both of them anyway - caught Rahetep by the linen trailing from his wrist, caught Nebu by the sin of refusing to leave his fool king, caught the front hem of Araminta’s perfect coat and the laces of the nearest acolyte’s boot and the edge of the Nile’s breath besides.

The world tilted toward the dark.

Sand avalanched upward in a narrow, hungry cyclone. It took their ankles and knees and arguments and made all of them equally granular. Cassandra had the absurd thought that she was being written into the book she had just slammed shut - a bookmark jammed in by an impatient clerk.

She lost her footing. Tarek’s grip slipped in grit and sweat; she clawed for him, caught his wrist, lost it, caught linen instead - Rahetep’s. Nebu’s claws punctured her shoulder through robe and the flesh beneath, sharp little commas anchoring her to a sentence that insisted on being finished. Araminta’s hand snatched at Cassandra’s sleeve and found it; for an instant, the two of them were a chain of women who trusted neither each other nor gravity. The seam widened to accommodate.

They went in.

The first chamber flashed past them in reverse: ribs collapsing, braziers dropping, gold filaments unpinning like hair slipped from combs. Air slapped Cassandra's face, then left; stone shouldered her ribs and apologized after. The corridor that had been a throat became an esophagus with opinions. The temple did not swallow them. It *filed* them - down, down, past floors that remembered holding courts and tea, past arches that remembered being taller, to a place that did not remember at all.

They dropped into night.

Not the night of the river and the frogs. A black so entire it had forgotten stars. The sand spat them out in a low, vast chamber that glowed from no source as if lit by a heart dreaming under the floor. Cassandra landed badly, shoulder first, fire slicing her arm where Nebu's claws had promised loyalty. She rolled and came up on a knee with a sound bitten off between her teeth.

Araminta hit the stone and stayed down for a count of three, then pushed herself up with a socialite's refusal to be seen sprawled. Blood darkened her sleeve where the pry-wand's spark had kissed her. The nearest acolyte fell to hands and knees and retched up numbers; they splashed and evaporated like spilled ink. Tarek arrived in a controlled ruin of limbs and oaths and found Cassandra by instinct, his hand closing on her shoulder for proof. Rahetep flowed to his feet with a dancer's insultingly efficient grace and looked around, face unreadable beneath linen and centuries.

The chamber breathed.

Not the scrape of a collapsing vault, not the pant of stone after exertion. A slow inhale that expanded the walls by the idea of a hair; a slow exhale that carried with it the smell of honey burned a long time ago and the iron taste you get when you bite your lip to keep from saying too much.

Cassandra wiped grit from her mouth with the back of her hand. Her wand, knocked loose in the slide, buzzed up to her palm like a trained thing and lay there, feverish, ashamed, ready.

In the middle distance - if distances could be said to exist in a room that had decided to be as near as a whisper - something rose like mist and collected itself into a sphere not of light but of attention. Gold at the edges. Dark at the center the way a pupil is dark. It blinked without eyes.

Araminta took a ragged step toward it, then another. Cassandra's body moved to stop her before her mind had finished the sentence. Rahetep's hand landed lightly on Cassandra's shoulder - permission and warning both. Nebu's tail thumped once against her spine, then went very still. Tarek exhaled a wordless plea into the dust.

"Careful," Cassandra said. The word cost her. It was worth it.

Araminta smiled - broken lip, perfect teeth, blood making a mockery of composure and failing. "At last," she murmured, and for once there was no chill arithmetic in it. Only relief. "The instrument."

The sphere inhaled.

Not air. *Meaning.* The taste of everything they had been saying since the first time a human told a fire its name. The edges of the chamber brightened as if applause had been threatened and then chosen against. Lines of gold in the stone wrote themselves and erased themselves in a single motion.

Cassandra reached without looking and found Tarek's hand. He gripped back. Nebu hooked his front paws into the torn fabric at her shoulder and did not retract his claws. Rahetep stood as if in a receiving line, straight-backed, polite, the last gracious man in a mausoleum of self-importance.

The Breath of Amun exhaled.

It did not move toward them. It did not have to. The exhale was a tide of promises: peace, answer, forever. It smelled like hot sugar and libraries and the first warm wind after a season of stone. It said: *No one you love shall have to leave.* It said: *The worst thing will never happen.* It said: *We can keep this.*

Something in Cassandra's chest, old as the first essay she had written that made a professor shut up, leaned. The wand in her hand hummed a tone that made the hair rise along her arms; the crack down its length glowed dully, like an ember remembering flame. She felt at once the ache of wanting and the shame of it, and the absence of shame seemed, suddenly, like a kind of prudishness.

Araminta took another step. Her heel slid; she recovered. Tears had cut lines through dust on her face. "At last," she said again, hoarse.

"Don't," Tarek managed, no argument, only love worn into the shape of a warning.

"Don't," Nebu breathed, and the word came out as a growl, because sometimes grammar must make way for animal honesty.

"Every seeker meets their reflection at the end of the journey," Rahetep said, softly, like an etiquette reminder shared in a vestibule. "Be certain you'll like what you see."

Cassandra raised her wand. Not to cast. To remind her hand what it was for.

The chamber inhaled again.

Behind her, somewhere - in the walls, in the seam that had become a throat - stone shifted and settled. The temple had shut, good and proper. The hinge had turned all the way through. There would be no running out to the honest night, no gallant sprint to the Nile, no tea in the reeds to wash the taste of this choice from anyone's mouth.

They were sealed *in,* exactly as the seal had promised someone they would be. With the relic. With each other. With the arithmetic of a wish dressed up in scripture.

Cassandra breathed in - once, deliberately, against the rhythm the room preferred - and held the breath where promises could not reach it.

“Right,” she said, and her voice came out rough, human, insufficient, and gloriously so. “Then let’s not feed it.”

She lowered the wand, opened her left hand, and found Tarek’s again. Nebu’s claws bit a little deeper. Rahetep inclined his head to his old enemy, the future, as if inviting it to tea and intending, this time, to pour the first cup himself.

The light in the stone dimmed to a pulse. The sphere hovered - patient, inevitable.

Darkness gathered its skirts.

Chapter 13: The Breath and the Bond

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The Breath and the Bond

Sand had a sound when it settled - a million soft decisions concluding at once. Cassandra came back to herself inside that hush, face pressed to stone warm as skin, mouth dry with dust that tasted faintly of honey. Somewhere close, water dripped in a slow, ceremonial rhythm, as if the ruin itself were counting its own breaths.

She lifted her head. The world answered with pain: a bright, ringing flare along her left temple, a bruise blossoming behind her eyes. When the colors receded she saw the chamber as if through glass - tilted, half-collapsed, its geometry broken and beautiful. A ceiling rib like a whale's bone jutted out above her; the black stone floor had buckled where the sealing rune had done its brutal kindness. Hairline cracks veined outward from a central crater.

In the crater, the air was not air at all.

It swelled and fell, swelled and fell, as if the chamber were the inside of a lung. Light formed there - not illumination but substance, a gold mist braided upon itself, dense and weightless, breathing in place. It hummed in many keys at once, too low for hearing and too high for thought, a sound that seemed to live behind the ears.

The Breath of Amun.

Cassandra scrambled to her knees. Her fingers found her wand by habit before her eyes did. Wood met palm with the comfort of a familiar handshake, and then she saw what it had become - a hairline fissure spiraling from grip to tip, as delicate as a frost pattern, as unforgiving. When she shifted her thumb, the fissure glittered like captured lightning.

"Don't," she whispered to herself, as if the wand might take offense. The breath in the crater lifted, answering her whisper with a brighter swell, and the old runes carved around the chamber's circumference stirred like sleepers waking to their names.

A cough. Not hers.

"Tarek?" Her voice came out raw, the consonants sandy.

"I'm here," Tarek answered from the shadow of a toppled column. He limped into the glow, hat gone, glasses dusted pale. Blood darkened one sleeve; he held his forearm close to his ribs with the calm impatience of a man who disliked making a fuss in front of ancient wonders. "The exit is… not presently taking guests."

Cassandra's eyes adjusted; shapes separated from the ruin. On a shelf of broken stone near the far wall lay Araminta Voss, her silver pince-nez crushed, gloved hands torn open to the

meat. She was startlingly small without her posture. Her breath rattled, but she was watching - of course she was, a scholar to the end - her gaze fixed on the living gold.

On the other side, Nebu's tail flicked from beneath a shattered lintel. He backed out with the dignity of a monarch reversing from an awkward audience. Dust powdered his golden coat, lending him the tragic air of a lion carved in an abandoned arcade. He shook himself, sneeze-snarled, and flicked a pebble with precise disdain.

"I regret to inform you," he announced, voice a velvet rag, "that I have sand in regions not recognized by polite anatomy."

"Alive, then," Cassandra said, relief flaring through the ache. "Where - "

" - your mummy, I know." Nebu's ears flattened as the gold light breathed again. "He's there."

Lord Rahetep stood at the edge of the crater, upright and composed, his wrappings torn in ribbons that trailed like ceremonial sashes. He had braced his hands on a slab of obsidian as if steadying an altar, and the obsidian, like all sensible stone in the presence of excessive divinity, had cracked beneath him. When he turned, the light made a delicate lantern of his eyes.

"Miss Blythe," he said. The civility of it broke something smaller and more human in her chest. "You overachieve even at cataclysm. Admirable."

She wanted to laugh; it came out as a dry hiccup. "Consider it an apology to the Nile for our earlier paperwork."

The Breath swelled. Hieroglyphs - not paint, not chisel marks, but light in the shapes of speech - asked the walls their old questions. They rose from the stone like steam; they braided, split, rejoined; they hovered a moment over Cassandra's hands and threaded through her fingers like curious fish, warm and inquisitive. Her skin prickled as if a language were tasting her.

Tarek took one involuntary step closer, eyes luminous with a wonder he usually hid behind his skepticism. The gold mist thickened, became a sphere within its own weather: eddies, vortices, windless currents folding into one another. Within those folds, Cassandra glimpsed unhelpful things - the suggestion of a dawn seen from above, the shape of a river that was also a spine, the impression of a woman leaning over a book that was also a door. Each glimpse struck the back of the mind and drained away, leaving the sensation of having nearly remembered something important.

"Don't look too long," she said, more to herself than to anyone else.

"And if I refuse?" Araminta's voice scratched across the floor. Cassandra turned, guilt rising like heat. She hadn't meant to leave her there. She crawled to her, Tarek already there before her, tearing a strip from his shirt for a bandage. Araminta swatted his hands aside with undiminished authority and pointed one blood-smeared glove at the breathing light. "There it is, Miss Blythe. The first principle disguised as the last."

“Don’t move,” Cassandra said, and then, because humor was the only tourniquet she trusted, added gently, “You’re leaking decorum.”

Araminta’s mouth twitched toward what might, in other species, be called a smile. “We could have built a world with this.” Her eyes did not leave the sphere. “A clean world. Not ruled by the tantrums of death.”

“Built,” Tarek echoed, not unkindly. “You say it as if the world were a vault.”

“It is,” Araminta murmured. “Most of you simply forget the key.”

Nebu had come to sit beside Cassandra’s knee, tail wrapped, pupils thin with alarm. He watched the Breath as one watches a storm decide between the hill and the house. “It’s awake enough to be ungrateful,” he said. “We should leave before it starts offering us bargains in exchange for our better instincts.”

“Doorways?” Cassandra asked Tarek, scanning the fractures for any geometry that could be persuaded into an exit.

“Blocked,” he said. “The collapse sealed us neatly. As if somebody designed it.”

She felt the faintest sting of pride. “Somebody did.”

“Then un-design it,” Nebu said, and flicked a glance at her wand. “Preferably without exploding your toothpick.”

Cassandra raised the wand despite the warning. The fissure along its length vibrated against her palm with a note she felt in the bones of her wrist. When she drew breath to summon a diagnostic charm, the gold sphere inhaled with her. The room brightened, and the charm she had not yet spoken hovered on her tongue like a word remembering it was a word.

Rahetep lifted one hand, palm out. “Cassandra.” He used her given name rarely; the sound of it here was like a hand pressed to a fever. “Do not feed it.”

“It listened,” she said, throat tight. “To a breath.”

“It listens to everything,” Nebu said. His whiskers shivered with more than dust. “That is its flattery. And its trap.”

The chamber’s walls replied, scripts awakening by degrees, layers of older languages sliding out from beneath the newer like geologic strata of prayer. Cassandra’s training tripped and stumbled, eager to parse, to catalogue, to categorize. She had learned six dead alphabets out of vanity and three out of loneliness; here, words she had never met came to greet her as if they’d been waiting with a patient smile.

In the gold she saw - not with eyes - a small, particular vision: her own desk in London. Neat stacks at last. A ledger closing with a sigh of perfect completion. The sensation of a mind without hunger.

It hurt. She shut her eyes. The vision blew away like sugar on the tongue.

“Stop that,” she told the light, voice shaking. “That’s cheating.”

“Cheating,” Nebu repeated, polite as a razor. “What a human way to describe a god.”

Araminta coughed, a ribbon of red at the corner of her mouth. “Don’t be provincial, cat. Gods are only concentrations of policy.”

“Then this one is the Ministry of Desire,” Tarek said, and bound her arm despite her glare. “And the budget is infinite.”

The gold sphere pulsed again. With each swell, the chamber’s fractures knit by a finger’s breadth, then split wider: inhale, repair; exhale, ruin. The place was choosing between two stories and liked both. Dust fell in soft veils, motes drifting through light that turned them to coins.

Cassandra felt her own breathing trying to take its rhythm. She forced hers irregular, off-tempo, petty in a schoolgirl way. The sphere dimmed, faintly affronted. She smiled through chattering teeth. “Right,” she whispered. “You’re listening.”

She closed her fist around the fractured wand. Warmth bled from the wood into her palm - more like a pulse than like heat, a delicate thrumming that made the hair at her nape aware of itself. For a moment she had the uncanny sense that the wand was not a tool but a throat.

“Hello,” the Breath said.

It did not speak aloud. It spoke through everything that could be made to mean: the slow drip, the fissures whispering as they widened and healed, the soft rasp of Nebu’s tongue as he wiped dust from his paw, the hiss of Tarek’s bandage knot. The meaning arrived in her like a remembered scent. Hello, hello, as the tide says hello.

Cassandra swallowed. “Hello,” she said back, because to withhold a greeting would have felt like bad manners in a temple where etiquette still mattered.

“Cassandra,” Rahetep said again, a warning laid gently across her name.

She glanced at him. In the living gold, the old king’s posture had changed. He looked not like a curiosity but like a man standing in front of a beloved, dangerous door. Love and fear were cousins on his face.

“It knows me,” she said.

“It knows everyone,” Nebu said softly. “It is the first question and the last answer, and it cheats at both.”

“Isn’t that what we do?” Cassandra whispered, and hated how hungry she sounded.

Dust sighed. The sphere drifted closer - no, not drifted; the world rearranged itself such that the distance was now smaller. The breath of it touched her cheek, warm as a hand that had learned kindness late. Gold seeped into the cracks of her wand, a slow capillary brightening. The fissure shivered like a string being tuned.

Araminta’s gaze sharpened to a needle. Tarek’s hand tightened around Cassandra’s sleeve.

“Careful,” he breathed.

“I am,” she said.

She was not.

The hum swelled, and with it, the sense of a mind behind the music - not singular, not plural, but aggregated, like a choir that included the throats of sand and stars. It did not press; it invited. Curiosity rose in her like a tide, old and young at once. She had followed riddles her whole life because solving them felt like making the world safer by making it smaller. Here was the opposite promise: a riddle that would keep the world safe by making it vast.

“Miss Blythe,” Rahetep said. She heard an order and a plea dressed as a title. “Attend to me, if you can.”

She pulled her gaze from the gold.

He stood very straight, king again in his ruin, dust softening the stern lines of linen and bone. The light shone through him in thins, showing the lattice of spells that shaped him. As she watched, those spells vibrated the way her wand had, a sympathetic resonance. It made her stomach turn as if a bridge had begun to sing under too much weight.

“Do you see?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” she said. And then, because the truth was a kind of faith: “No.”

He smiled, that private, weary smile reserved for students who asked the right wrong question. “Good.” He looked past her to the sphere. “It woke. And it remembers how to want.”

Another pulse. Another fall of dust. Somewhere in the ruin, a stone surrendered; the sound was soft, like a body sitting down after a long day.

Cassandra drew a breath of her own - ragged, human, small. She met the gold with the most stubborn thing she possessed: her refusal to be impressed without reserves. “All right,” she said, as if addressing an overconfident artifact in a back room at Gringotts. “If we’re to have a conversation, we have house rules.”

Nebu made a choked sound that might have been a laugh. Tarek bowed his head to hide his grin.

The living light leaned closer, as if amused. It was very nearly a purr.

And the temple - breathing around them, counting the moments like beads - listened, and waited to see who would remember their manners first.

They did not agree on house rules.

The Breath answered Cassandra’s audacity the way a sea answers a pebble: it folded around the declaration and made a brighter shoreline of it. Gold thickened, the light within the sphere knitting like muscle, and the runes along the walls stood up straighter, wide awake now, each stroke sharp as a reed cut this morning. The air smelled of clean linen, crushed mint, and hot copper - the intimacy of a temple after offerings.

Cassandra tasted the pulse at the back of her tongue. It wasn’t sound; it was a thought choosing a rhythm. She lifted her cracked wand in the small, stern way of a teacher about to take attendance.

“Rule one,” she said. “No bargains in small print.”

The light breathed in, a courteous mockery of obedience. On the walls, a single sign drew itself with patient strokes: a feather. The simple, terrible measure of a heart.

“Ma’at,” Tarek whispered, reverent despite himself. He edged a half-step between Cassandra and the sphere, equal parts scholar and friend. “Balance.”

“Flirtation,” Nebu corrected, his tail switching. “It brings out a feather and pretends it’s moderation.”

Araminta laughed - a dry, flaking sound - and gestured with her ruined hand. “Stop pretending to be provincial, all of you. It will speak in whatever alphabet we adore. Show it a ledger and it will turn wisdom into numbers for you, Miss Blythe.”

The feather dissolved. In its place unfurled a different language, one Cassandra knew too well: tidy columns, totals, margins illuminated with a faint silver that looked like moonlight reflected off polished goblin steel. Numbers marched down like a disciplined army, never stumbling, never lying. Across the top appeared a heading in precise banking hand, so accurate it made Cassandra’s knuckles itch:

Ledger of All Debts Owed by Death.

Tarek inhaled, a small, wounded sound. Cassandra felt the trick of it and the thrill of it in the same breath, shame and hunger like threads twisting.

“Rule two,” she said, forcing sardonic calm into her voice, “No ledgers. No lists. No encyclopedias of reality.” She swallowed. “Especially not cross-referenced.”

The sphere brightened, delighted. A second script spiraled up beside the first: loops and teeth she recognized only from nights spent with dictionaries and ink-stained fingertips. Proto-languages, the mother-tongues of mother-tongues, some she had glimpsed once as marginalia in an illegal folio, some no one had ever recorded. They braided into a crown. Her throat went hot. Under her tongue, the beginnings of a syllabary arranged themselves without her consent, a new alphabet proposing itself like a suitor.

Tarek stepped closer to the wall, his eyes enormous and wet as if the light had got inside them. The gold traced the air in front of him and constructed an altar of words that never had altars: the names of the dialects that drowned when rivers were dammed; the grammar of

merchants who sold salt beside a sea that had forgotten it was a sea; the sentence that would prove, cleanly and finally, how language taught the first humans to look at stars and know they were looking back.

“Oh,” he breathed. “Oh, but let me - ”

“Don’t,” Cassandra said, more sharply than she intended. The light, sensing the friction, flared. For Tarek alone, the sphere gathered itself into a gently spinning astrolabe of syllables, an orrery of utterances. Each wheel turned with the faint, sweet click of a prayer bead. She could see his hand rising as if to steady it.

He wasn’t vain, not like she was. His wanting made no racket. That made it worse.

“Rule three,” she said, and hoped her voice could be heard past the pounding of her own want. “If you show us what we long for, you show us also what it costs. Full measure.”

The sphere complied with indecent eagerness. Beneath the orbiting alphabets, darker ink swam up like a bruise, and a simple sketch took shape, drawn in outlines of starlight and soot: a small library built of clay and date-palm where children traced sounds with reeds - then the cracked floor empty after flood. A library again, stone this time, where a scholar copied stories by oil lamp - then a hand blows out the lamp as soldiers enter. Again: a classroom shuttered because the teacher has been arrested. Each scene held a different century. The gold annotated them with a sober tenderness that felt like apology.

Tarek flinched as if something had lightly slapped him. He lowered his hand. His mouth folded into the kind of smile people wore at funerals when humor showed up uninvited.

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely, and stepped back.

“See?” Nebu said softly, though his voice had no glee in it. “It always wears the right mask for the room.”

Cassandra pivoted to Araminta, intending to drag her attention away from the light by any means left - but Araminta, who had no interest in orreries of language or feathers on scales, had been given her own private revelation. Before her, the sphere combed itself into a grid. Rooms appeared, corridors without dust, stairways that bent in agreeable angles; enchantments swept floors as if dusting were a polite belief. Transparent vault doors made of nothing so clumsy as metal hung ajar for inspection, each labeled with a number that boasted of its own security. A set of statutes wrote themselves in silver upon the air, clauses cross-referenced, penalties exact and comforting as fences.

Araminta’s pupils dilated until her eyes were almost all pupil. Her breath grew regular, greedy.

“Administration,” she whispered, and for the first time there was wet warmth in her voice. “At last.”

“Of eternity?” Cassandra asked, too fast, trying to keep words between Araminta and the lure.

“Of risk,” Araminta corrected. Her gloved fingers twitched as if they could not decide between stroking the light and typing it. “Take hazard, render it orderly. That is civilization. We don’t end death. We license it. Appointments can be made; scandals, avoided. Lives renewed by application. No more accidents of birth. No more lotteries of health.”

Cassandra’s sarcasm, normally elastic and inexhaustible, found itself brittle as a dry reed. “Will the poor be given queue numbers or merely asked to hold their breath until their betters finish?”

Araminta turned a shrewd, pitying look on her. “Oh, Miss Blythe. You think cruelty lies in systems. Cruelty lives in whims.”

Nebu’s tail curled. “Cruelty lives anywhere it is most at ease.”

The golden grid blossomed a second layer that only Araminta seemed to see: a private office, a desk where letters arrived with official seals, a polished inkwell that never ran dry. The chair was Araminta-sized in the way a throne is king-sized. Cassandra had never before considered that an ink blotter could be seductive.

“Rule four,” Cassandra said, desperate enough that she addressed the light with bright false cheer, the way one addresses a slippery client. “We don’t touch.”

The sphere turned half a degree. It did not withdraw. It exhaled.

Heat slid across Cassandra’s cheekbones. Runes on the floor vibrated like strings. The crack in her wand warmed, gold capillary seeping another inch, and something verdant and terrible pressed at her skull - the sense of a door in her head unlocking with a click she had been born hearing and only now identified.

The chamber blurred. The Breath made an offer it had no right to make.

It showed Cassandra herself.

Not here - not dusty, bruised, frantic - but years hence, quill poised above a page in a room of jewel-dark wood and sober lamps. The woman in the vision was older by no more than a decade, but her eyes were calmer in the way of ice on a river. She wrote with an unhurried surety that came from never needing to guess. On the shelves behind her, books wore her name in discreet gold - compendia of curses unraveled, atlases of ancient grammars corrected and re-sewn, a tidy series of handbooks that explained the inexplicable in five handsome volumes. There was a bell on the desk. When it rang, people whom Cassandra admired came with questions and left with gratitude.

The world had been made smaller and safer and obedient by her. Traps were cataloged, riddles obeyed, wild magic trimmed like hedges into civil shapes. No one died when they needn’t. No one asked a question that did not have an answer already filed in a kind, clear place.

Cassandra felt a sound trying to climb out of her - not a sob, not a laugh, but the noise you make when a childhood wish turns up at your door and knows your name.

Rule four evaporated. There had never been rules.

Her hand started toward the light the way sleep starts toward a dream.

Rahetep moved, linen whispering. The broken obsidian sang under his shift.

“Miss Blythe.” The title again, the old courtesy like a lifeline thrown with the care of someone who has done this before and lost people to their own reflection. “You are about to make an honest mistake.”

She stopped, breath burning. “What if - ” Her voice splintered on the question. She cleared it, tried again, like a violinist finding the note without a teacher. “What if it could be like that? What if I could… fix things?”

“Fixing is a kind of hunger,” Nebu said, and there was no mockery left anywhere in him. “You would eat and eat and never taste. And others would starve on the smell.”

The light, affronted by interruption, tried a different key. It changed flavors. She felt on her tongue the crisp pear of an answer so elegant it would make a headmistress cry; the warm bread of a proof in number theory that would settle a century’s argument; the sugared fig of a rune’s true name, sweet and sticky and finally hers. She ached with it. Nobody had ever told her magic could taste like food.

“Rule five,” she said, voice low, almost a prayer. “If you are real, you will tell us what you take.”

The gold slowed, very slightly. A subtle sorrow crept into its timbre, not unlike a musician obliged to play the piece that proves their limitations. On the walls, the feather returned. Beside it, a heart took shape - not the figurative one, not the cute candy geometry, but a real thing sketched in lines of light and shadow, valves and sinew and the engineering of ache. It hung a moment, beautiful and obscene.

The feather did not move.

Cassandra exhaled. Something in her shoulders, raised for years without her noticing, let itself lower. Anger arrived - not at the Breath, not quite, but at whatever part of herself believed she was owed a world that made sense because she wanted to be kind.

Tarek laid two fingers on the back of her wrist - human weight. “You asked it to show price,” he said softly. “You must pay attention.”

Araminta hissed through her teeth. Her vision had soured; the perfect grid had fogged, and in its fog Cassandra now saw what Araminta could not: queues, of course - but queues that never ended; a desk where complaints piled into geology; an office kept warm by documents burnt for heat. She saw a young witch - a version of herself who had not learned to stop wanting - turned away from a window where her own file lay stamped **PENDING** in ink that never dried.

Araminta did not look. She saw her chair. She reached.

Nebu’s fur jumped with static. “If she touches it - ”

“Don’t,” Cassandra said again, the word smaller each time she used it, as if the temple were wearing it out. She pressed her palm to the stone and found - impossibly - coolth. She swallowed the sweet ache of the life the Breath had offered and held onto the meaner taste of her present breath: dust, fear, friendship.

“Rule six,” she said, and set her voice like a lodestone. “We will not be separated.”

She meant it as a declaration to the temple, to the god, to whatever would listen and take offense. But the gold took it as a prompt for theater. The chamber remapped, softly, like a dream choosing another set. The sphere increased its breathing; its surface thinned; within, shapes swam forward - a hand she knew, a laugh she had cataloged by habit for weeks, the particular angle at which a certain cat pretended not to look worried.

It showed her Rahetep and Nebu together, steadied. It showed the two of them freed from their bondage of centuries: Rahetep’s wrappings falling in a slow, dignified unravel to reveal a body neither living nor dead but perfectly held, a second life without hunger; Nebu awake beside him, no longer bound to one soul but companion by choice, sighing in sunlight on a balcony where hibiscus grew, eyes slitted in that particular feline smile that admits to satisfaction without surrendering pride. They were whole. They were laughing at her terrible puns. They were asking her to stay for tea, always another cup, always another evening perfectly measured, nothing rushed and nothing left to rot.

It was a kindness beyond cruelty. Cassandra’s vision narrowed to a narrow hallway in her chest where hope and dread had elected to live together.

“Is it true?” she asked, not of the light, which would lie graciously, but of Rahetep, who did not know how to lie without making it pretty.

He did not answer. He could not. He was looking at the same scene with a tenderness that broke him open. The architecture of spells that held him hummed louder; the linen across his ribs tightened as if in pain. When he spoke, it was as if each word had to step past guards.

“I want it,” he said. The admission was a man removing his crown to show the bald kindness beneath. “I want it very much.”

Nebu shut his eyes. “I am not proud,” he said, and the arrogance dissolved out of him like salt. “I want it too.”

The Breath leaned in, triumphant, gentle. For each of them it flicked a different light: for Tarek, the lesson preserved; for Araminta, the pen with which to sign eternity; for Rahetep and Nebu, the impossible reprieve; for Cassandra, the office and the quiet books and the answering of all questions, the cessation of this ache in her bones that had begun when she was a girl and heard her first riddle say **come find me**.

Cassandra closed her eyes.

Behind her eyelids the same honeyed visions waited, perfect coinage. She did something small and plain that felt like dying well: she counted. The drip in the ruin had been exact, ceremonial. She found its rhythm and put her breathing on an offbeat again, petty as a schoolgirl, stubborn as a mule. She named the things she could actually touch: stone under palm. Tarek's fingertips, two points of warmth. Nebu's fur barely ghosting her boot. Rahetep's presence, which had always felt like a lamp left burning on purpose in a dark house.

When she opened her eyes, the gold had dimmed a fraction. Not much. Enough.

"Clever girl," Nebu murmured, and sounded like a prayer trying to pass for mockery.

Araminta cursed and pulled herself another inch toward the sphere.

"Miss Voss," Cassandra said, without looking away from the light. "This is where curiosity becomes cruelty. This exact meter."

Araminta smiled, teeth red. "Then you and I are both at home."

The gold listened, patient and pleased, as if dinner guests had arrived with appetites. It breathed in. It breathed out. The chamber moved with it, cracks knitting and dividing, mercy and danger married in each respiration.

Cassandra laid the cracked wand across her knees as if setting a knife aside, and for a moment allowed herself to want everything it offered, bright and entire. Then - gently, like putting a cup back on its saucer - she put the wanting down.

"All right," she said to the living light. "No bargains. No lists. Show us yourself, then. Not our reflections."

The sphere paused - the brief confounded silence of a god asked for honesty. Then it began to change: the gold loosening into threads that showed not gifts but origins - river reed, sun disk, breath upon a mirror, hands cupped to shelter a flame. No ladders to power. Only the first tricks humans learned to keep a little warmth alive in the dark.

And for the first time since waking, Cassandra felt the ache in her wanting slacken.

The temple breathed. They breathed with it - not in time, not obediently, but alongside. And the wanting, called by its name, did not leave, but it ceased to command.

Politeness has a texture. In Araminta Voss it had always been lacquer - hard, flawless, reflecting everything except the hand beneath. Now the lacquer was cracked. The woman inside crawled through it.

She levered herself off the broken paving with the courage of someone who had never believed in the existence of pain until it introduced itself properly. Dust clung to her like shabby lace. Her left glove, torn to the wrist, leaked a steady curate's red. The pince-nez that had once made every room her jurisdiction hung by a bent arm from the bridge of her nose, one lens a blind moon.

No one had taught Araminta how to crawl. She did it tidily.

“Don’t,” Cassandra said, and hated how small the word was in this breathing room.

Araminta’s head tipped toward her - acknowledgment, not obedience. “Miss Blythe,” she said, voice soft as blotting paper. “You are trembling.”

“Because I’m alive,” Cassandra said. “I intend to remain so.”

“Intentions are drafts,” Araminta murmured, and went on.

The Breath drew itself nearer with the good manners of a host who does not make wounded guests cross the room. The sphere thinned to a veil, then a rain of gold filaments, as if undressing for surgery. Heat touched Cassandra’s knuckles. The air smelled of linen in a sunlit window and the moment after lightning.

Nebu stepped sideways with a soundless quickness only cats and guilt possess, blocking Araminta with two pounds of fury. He arched, tail a punctuation mark, whiskers trembling in the currents. “Back,” he hissed. “This is not a buffet.”

Araminta stopped. Not for the cat, but to look him in both gold eyes and let the interest show. “Nebu,” she said, the first time Cassandra had heard her use his name without disdain. “How many centuries have you spent tidying up the appetites of men?”

“Enough to know a well-fed predator when I see one,” he said, not glancing at the sphere.

Araminta’s lip creased in what the charitable might call amusement. “Then you understand my position. We can leash it.”

“We?” Cassandra said. She slid on her knees beside Araminta and caught her elbow. Heat surged from the other woman’s skin - fever or proximity, impossible to say. “Let go of the idea. Let go of it now.”

Araminta did not pull away. She simply turned her face, so close Cassandra saw that her powder had settled into a faint map of years no one had been permitted to discuss. When she spoke, the words came with the gentle vindication of a teacher returning marked papers.

“We guard wealth in vaults,” she said. “Why not eternity? Immortality is the ultimate investment.”

Tarek’s breath left him in a single syllable that did not choose a language. “You would ledger a life.”

“I would end the embarrassment of chance,” Araminta said. “And of pity. Pity is the imagination’s laziness.”

Cassandra tightened her grip, feeling the tendons shift beneath silk. “You call it pity. I call it the brake between you and the cliff.”

Araminta’s eyes warmed, ironically maternal. “Dear girl. I have never driven off a cliff in my life. I build roads.”

Behind them, the gold listened, rapt, like a child learning it has a favorite parent. On the walls, statutes formed again in silver strokes - clauses, subclauses, an architecture of polite dominion. Beside them, the feather waited with an impartial patience that felt like a dare.

Rahetep moved forward, no longer kingly but simply tall. “Madam,” he said, voice the kind invented to reassure and to command in the same breath, “your body is failing you. Allow my - ” he wavered on the noun, the word *physicians* having misplaced itself in his centuries - “allow my friends to bind your wounds.”

Araminta looked up at him as if at a painting too sentimental but undeniably expensive. “Your Majesty,” she said, and with a wincing elegance found her knees under her again. “Your priests began this charity long ago. They were too devout to finish it.”

Nebu’s claws ticked on stone. “They were too wise.”

“Wisdom is a provincial praise word for fear,” Araminta said, and resumed her crawl.

Cassandra didn’t try to drag her. She knew the line between aid and insult in Araminta’s country, and that line could cut. Instead she slid forward with her, a companion to the edge.

“Look,” Cassandra said, very quietly, because quiet was the only voice that had a chance against the gold. “Look properly. It gives you sans queues, sans scandal, sans grief. Does it show you what it will take?”

Araminta’s mouth made a small O as if tasting a citrus. “It will take mess,” she said. “It may take rebellion.” Her eyes glittered. “I have always admired competent rebellions.”

Tarek flanked them, blood binding his sleeve to his skin now; he winced and kept moving. “It will take fault. It will take the right to be wrong and live through it.”

“It will take error off the table,” Araminta corrected. “At last.”

The sphere sighed. Pleasure? Impatience? In its heart, the suggestion of a door opening inward and down.

Cassandra felt the room tilt toward that hinge. She thought of the desk in the vision, the tidy books, the bell. She pictured Araminta at her own desk, a thousand letters a day, each stamped with a precision that no longer reminded her of mercy. She pictured queues that never ended. She pictured the word **PENDING** like frost.

Gently she let go of Araminta’s elbow and took her hand instead. “Please,” she said, and heard the ferocity in it like a splinter of glass. “Please, don’t.”

Araminta’s fingers squeezed back, friendly as a trap closing. “You will thank me.”

“For what?” Cassandra asked.

“For removing the burden of your kindness,” Araminta said simply. “You spend yourself on it. Imagine if the world ran without it.”

Nebu’s ears flattened. “Imagine a world that runs without kindness and tell me if you want to live there.”

Araminta angled her chin. “I do not intend to live there. I intend to run it.”

“Araminta,” Cassandra said, dropping courtesy like a cloak grown too heavy, naked underneath and past caring. “Don’t make me hate you.”

Araminta blinked. For the first time since Cassandra had known her, something uncertain crossed her face - thin, quick, almost a breeze. She looked not at the light, not at Rahetep, not at power, but at Cassandra, as if seeing the young woman who brought her tea during long nights of memoranda and never once put it down on the wrong stack.

“Oh, Cassandra,” she said, and the use of the name was an intimacy Cassandra would have paid not to receive. “If there is hatred after this, it will be for a smaller thing than the end of death. You are sentimental about the abyss.”

She slipped her hand free, with that terrible gentleness people use to refuse a dance, and reached.

The Breath met her halfway.

It did not seize. It did not devour. It welcomed as if temperature were courtesy, as if it had been waiting for the correct appointment slot. Light unspooled around Araminta’s wrist like a hospital band, then climbed with a grateful efficiency. Where gold touched silk, the glove went white - not bleached but clarified: fabric turned to fine powder that kept the texture of silk for a heartbeat before forgetting it had ever been textile and consenting to be dust. Her fingertips vanished into a flurry that sparkled, each mote whispering a syllable too small to hear. Cassandra realized the whispering was her own name. No - names. All the names Araminta had written at the bottoms of forms, a ledger emptying itself into air.

“Stop,” Tarek said, because what else do you say to a tide. He reached - but the gold would not be touched by anything but consent. It slid from him like kindness that had no time.

Nebu made a sound Cassandra had never heard from him, unkingly, a kitten’s cry.

Araminta did not look frightened. She looked busy. Her eyes tracked the climb of light as if supervising a staff. “Yes,” she murmured, more to it than to them. “Yes. Efficient. Finally.”

The gold reached her chest. For an instant her ribs glowed - an anatomy lesson lit from within, tender and indecent. The lines of the heart shone. Cassandra watched, helpless, as a feather, uncalled, slipped into being beside it. It did not weigh. It waited. There was nothing to weigh. Araminta’s heart knew only one measure: purpose.

“Araminta,” Cassandra said, and placed her palm an inch from the light, praying to friction, to drag, to the small physics of friendship. “Tell me to pull you back.”

Araminta turned her head again. The lacquer was gone. What remained was a woman who had been a girl who wanted to be the sort of person who never cried at work. Her mouth softened.

“Write a report,” she said, the ghost of a smile at the corner of it. “Make it neat.”

The gold rose to her throat. Her voice thinned to a ribbon. “And - Miss Blythe?”

“Yes,” Cassandra breathed.

“Do not,” Araminta said, and for the first time in all the years Cassandra had known her, sounded tired, “waste this on pity.”

The light kissed her mouth shut.

For a moment she was statue and embroidery and instruction at once, a figure of silver law stitched in gold. Then she became a storm of white - fine, weightless, impossibly clean. Ash, but not the kind that stink of ruin; ash with no smell but linen and something like old paper turning into sunlight. It lifted in a column and unspooled along the breath of the temple, each mote catching, for a fraction, the curves of letters it had once formed in ink. The whispering continued for a heartbeat after she was gone: the susurrus of clauses looking for their sentences. Then it ceased, and the breath of the room went on, and there was a small, elegant absence where Araminta had been.

Silence arrived with shoes off.

Cassandra’s hand remained where it had hovered, palm warm with heat that had not burned her. She let it fall. It made a dry sound on her robe, the real weight of cloth a mercy.

Tarek bowed his head. It was not prayer. It was the posture you take when language fails you and you refuse to reach for your cleverness.

Nebu sat down, very carefully, as if the floor’s opinion mattered. He licked his paw once, not grooming but thinking. When he looked up, the yellow of his eyes had gone darker, candle to ember. “I will not make a joke,” he said, as if logging the decision for internal audit.

“Good,” Cassandra said. She did not cry. She had always imagined if Araminta died, she would be angry at how small the scene would make her feel. Instead she felt the size of the room shift around the shape of the loss, politely.

Rahetep spread his fingers - grace learned long ago for dismissing courtiers without humiliating them - and then simply let the hand fall. “She was a devoted servant,” he said. “I do not say of what.”

Cassandra turned to the sphere. The gold had banked itself, chastened or sated; it pulsed with a gentler amplitude, like a god who had eaten a small, tidy meal and was contemplating dessert. The runes on the walls gleamed with new ink: unfamiliar clauses, the kind grief writes without asking permission.

“You don’t get to make yourself prettier because she chose you,” Cassandra said, and was startled to hear how calm her voice had become. “You don’t get to wear her competence like jewelry.”

The light regarded her. If gold can blink, it did.

“We are not taking your bargain,” she finished, and the stubbornness in it steadied her on her feet more than any spell could have done.

The Breath inhaled. Exhaled. Around them, the temple agreed and disagreed in the same motion, cracks sealing a fraction and splitting a fraction more. Somewhere beyond the broken doors, sand shifted as if considering becoming river again.

Cassandra looked at the small drift of white caught in a seam of stone where the currents had missed a grain. It clung there, oddly domestic, like flour on an apron.

She reached into a pocket that still held useful human nonsense and drew out her handkerchief. She wetted a corner with spit and the least magic she could bear, and, carefully, she lifted the remnant. It lay on linen like an absentminded snow.

Nebu tilted his head. “Sentiment,” he observed, but the edge was gone from the word.

“Record-keeping,” Cassandra said. She folded the cloth as she would have folded a memo - precisely, unafraid - and tucked it away. “For the report.”

Tarek’s mouth twitched. “You will make it neat.”

“I owe her that much,” Cassandra said. The breath moved against her cheek like a cat deciding whether to forgive. She did not look at it. She kept her eyes on what could be done with hands, and on the faces that remained. “And after the report,” she added, to the room, to the god, to herself, “we end this.”

The light brightened - amusement? challenge? - and the temple breathed on.

The ruin had learned their names. It held them on the tongue a moment longer with each breath, tasting who would stay and who would be taken. Where Araminta had vanished the air remained faintly warm, the way a cushion keeps the shape of a guest who sat impeccably straight and never quite relaxed.

Cassandra tucked the folded handkerchief deeper into her robe. Her fingers felt clumsy from being too human in a room that preferred myth. She met the gold with an ordinary stare - the look she used for bad ledgers and worse excuses - and waited for it to blink first.

Instead, Rahetep stepped between them, a courtesy turned into a boundary.

He had always looked like a portrait pretending to be a man. Now, under the temple’s soft respiration, he seemed more man than portrait: linen pulled uneven across a chest that rose and fell, dust darkening the edges of wrappings where a living body would sweat. Cracks in the obsidian at his feet reflected him in a dozen stuttering angles, a king broken into etiquette and ache.

“You have kept me longer than I deserved,” he told the light. He might have been speaking to a courtier whose loyalty had become embarrassing. “Now you will hear me.”

The Breath obliged with a brighter pulse, polite as a nod.

“Rahetep,” Cassandra said, because the room was taking the scarier adjectives and leaving her with names. “What is it hearing?”

He didn’t turn. “A confession,” he said lightly, the way one announces a parlor game. The humor sat on his tongue like a coin too cold to swallow. “And a treaty.”

Tarek moved nearer, wary as if approaching a cliff at dusk. Nebu had arranged himself beside Cassandra’s boot, not touching, his tail wrapped in a tight brace. His eyes had the unfriendly shine of polished amber.

The hieroglyphs along the walls began to draw themselves without reference, the temple writing a transcript before the speech. A bird, a reed, a loaf, a curved horn - the old alphabet clearing its throat.

“I did not misname the spell that bound me,” Rahetep said. “My priests and I made the Breath of Amun as a mercy. Not to lengthen life - ” he smiled wryly, and in the tilt of his head Cassandra could just see the younger man sulking at a stern tutor - “but to sweeten death. We asked the sun to teach the soul to leave kindly.”

The sphere dimmed, as if remembering its first job.

“But in the way of all generous architectures,” Rahetep went on, “a door became a gate, and a gate a fortress. The priests were not cruel men. They were greedy for good. They decided one could proceed in goodness forever if one simply refused to stop. I learned what a kingdom looks like when it cannot bear ending.”

He spread his hands. Linen whispered. “It petrifies.”

Cassandra knew history when it confessed as metaphor. She also knew self-justification when it wore a poet’s stole. “You sealed it,” she said, inviting him to make his worst virtue plain.

“I sealed it,” he echoed, and for a moment the king was back - final, exhausted. “I wrapped my gods in silence and put my name over the lock, because the living would not obey unless a monarch told them their disobedience displeased him.”

Nebu’s tail ticked. “You were very grand about it,” he said, unable to keep contempt from treading on affection.

Rahetep inclined his head, conceding the point. “I believed I had put the question away. But the Breath is a question that breeds itself. What we had not guessed - what I had not guessed - ” He touched his own breastbone, and the linen there shivered as if in a draft - “was that to seal a thing with your name is to become its memory.”

The runes around the room stopped pretending to be ornaments. They aligned like soldiers mustered for inspection. Cassandra felt them click down the bones of her spine.

“What are you telling me?” she asked, softer than she meant, as if a louder voice would break the glass layer atop a lake.

“That my resurrection was not a mistake, Miss Blythe,” he said. No humor now. No title games. He turned to her with a face so naked it felt indecent to witness. “It was the curse fulfilling itself. I have been the Breath’s anchor since I declared myself its keeper. A king is a kind of furniture. The spell remembered the throne that set it aside and called the throne back to sit down.”

Tarek winced, not at the poetry but at the logistics. “It wants to occupy you.”

“It wants to be alive,” Rahetep said. “And I am the body it knows by deed.”

Cassandra’s cracked wand warmed in her palm as if trying to be chosen for an answer. She set it down across her knees again. “But if it takes you - ”

“It ends me,” he finished. “Which, as you have repeatedly reminded me,” and a tired smile visited his mouth and left, “is the nature of an ending. That is tolerable.”

“Not only you,” Nebu said, and the word came from the back of his throat like a growl and a prayer strangling one another. He stood, stiff-legged, as if the floor had betrayed him. “Tell her the price paid by accessories.”

Rahetep looked at the cat as a man looks at his oldest folly and favorite friend. Whatever he had meant to say, he removed its ornaments before he spoke.

“Nebu was bound to me when I made the vow,” he said. “Voluntarily. Enthusiastically.” His glance warned the cat against theatrical protests. “He carried the Breath’s leash when I would not. When I set the spell aside, it rested on his spine. He has been its guardian and my jailor ever since. If the Breath inhabits me again, it will drink through him as well. It will draw us both into its throat and find that neither of us is enough, and drink anyway.”

Nebu did not sit. He didn’t blink. A muscle tremored in his cheek in a way no cat ever allows in public.

“Say devour,” he said, voice level. “Don’t make it pretty for her.”

“Devour,” Rahetep said obediently, and the word made a soft indecent noise in the room, like silk torn with two fingers. He turned back to Cassandra. “The cleanest end is to let it take what it claims. To let it finish what I began and in finishing, spend itself.” He glanced at the gold. “It may be that a god, like a man, can be encouraged to rest by giving it exactly what it has asked for in the quantity it cannot survive.”

Cassandra tasted bitterness like old orange peel. “Sacrifice as strategy.”

“Sacrifice as symmetry,” he corrected. The king again, proud against sense. “I tied the knot. I will be the knife.”

Tarek made a sound like a no pulled through his teeth. “And if it does not spend itself? If it likes the furniture?”

“Then I will have done what I should have done the first time,” Rahetep said. He turned away from Cassandra not out of disrespect but from some old instinct - no man shows his face when admitting cowardice. “Not delegate the dirtiness of endings.”

Cassandra felt the room nudge her toward permission. The gold warmed the air in the shape of assent. Her mind did what it always did when the universe tried to decide for her: it counted small things. The drip in the corner. The gentle tug where Tarek’s sleeve brushed her wrist when he breathed. Nebu’s silence, which was a weight by itself. The fissure in her wand, catching light like a vein of ore inside dead wood. The handkerchief in her pocket, heavy with dust that would never be called ash in writing.

“You taught me to make tea,” she said to Rahetep, and he blinked, nonplussed by the pivot. “Not metaphorically. In the villa. With patience. With the pour from high so the leaves could breathe. You told me ceremony trains the heart for larger obediences.”

He inclined his head. “I am flattered to have been memorable as a kettle.”

“Don’t be vain,” she said, and only realized after that she had borrowed his scolding tone for herself. “It matters. You do not win against hunger by feeding it what it wants in the hope it will grow polite. You make it sit and wait while you boil the water. You decide the cup.” She swallowed. “You taught me that.”

Nebu’s ear flicked. “She is making an argument I approve of. That is new.”

Tarek set his shoulder to a fallen pillar and didn’t push, perhaps just reminding the ruin that there were boundaries other than divine whim. “If you step into it,” he said to Rahetep, “you are deciding alone. This was made by men who wanted the last word. It does not deserve another man’s final say.”

“I was a god once,” Rahetep said, and the lie was that this was not also a joke. He let the laughter die by itself. “And I am a man now. The worst parts of both know how to call something noble when what they mean is convenient.”

“Then don’t,” Cassandra said. “Don’t give it an easy name to hide inside.”

His gaze met hers. He had been courtier and king, corpse and curiosity; sometimes he had been friend. Now he was a pupil in a difficult room, and she was the test.

“What will you name it, then?” he asked.

“Running away,” she said, and felt the word disgust her because of how truly it fit. “You are tired of wondering if you are good. You have found a way to make the answer permanent.”

He would have flinched, once. Now he smiled, the expression a man puts on to keep his eyes from showing too much. “If I were younger,” he said, “I would make a speech about honor.”

“And if you do this,” Nebu said, suddenly ferocious, the golden fur around his face bristling in a halo, “you make my centuries a staircase to your exit. I will not be reduced to carpet.”

Rahetep closed his eyes, and even that was beautifully practiced. “I have made you worse things with better intentions.”

“Then stop.” The cat’s voice had become small and knife-bright. “Stop doing things to me in the name of us.”

The sphere listened like a patient, clever liar waiting for them to tire themselves into consent.

“The Breath wants a host,” Cassandra said. Saying it aloud put the weight of the syllables across her tongue; she could feel them settle in the muscles of her jaw. “You are the door it remembers. If you open - ” She shook her head, fighting the Blood’s pull on grammar itself - “if you open, it will walk in and never sit down.”

He almost said *perhaps*. He did not. “Then what?”

Her hand went to the wand as if it were a habit and not a plan. The crack thrummed against her fingers, warm as a live vein. She imagined - not fully, not yet - the wand set between the Breath and its wanting, a conductor rather than a cup, a lightning rod rather than a chalice. The thought ran sparks down her forearm.

“Then we don’t give it a door,” she said. “We give it a window. We let it pour through something that isn’t a life.”

“Something?” Nebu repeated, flat.

Cassandra looked at her wand. It looked back like a throat.

Tarek must have seen the idea enter her. He did not say careful; he did not say brave. He said, simply, “You cannot know what it will take from you.”

“No,” she said, surprised to hear no tremor in it. “But I can choose that it takes it from me.”

Rahetep’s eyes - lamplight in linen - warmed and hurt at once. “Do not gild this,” he said, the plea honest as thirst. “Do not make your mercy into my permission.”

“You don’t have my permission,” she said. “You have my objection.”

The temple liked the shape of that. The gold deepened, a low note in the chest rather than a shine on the skin. The feather on the wall appeared of its own accord, and beside it - obscene as truth - the heart again. It hung, the two measures refusing for once to speak to one another.

Rahetep took one step toward the sphere. Sand gathered at his heel like pages. “It called me,” he said. “For so long it called. I returned because I am its echo.” He looked to Nebu, and the cat, who had never offered anyone the comfort of easy absolution, showed his throat the smallest degree.

“I am not asking to be saved,” Rahetep said.

“Good,” Cassandra said gently. “Because I’m not offering.”

The breath in the room did what living bodies do when someone refuses the script: it stuttered. Dust fell like a soft dismissal. The gold pulsed, amused, affronted.

“Once,” Rahetep said, turning back to it, “I told a nation that the gods require ceremony to make them honest. I meant: let us slow down. Let us have to think while the incense climbs.” He raised his hands as if to receive anointing that would not come. “If I go to you now, I go fast. I refuse the ceremony. That would be a second arrogance.”

Nebu’s tail uncurled by the thickness of a whisker. “Yes,” he said with exquisite condescension. “Learn at last.”

Tarek exhaled, and in the plainness of it was relief and renewed fear. “Then we choose a different ceremony.”

“Yes,” Cassandra said.

Rahetep faced her fully. He set aside poise, rhetoric, the thousand King’s Postures he had been taught before his first teeth fell out. Without the costumes, he resembled what anybody becomes in the instant before a hard decision: a person who would like to be guided and knows no one can.

“Will you hate me if I do not let you?” he asked.

“Probably,” she said. “For a while. Then I’ll be busy.”

Something - not a laugh, but its relative - caught in his linen chest. “I am as proud as I am foolish,” he said quietly. “I would like to be prouder for wiser reasons.”

“Then stand with me,” she said. “Do not stand in front of me. Not this time.”

Nebu moved to her other side, a line of heat against her shin, pretending it was incidental. Tarek, who had a gift for restraint, did nothing so dramatic as take her shoulder; he simply set his spine at the angle of hers so that if she fell backward, a scholar would interrupt the floor.

Rahetep looked at them - a misfit court, undignified and true. Then he bowed, deeper than ceremony required, the kind of bow you give not to a sovereign but to an equal you have ignored too long.

“Very well,” he said to Cassandra. To the Breath, he added, almost conversational, “You will not have me. You will have to be content with her temper.”

The sphere brightened with the delighted insolence of weather considering mischief.

“Temper,” Nebu sniffed. “Understatement.”

Cassandra picked up the wand. The crack gleamed along its length like a promise and a threat. The wood vibrated, not protesting, not consenting, simply aware. The gold drew a fraction nearer, sensing the new grammar offered it.

“Then we begin,” she said, because someone had to name the ceremony that would make them honest.

The temple breathed in. The world leaned forward. The ruin’s single drop kept time. And Rahetep, who had once taught a nation how to turn toward the sun without mistaking themselves for it, stepped back - not in retreat, but in trust - so that Cassandra could stand where the light would test her first.

The ruin held its breath as if the walls had decided to be ribs. Cassandra lifted the wand and the crack along its grain brightened like a seam of ore found by accident in an old well. The breath-lantern in the crater answered, a courteous leaning closer, the way a flame inclines toward a drawn-in gasp.

“Now would be an excellent time,” Nebu said, voice precise because it trembled, “to reveal that your plan involves an army, a bathtub of salt, or a very large door you haven’t mentioned.”

“No army,” Cassandra said, and let her mouth twist. “Door, yes. But it opens from my side.”

“Ah,” he said tightly. “Stupidity as architecture.”

Tarek didn’t try to stop her hand. He leant alongside her, gathering the quiet like bandages. “You can still decide to live in an ordinary story,” he said. “We will not think less.”

“I would,” Cassandra said gently, and was shocked by how uncruel it sounded. Honesty at last: the small relief of it. “Besides, there is nothing ordinary about us anymore.”

She planted her boots. The floor replied with a low, geological approval. Rahetep did not come between her and the light; an old lesson learned, a new courtesy kept. He stood within reach, shadow intertwining with hers on the stone - two silhouettes sharing a spine. He extended one hand until his knuckles almost touched her shoulder, the minimal distance of consent. “Miss Blythe.”

“Rahetep.”

“If you feel yourself becoming excellent,” he said, “stop.”

Despite everything she laughed, a breath punched out of her, small and mortal. “That was the plan.”

She curled her fingers around the wand. Wood warmed. The fissure hummed - a living string drawn tight, a vein waking in dead timber. The sphere inhaled with her and flushed from honey gold to something whiter, almost colorless, like heat made visible. Runes climbed the walls obeying no hand but light, not merely waking now but converging - lines bending toward the wand as if agreeing to a centre.

“Ready?” she asked, and was startled to hear herself ask the temple, the god, the room, the others, her own bones.

“No,” Nebu said frankly. “Please proceed.”

She breathed out and lowered the wand into the light.

It was a touch that the body could not explain. The wand did not enter the sphere so much as the sphere found it and made room, like water that has learned politeness. Gold braided up the crack, not flooding but threading, curious, almost shy. The first filament kissed her fingers, and taste arrived before sound: bitter orange, cardamom, a shadow of smoke, the flavor of an old library's dust warmed by winter sun. Knowledge has a palate, she thought absurdly; this one has eaten cultures and washed its hands.

Then sound: not a note but a wordless vowel sung by a mouth too large to exist, the room's jaw unhinged. It vibrated her teeth. Her eyes watered from behind.

Behind the sound, a structure - a music that understood mathematics without counting, grammar without letters. The sphere recognized the wand as throat and her as breath and made them both instrument.

"Cassandra," Tarek said distantly, the way a friend calls from the shore when you have dived too deep. "Speak only what you can bury."

She opened her mouth and the first word wasn't a word. It was an intake. The gold leapt. Her wand illuminated from within, a lantern made of years. The fissure became a river delta of light, little channels opening to guide the current. Her arm took on the strange, objective weight of a machine.

And then the door in her head unlatched.

The room went away. It did not leave; it widened until figuring out where she stood was as petty as remembering which teacup was hers in a storm. The Breath poured through the wand, and the wand tipped it through her, not into her - no chalice, no vessel, a conduit, as she had sworn - yet even a conduit gets wet.

Light came - no, not light. Recognition masquerading as dawn. She saw the runic bones of every charm she had ever cast rise up and knit themselves into their ancestors. She saw language stand from its desk and admit it had been a river. She saw time peel like old wallpaper to show seasons painted underneath - chalk spring, charcoal summer, gold autumn that looked like the inside of her wand, and a winter so careful it made room for seeds.

Underneath, deeper, she saw the first occurrences, the clumsy radiance of invention: hands teaching fire to sit, a breath fogging a mirror and a priest learning to write on it, a child naming a stone until the stone stopped being a hazard and became a story. She saw the secret of why spells need wands or words or wheels - because bodies require ceremony to bear the weight of wanting.

She could have stayed there. The word *could* unfurled like an invitation with a seat saved for her. The Breath showed her the room with the desk and the books and the bell again, but now she saw it from the inside - the grammar of mastery hung like spotless curtains, the air gold with solved problems, the quiet authority of a life finally tidy. The ache that had lived in her since childhood - in the places where kindness and cleverness rubbed each other raw - stilled.

Mercy without error. Knowledge without blood. The absurd, impossible promise that no one would die badly again.

It would cost so little, said the voice that was not a voice. Give up the friction. Give up the sorrow of guessing. Let go of the small comedy of cups and spills. Stop laughing at the wrong times. Put away the grief of wanting and be done.

For a sharp clean second she wanted it more than kindness, more than honesty, more than tea. The want shot through her like the first time she'd correctly translated a curse in an archive older than her grandmother's bones - a rush that felt like being seen by the universe and approved.

"Miss Blythe," Rahetep said, but his voice was a thread snagging her sleeve, not enough to pull her back. Nebu made a sound so small it might have been a whisker breaking.

The Breath offered her a final revision: the books with her name in gold; the tea cooling beside concise reports that never lied; Tarek smiling into a future where nothing was stolen because nothing needed to be hoarded; Rahetep and Nebu alive not by miracle but by policy. The door opened wider. The hinge sang.

Cassandra did the smallest, ugliest, bravest thing she knew.

She remembered being wrong.

Not grandly, not nobly. Petty wrongs: misreading a rune because she'd been proud of knowing it already; breaking a teacup and pretending she hadn't; telling a clerk a joke that made them smile and then realizing it had sharpened the sting in their day; the time she chose a clever solution and watched it turn cruel at the edges; the letter she never sent because it would have made her admirable. She remembered crying alone and pretending she'd been reading.

She remembered pouring tea from high so the leaves could breathe.

The vision did not shatter. It waited, patient. It was the first answer and the last problem; it could afford to wait.

She steadied her hand, which had begun to lift in praise, and turned her wrist a degree - no more than you turn a cup to catch the right light.

She spoke.

Not a command. Not a claim. The word she chose made no grammar in any tongue she had paid for. It was the sentence the Breath had taught her in the instant before language pretended it owned meaning, a sentence only someone wounded by wanting could pronounce without going mad.

"All knowledge," she whispered, and the wand carried the whisper through itself like a violin remembering its wood, "is borrowed light."

The temple recognized the spell in the bones of creation, the unbinding hidden within the binding, courtesy hidden within refusal. The sphere drew tight, surprised and delighted in the same intake, as if someone had remembered an old joke perfectly. The gold that had been threads pulled back through the fissure in the wand, silk through a ring, silk through her, out and away, not stolen, not kept, but returned - library books going home, candles blown out with thanks, names given back to nests.

“Again,” Nebu breathed, as if coaxing a dying fire. Cassandra said it again, the word a little heavier, a little truer, and the chamber joined her - runes coming loose of their pride, hieroglyphs shrugging off sharpness to become breath drawings. Tarek whispered the sentence in a dialect only he knew and the walls politely added a footnote. Rahetep did not speak; he bowed his head, as if the phrase were a coronation he refused to attend as king.

The Breath tightened further, a sun curling, a flower shutting in night. Its edges lost their appetite for horizon. It became the size of a punch bowl, a pomelo, a custard apple, an orange, the gold now so intense it looked white.

Cassandra felt it try her, as all gods do when refused beautifully. It surged along the wand and attempted to step from conduit to cup. Her arm flashed with pain - the clean, instructional kind, like being caned by a schoolmaster she respected. She bent with it rather than braced and found purchase in a different muscle: the one that pours tea without spilling while the house burns.

“Polite,” she hissed through her teeth. “We agreed.”

The Breath laughed - she felt it rather than heard it, a bright stutter in the bones. Again she repeated the sentence - the vow, the spell, the apology. Each time she said *borrowed*, the light obeyed the verb.

Her wand cracked.

Not in the shattering sense. In the decisive sense, like ice finding its own logic. The hairline fissure split with a sound almost too soft to be borne - a thin, crystalline sigh. A sliver leapt from the tip like an exclamation. For a terrified instant she thought she had destroyed the only bridge between ambition and decency she possessed.

But the crack became a seam, and the seam became a hinge.

The wand opened not outward but inward, admitting the light as a hinge admits a door: letting it move without letting it own. A pale plume - no color left, all color concealed - poured into the secret heartwood, flooding channels that had been waiting since it was a sapling under stars. The light poured and poured and grew smaller, like an oath kept properly.

The chamber chose then to object. Air slammed. Heat struck. The carved ribs of the ceiling groaned like a beast forced to wake twice in one morning. The runes on the floor flashed, cuffed by the afterimage. In the crater where a sun had been, a silence formed - too round to be absence. Pressure bowed Cassandra’s knees. She tasted iron.

“Down!” Tarek shouted, too late to be useful and exactly in time to be kind. Rahetep’s hand finally touched Cassandra’s shoulder, not to stop her but to anchor both of them to the human scale. Nebu flattened his body into a golden bar and glued himself to the stone.

The light went in.

It went in like water finding its level. It went in like forgiveness no longer practicing being polite. It went in and shut the hinge with a tiny cluck, the sound of a latch on a cupboard that holds a single, precious cup.

Silence followed, not the kind that falls, but the kind that stands up.

Cassandra realized she was on her knees. The wand lay across both palms, unrecognizable and exactly itself - a slender piece of wood now veined with a pale, pearly glow that moved as breath moves: in, out, a secret kept and kept again. The crack had become a luminous seam down the middle, not healed but honored. The air smelled of rain on dust, of hot stone after shade, of a match blown out a second after it caught.

In the centre of the room hung nothing. The space where the sphere had breathed kept its shape for a heartbeat - an afterimage of roundness, a glass bowl of absence - then thinned until the eye consented to believe in air again. The hieroglyphs along the walls blinked awake to their unimportant jobs. The single drip resumed, a civil servant getting back to work after a scandal.

Cassandra swayed. The inside of her skull was crowded - echoes of visions ricocheting like birds that had mistaken a window for sky. She knew how to build a charm that made water forget it had fallen; she knew the original name of a rune she had tattooed on her brain during exams; she knew how to speak to a door that had never been spoken to before, in a city she had not yet visited. The knowing burned sweetly, like stolen fruit, and began to go out on its own.

Her body ached in very specific ways - little mortal complaints: wrists that had held a pour steady, ribs that had tried to be bellows, knees that had been stone for too long. She was reassured by them in the way a penitent loves splinters: proof that she is not yet finished with wood.

Nebu was already on his feet, because cats do not allow gravity to witness their delays. He approached with a delicacy that would have felt like mockery if not for his pupils - dark, enormous, an animal answer to starlight. He sniffed the wand. The seam’s glow limned his whiskers. He blinked slowly, like a priest blinking at a sacrament he would prefer to insult.

“Hum,” he said, uncategorically. “It is breathing.”

“Convenient,” Cassandra whispered, breath pulling up sore places and making them complain. “So am I.”

“Less loudly now,” Tarek observed, relieved folded into scholar’s awe. He crouched and set two fingers on the wand’s tip - not touching, but letting his skin taste the air around it. “Did it… die?”

“Gods don’t die,” Rahetep said. He had knelt without ceremony, the way someone does when either prayer or exhaustion takes their dignity and makes a pillow of it. His hand remained on Cassandra’s shoulder. The grip had shifted from anchor to farewell without moving. “They go quiet if you make their worship difficult.”

Cassandra looked down into the line of light, her own reflection split on either side of the seam. In each half she was a little wrong - the mismatched versions no mirror could reconcile. It charmed her, briefly, that she could not be tidy even as a ghost.

“It went home,” she said, and heard how naïve that sounded and prized the naïveté like finding a seashell among bones. “Or at least, it’s in the stacks. On loan.”

Nebu sniffed again, distrustful of metaphor. “On parole.”

The room, having been nearly a lung, became merely a room again with theatrical reluctance. The ceiling shed one last ribbon of dust like a curtain falling after applause. Somewhere deep in the ruin stone settled with a housecat’s thump.

“I am going to be insolent,” Cassandra warned no one in particular, and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. Not tears. Sand, smoke, knowledge evacuating through ducts. She lifted her face to Rahetep with a crooked smile she had to earn each angle of. “How cross are you with me?”

He considered the appropriate degree of truth. “Exquisitely,” he said. “Which is to say - I am grateful to be permitted the luxury.”

She wanted to tell him that gratitude was the least interesting emotion. She wanted to say she had never felt smaller and never more beautiful in the way of a tool used properly. She wanted to sleep for a week under a desk. She wanted tea.

Instead, she clutched the wand as if it were a hot loaf of bread and said, “We should go.”

The temple took offense at the sentence as only architecture does when asked to stop being a cathedral and be a corridor. The floor groaned with new opinion; the nearest pillar coughed a mouthful of grit. A seam tore across the far wall as if someone had unzipped the idea of stability.

Tarek was already up, his hand under her elbow with a professional air that made her think of librarians hustling patrons out before fire got ideas. Nebu trotted ahead, ears arrowed forward, tail low - a golden fuse seeking a route with no intention of burning.

Rahetep rose last. He swayed unkingly and caught himself with a palm on the obsidian that had cracked for him before. For a moment, through the seam of Cassandra’s wand, the light flared - small, pleased, as if greeting an old acquaintance. He regarded it with affection and made no move toward it.

“Now,” Nebu said, the word both order and prayer.

A slab came down delicately where Cassandra’s head had been. She ducked and laughed, a ragged hiccup. “Yes. Now.” She tucked the breathing wand inside her robe, where it hummed against her ribs in a rhythm slowly resolving toward hers. The seam warmed her like a pocket hearth.

They ran.

The temple objected in grand style. Corridors that had been straight because divinity prefers headlines decided to attempt poetry - metaphors of stone, enjambments of pillars, the occasional pun of a stair that became a slope. Sand came in like applause at the wrong moment. The air found its own broom and swept them toward a decision they had already made.

Cassandra’s vision kept trying to spend itself, flaring open on invisible maps, on etymologies ached at since school, on the geometries of safety; she blinked hard and chose to see the ordinary: Tarek’s shoulder, the living angle of it; Nebu’s hind feet flashing like commas; Rahetep’s shadow - longer now, finer, a thread pulled through cloth.

A gust tore down the nave. The breath in her wand answered with a steadier beat. She let it pace her, small metronome against panic, and found her humor hiding under her tongue where it always went in emergencies.

“If we survive,” she panted, “I am writing a very stern memo to the concept of dramatic timing.”

“Send a copy to architecture,” Tarek said between breaths. “And to the Nile.”

“Send it to me,” Nebu snapped. “I will cross it out and send it back with improved insults.”

They burst into the chamber where they had first woken to the living light. It was larger now in the bad way - corners farther apart, ceiling considering the risks of loyalty. The central crater was a blank, the absence so clean it could have been polished. The feather on the wall had decided to fall. It drifted, weightless, ridiculous, perfect.

Cassandra’s knees wobbled with an emotion she would file later. For now she did the practical unheroic thing: she grabbed Rahetep’s hand - linen over bone, warm in places as if his body were practicing - and hauled him into a run. He let himself be pulled, far too dignified to admit he needed it.

“Left,” Tarek said, choosing at a hazard of instinct and scholarship. “This way was less cursed earlier.”

“Nothing is less cursed,” Nebu said, but he went left.

The temple coughed again; a spume of powdered stone blossomed like a bad cake. The seam of light in Cassandra’s wand winked at the dust and made the particles glow for an instant as if blessing them for service rendered. The blessing did not make them less gritty in the teeth.

They reached a wall that had not been a wall before - a plane of stone as frank as an end. Cassandra would have laughed if she’d had breath. She put her palm to it, defaulting to the very first trick.

The wall knew her by now. It liked her audacity as much as it disliked her ethics. Under her hand, the grain shivered. Runes moved their chairs. Somewhere far off, something sighed, old hinges refusing and then surrendering.

“Allow me,” Rahetep said, because ceremony, once learned, is a habit. He laid his hand beside hers, and for a second his presence harmonized the breath in the wand. The seam brightened; the wall relented.

A seam appeared.

A mere person could have called it a crack. Cassandra called it an apology.

They pushed. Stone widened by degrees. Air from outside, sand-crisp and river-damp, touched their tongues.

“Go,” Rahetep said.

“You first,” she said.

“No,” he said, as if teaching a polite child to accept the last piece of cake. “You carried what none of us could. Go.”

Nebu snorted. “You both have terrible instincts for survival.”

Tarek didn’t waste breath inventing a hierarchy of gallantry. He ducked and went, pulling Nebu with the kind of disrespect cats admire, then turned and offered hands back. Cassandra pushed the wand through first, then her body, scraped and relieverawed at once. Outside the cut, the passage was low and disinclined; the air tasted of not-god, richly.

She turned to help Rahetep. He had paused at the seam and looked back into the temple as if memorizing a face he would not draw again. For a heartbeat the light in her wand answered the glance, a reflex like friends nodding at one another across a crowded room.

“Come on,” Cassandra said, soft and fierce. “Before it thinks of a speech.”

He bowed to the ruin - a shallow inclination, a goodbye to a throne that did not own him - and bent his regal height through the seam. Stone kissed his shoulders and, remarkably, did not take offense.

Behind them, the room inhaled in disappointment.

The seam in the wall began to close with the mad, shy speed of second thoughts. Stone learned to hurry. Cassandra felt the drag of the place on her hair, on the hem of her robe, on the secret seam of light under her ribs.

They squirmed. They shoved. Sand hissed. Tarek hauled. Nebu swore in a dead dialect that made the stone flinch out of embarrassment and give him a paw’s breadth more space.

Cassandra tumbled into the narrow passage, heart trying to beat both faster and slower at once. The wand under her robe hummed in time with neither and in doing so kept her alive.

“Forward,” she said, and did not look back.

The temple, which had breathed for an age, exhaled once like a tired giant and began to come down.

Passages remember shapes. This one had been cut by fleeing priests a thousand years ago and sealed again by honest sand. It kept the memory of panic and the courtesy of edges. Stone pressed Cassandra’s shoulders with the serious patience of an old librarian ushering her through a crowded archive. The temple behind them inhaled for a last dramatic remark and then thought better of it; the exhale came long and low, a giant settling into a sleep it should have taken earlier.

“Forward,” Cassandra said again, because the word kept her bones from listening for a benediction she could no longer accept. The wand beneath her robe hummed a small, self-possessed song, the seam of light against her ribs finding the plain meter of a mortal heart.

Tarek’s hand found hers in the narrow, his fingers slick with blood and dust. He didn’t squeeze. He let her decide the grip. Nebu threaded ahead, a filament of gold through the dark, tail a quill that annotated darkness with commas. Behind them, Rahetep moved with the grace of a tall man who had learned humility from low doorways. Linen brushed rock with a whisper like pages agreeing to close.

The passage kinked. Sand hissed down the back of Cassandra’s collar as if to remind her of the world’s sense of humor. “I am filing a complaint,” she muttered, and felt Tarek’s laugh as a brief vibration through his palm. The air thinned and cooled - new breath, river scented. A dim halo appeared ahead: not light, exactly, but the idea of it.

Nebu stopped so abruptly that Cassandra’s nose found his hip. He had braced on the lip of a broken stone lintel, whiskers flared, ears pitched forward with the soldierly alertness of a cat who would deny ever having served. Beyond him, the passage widened and tilted up. The light sharpened into day.

“We should hurry,” Tarek said, which was like advising rain to be wet. He released Cassandra’s hand and climbed. Nebu flowed after him. Cassandra went last not from gallantry but to keep Rahetep within reaching words.

“Almost,” she said, looking back.

He nodded. The light - or what counted for it here - passed through him in long threads, catching the edges of his wrappings and turning them to silk for an instant before letting go. He smiled with careful extravagance, like someone still learning how to move a face at speed. “Almost,” he agreed.

They broke into the morning as if the day had been waiting in the doorway with its hat on. Dawn over the floodplain had dressed itself kindly: a pale halo on the horizon where reeds drew quills against the sky, a ribbon of Nile like ink in the distance, light that came not as triumph but as permission. The ruin's flank climbed behind them in ribs and plates, black obsidian bitten by time into scales. The ground under their boots was the temple's own breath turned to drift: soft, a little treacherous, smelling of old honey and hot stone.

Cassandra wanted to fall down and give the earth her entire weight. The wand's warmth at her ribs told her she could: not yet a command, but a suggestion in bedside tone. She ignored it and counted them instead: Tarek, pale under the dust, glasses crooked, left arm bound in a makeshift sling that made him look like a scholar who had tried to wrestle a concept; Nebu, immaculate by sheer force of philosophy, tail erect in the manner of autocrats and antennae; Rahetep, standing just within the cave mouth, tall in the shadow, a notch of night cut into day.

The ruin stretched its long body and at last let itself fall. Stone sighed upon stone; slabs shifted as if remembering etiquette and then choosing bluntness. The cave mouth narrowed by an inch, then three. Chips of obsidian skated past Cassandra's boots with the cheerful innocence of children too young to know what they are fleeing.

"Out," she said, and turned to haul Rahetep the last step into morning.

He did not move.

It wasn't refusal. It was weather. His outline had gone tender at the edges, not vanishing so much as reconsidering its boundary. Beneath the linen, light braided and unbraided, each thread deciding whether it belonged to a shape or a story. The shadow he threw on the sand had been dark a moment ago; now it looked like a lace veil laid down by a thoughtful aunt.

Nebu saw it too. His body flattened with a jealous awkwardness - cats are not built for pleading - but he made himself less elegant and more present and pressed his head against Rahetep's shin as if anchorage could be done with fur. "No," he said, as if he had misplaced the Egyptian for that syllable and spoke it in theology instead. "Not both."

Rahetep reached to stroke him. His hand remembered the gesture perfectly. The light in his palm did not. For a moment it seemed that Nebu would be petted by weather, by a shape of sun; then contact found itself, and the cat leaned into the weight with such relief that Cassandra looked away.

Tarek stood beside her, breathing fiercely like someone bargaining for the continued existence of air. "Is it…" He did not finish, which was kind.

"Yes," Rahetep said, as gently as if confirming a child's suspicion about winter. He looked to Cassandra and found her watching with the brisk sanity of a woman who has decided to finish the job of living before she indulges the job of grief. "It seems I was furniture after all," he said wryly. "A chair returned to the temple storage."

"Borrowed," she said, and her voice cracked on the word like glaze. "We've established a theme."

He laughed once, quiet and honest. “I like the thought of myself stacked neatly with other inconvenient chairs.” The laugh left a brightness. He turned to Nebu. “My old friend,” he said, and the wounded grandeur in it made Cassandra’s ribs ache as if the wand had pressed harder. “I release you.”

Nebu’s fur jumped. “You do not,” he said without looking up. “You are not allowed.”

“I release you,” Rahetep repeated, a king remembering the kindest of his duties. His voice was not ceremonial. It was domestic, as if the words should be spoken in kitchens and at the ends of long dinners, where loyalty is often kept too long out of love. “You are no one’s leash anymore. Not mine. Not the Breath’s. Not your own anger.”

Anger, hearing its name, tried to report for duty. Nebu ignored it. He kept his face in the linen and made a small sound like a hinge grieving.

Cassandra stepped close. She had not liked to touch Rahetep often; it felt like an inconsistency in reality, and besides, he belonged to a species of dignity that made casual contact bad manners. Now she put her hand on his arm because manners had been rewritten and because certain gestures keep the world from choosing worse. The linen beneath her palm felt warm where sunlight gathered in, and inside the warmth was a tremor like a held breath.

“You broke the curse, curse-breaker,” Rahetep said, his voice turned low for her alone, as if confiding stairstep gossip. He looked not heroic but pleased in the particular way people are pleased to have been proven wrong in exactly the way they’d hoped. “Now break your own.”

“My own?” she said, and hated how perfectly he’d found it.

“You know the one,” he murmured. “The one that says you are only your cleverness. The one that sits up late with you and tells you you must deserve your tea.”

She closed her eyes for the span of a heartbeat and let the words sit in the room where she’d stored the visions: the desk, the bell, the books. When she opened them, she found the ordinary on purpose - the way light had caught on a chip in Rahetep’s cheekband, the exact, bureaucratic square of Tarek’s jaw when he was about to be useful, the offended angle of Nebu’s ears.

“I will try,” she said. “That’s the best I can swear.”

“It is the only oath that keeps,” he said, satisfied. “Do not make the larger ones unless you need to scare children.”

The cave behind him adjusted its opinion again; pebbles pattered like polite applause. His outline lost another truth. Through his chest, the day moved, and in the linen folds sunlight caught as in dewdrops - gold in white, a king’s last finery.

Nebu sat back on his haunches. He had made himself very exact, as if accuracy could be a protest. “If you become a proverb,” he warned, “I will bite you in front of historians.”

“I should like to see you try,” Rahetep said, and looked as though he truly would. “There may be tea.”

Nebu’s composure fractured. He leaned forward as if to headbutt the word itself. “Make it strong,” he managed, disdain ragged with hope. “None of this sentimental British dilution.”

Cassandra looked from one to the other and felt the chapter trying to close around them like a kind hand. Grief sharpened, then softened, as if someone had honed a knife and set it down.

Tarek cleared his throat, the small, necessary act of a man who refuses to allow silence to do all the talking. “We should move,” he said, apologetic to the moment and to gravity both. He nodded toward the slope where the floodplain waited. “The collapse will not be content with rear walls.”

“Go,” Rahetep said, and the word had a formal ease again, the comfortable weight of a command used often to send people safely home. He did not say goodbye; he wore it. He lifted his hand, and for an instant it was a hand. He put it on Cassandra’s shoulder, just where she always carried her stubbornness. Warmth went through the cloth like a syllable.

“Take the long way where you can,” he said. “Shortcuts argue with the soul.”

“Yes, Your Dignity,” she said, because if she joked she would weep and fall apart in useful pieces. She leaned into the pressure and stood up a little straighter. “If you see my grandmother, tell her the kettle whistles when you think about it.”

He looked amused, then helplessly fond. “If there is a line for such requests, I will queue.”

It happened then not with tragic drama but with etiquette. He took a breath he didn’t need, and the day moved through him as through gauze. The linen did not drop. It thinned. The shape of him became the suggestion one leaves on a chair after a long sitting. He reduced not to ash - that was Araminta’s vanity - but to brightness so fine it did not choose weight. It didn’t blow away. It learned how to be invisible.

For one rude second Cassandra saw underneath: not bone, not spell, but the place where a person had held their first hunger and their last mercy. It was too naked to look at. She blinked and it was gone.

Nebu remained in the posture of argument for a moment after there was no one to argue with. Then his tail fell from exclamation to line. He stared at the space with a disciplined loathing that had nothing to fasten to and therefore turned quickly, efficiently, into love. He made a low, ordinary sound, the one a cat makes when it decides to live in a house again.

“Come on,” Cassandra said, voice hoarse with the effort of staying ordinary. She put a hand out, fingers spread. Nebu examined the offered palm as if it had applied for a position. He stepped into it with a delicate disdain that tasted like forgiveness and leapt to her shoulder in a single sovereign move, claws precise. He settled there as if the place had been designed at his request.

Tarek adjusted his sling and looked at Cassandra over the ruin of his sleeve. The exhaustion on his face had taken on a second expression beneath it, something like relief that looked embarrassed to be seen. “We are not dead,” he said, as if making a note on a chalkboard.

“Write it down,” she said. “Date, time, credit line.” She took a step and discovered that her knees belonged to her again. The wand’s hum matched her pulse for the first time; the seam warmed like a coal kept prudently under ash. She touched it with two fingers and felt not a god but a loan.

They walked. The slope accepted them with the lazy acquiescence of sand, complaining softly around her boots. Behind, the mountain of obsidian reconsidered heights and chose less. A cloud of dust lifted and moved sideways, undecided between sky and biography.

Halfway down, when the air had begun to taste more richly of water and goat and morning, a breeze found them - a river wind that had practiced on reeds. It combed their hair and collected their sweat and spoke, without language, the local news of herons and irrigation. Nebu leaned into it and closed his eyes as if someone had started scratching the base of his skull properly.

Cassandra stopped and turned, because she had always been rude to endings and she meant to manage this one better. The temple lay behind like a thought that had finally been admitted as too large. In the broken black of its flank the seam by which they had escaped gleamed briefly and went dull. A feather rose on a thermal above the ruin, indecently pretty, then vanished into glare.

She lifted her hand and did not wave. She did something smaller and ruder and truer: she pressed her palm over the seam of her wand and nodded. Not to a god, not to a king, not to death. To a friend.

Nebu’s claws pricked her shoulder once, not to harm but to confirm existence. “If you cry,” he said without opening his eyes, “I will sneeze and claim an allergy.”

“Very dignified,” she said. Her voice behaved itself. “Come along, Mr. Rest-of-My-Conscience. There is tea in the world yet.”

“Strong,” he said. “And with proper cups, not tin canteens.”

“Luxury later,” Tarek said, but the corner of his mouth confessed he would accept a cup if bullied.

They reached the plain while morning was still taking advice. The light warmed their faces in a way that felt like - not reward, exactly, but acceptance. Cassandra took the long way as instructed: she didn’t cut straight to the river. She followed the curve of a dune that had opinions, walked around a thornbush that wished to be left as a monument, stepped on the flat stones that remembered being steps. Her body learned again the measurements that mattered: stride, breath, shoulder to shoulder.

At the edge of the water she crouched and cupped her hands into the Nile. The river filled them with a practised generosity: cool, mineral, faintly sweet, a flavor that had never learned

to be clever. She lifted the water to her mouth and drank. The world occupied her without bargaining.

When she stood, the wand under her robe exhaled in time with her lungs and went quiet, not asleep but content. In the long, clear light of morning she found Tarek watching her with the sideways care of a colleague cataloguing the living for a change. Nebu pretended to examine a dragonfly and failed to hide his satisfaction when it landed where he had calculated it would.

“Let’s find the road,” she said.

Tarek nodded. He looked back once at the broken dark on the horizon and inclined his head in a polite, almost bureaucratic acknowledgment: closure filed, case noted, unsatisfactory outcomes accepted. “There will be questions,” he said mildly.

“There will be answers,” she said. “Some will behave. Some won’t.” She looked at the river and then at her two improbable companions, who were not relics, not tools, not trophies. “We will choose the long way where we can.”

“It will be tedious,” Nebu predicted.

“It will be funny,” Cassandra said.

“It will be ours,” Tarek added, and seemed surprised to hear himself sound possessive about a future.

They walked, leaving three clean lines in the wet sand that the river would tidy away in its own time. Behind them, the temple settled into story. Before them, Cairo’s dust rose like someone laughing in another room. The sun climbed with the pretence of ceremony and then, catching itself at the edge of pomp, became simply day.

Cassandra glanced at the wand’s seam one last time. It breathed, very lightly, like a creature asleep on a friendly chest. She touched it and thought - not of glory, not of knowledge, not even of victory - but of kettles and long pours and the discipline of waiting, and of a hand on her shoulder telling her, wickedly and true, to stop when she felt herself becoming excellent.

“All right,” she told the morning. “We go on.”

Chapter 14: Tea with the Dead

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Tea with the Dead

The Wizarding Court of Cairo rose from the sand like a ziggurat sculpted by an accountant with artistic ambitions: all strict tiers and sunlit angles, every surface chiseled with clauses that glittered when the heat struck them. Inside, the air always smelled faintly of papyrus, lemon oil, and singed ego. Enchanted hieroglyphs streamed along the walls like schools of golden fish, pausing to read one another, then re-ordering themselves into citations that drifted to wherever a barrister was looking most smug.

Cassandra climbed the steps with a cracked wand tucked into her coat like a dangerous bookmark. The cane she wasn't admitting to using made the faintest click on stone - injuries from collapsing temples have a way of appearing in the paperwork before they admit themselves to the body. Weeks had passed since sand had learned to stand still and time had stuttered like a lantern in wind; weeks since Rahetep's hand - cool, dry, impossibly gentle - had rested on her shoulder and told her to break her own curse. Sleep, when it came, smelled of honey and dust.

"Miss Blythe," Inspector Mogrim called from the doorway with the weary relief of a man discovering his least troublesome fire had elected not to spread. His monocle - an honest instrument that squeaked whenever someone lied, and occasionally when they were merely theatrical - gleamed. "I note you are not under arrest. How very efficient of you."

"One does try," Cassandra said, and followed him into the main chamber.

The Court itself was a grand bowl of sandstone benches beneath a ceiling painted with stars that updated nightly to match the real sky. Ghost scribes floated in sober rows, quills scratching in midair; each line of script unspooled like fine silk and coiled into glass jars that labelled themselves: *Testimony, Unnecessary Flourishes, Objections, Reasonable, Interruptions, Feline.* Someone had added a tiny doodle of whiskers to that last label. She chose not to look at it too long.

At the far end, the presiding judge reposed on a dais of cool marble: a sphinx carved as if moonlight had taught itself patience. Her eyes were the pale gold of morning over the Nile, and when she blinked, entire legal precedents shifted to accommodate the new angle of consideration. The clerk, a delicate man with a voice like a closing drawer, announced the case.

"Docket Seven: *The City of Cairo v. The Breath of Amun*, with associated matters… mm… posthumous status of Lord Rahetep, formerly Pharaoh, presently - " He coughed. " - unavailable."

“Unavailable,” repeated Mogrim under his breath, escorting Cassandra to the witness stand. “A generous euphemism.”

Cassandra took the stand. The wood was warm, like something that had been alive very recently. A regulation teapot hovered just behind the rail, breathing quiet puffs of steam into a brass infuser. It made her smile despite herself. The last time a court teapot had appeared, it had flooded the defense table in a tantrum and attempted to drown a barrister for confusing *precedent* with *president.* This one wore a little blue ribbon that read **CERTIFIED NON-HOMICIDAL**.

The sphinx inclined her head. “Miss Cassandra Blythe,” she said, and her voice was a low river. “State, if you please, how the temple came to collapse and yet the city did not.”

Cassandra breathed once. The cracked wand hummed where it lay; sometimes she felt it echo in the small bones of her ear. “Your Honor,” she began, “the collapse was not incidental to the Breath of Amun - it was… a negotiation. The Order of the Sun’s Shadow initiated a rite that would have rendered time a polite suggestion and death an inconvenient rumor. We disagreed on the merits.”

“A tasteful summary,” murmured Mogrim.

Cassandra told them, carefully, how the runes had risen like fish in a dark river; how the orb of gold mist had spoken in voices that seemed to remember her before she existed; how spells had fed it the way compliments feed vanity. She omitted the part where knowledge had poured through her like sunrise - where, for a breath, she had understood every spell as if it were simply a sentence she had always known and momentarily mislaid. That was not for court jars.

The ghost scribes’ quills chattered, and one inked *metaphor, overloaded but acceptable* in the margin. A jar sighed as it sealed itself.

“And Lord Rahetep?” asked the sphinx. “His status?”

The word *status* had too many smooth edges. Cassandra looked down at her hands, their new constellation of faint scars, then up, steady. “He chose to move on,” she said. “Properly. Not as a riddle, but as an answer.”

Something like wind passed through the room. The hieroglyphs along the wall paused, then reassembled into a single, stylized cup of tea, and beneath it, a feather - *ma’at,* balance. The court murmured. Mogrim’s monocle squeaked very softly in a register that suggested difficult affection.

The prosecution - two stern witches in sensible linen - rose to ask whether collapsing a temple counted as an appropriate municipal strategy. Cassandra agreed, politely, that it did not. The defense - today a tall wizard with a legal mind like a scythe - pointed out that the alternative had been “eternity with terms and conditions,” which everyone agreed was worse.

There were procedural fireworks: a stack of precedents performed a dignified waltz to determine which would lead; a dozen spectral witnesses appeared to swear they had seen

nothing and wished to keep it that way; a jar labelled *Objections, Petty* quietly filled itself until it toppled and a bailiff caught it without looking.

Finally, the sphinx's tail curled once around the base of her dais, and the murmurs folded into stillness. "We will render judgment," she said. "But there is one matter that pertains not to property or precedent but to courtesy."

The courtroom blinked as one organism.

"Lord Rahetep," the sphinx went on, "conducted himself within these walls with an unusual adherence to civility. He answered questions beyond what was asked, provided context without being prompted, and refrained from hexing the prosecution when offered opportunity. These acts, while not strictly legal merits, weigh upon the scales we keep for history rather than law."

The hieroglyphs above her head arranged themselves into a neat line, then rewrote, then rewrote again, as if practicing an elegant signature. Cassandra's throat felt tight in the way deserts do just before evening cools them.

"It is the Court's conclusion," the sphinx said, "that the late Lord Rahetep acted in good faith and for the protection of the living. He is therefore exonerated of charges relating to his reanimation, his presence in the city, and the incidental tidying he performed on our archives."

One of the ghost scribes coughed. There had been a day when half the Court's marginalia had rearranged according to a system of indexation so rational it caused spiritual crises in three departments. *Incidental tidying* was merciful.

"As for Miss Blythe," the sphinx continued, turning those dawn-colored eyes, "this Court finds that you acted under duress created by a society now disbanded, and that your decisions, while… dramatic… prevented a greater harm. You are absolved of liability in the matter of the Temple of the Breath."

The teapot breathed a little sigh that fogged its own spout. Cassandra let out the breath she'd been hoarding like coin. Mogrim gave her a sideways look that might, in a less arid man, have been a smile.

"And further," said the sphinx, "on account of impeccable manners and cooperation with the law, the Court grants to the memory of Lord Rahetep the honor due a guardian of the city. His remains will be accorded safekeeping in a place of dignity." Her gaze softened, barely. "And when the living pour tea, let them pour once for him."

A ripple of approval moved like heat across stone. The jars labelled *Tears, Professional* each accepted a single dignified drop and sealed themselves. Cassandra's eyes stung. It was the dust, obviously.

"Inspector Mogrim," the sphinx added, "see to the protection of any… establishments… that might emerge in commemoration, provided they comply with municipal codes and refrain from necromantic menu items."

Mogrim bowed. “Your Honor. I will inspect all menus.”

The gavel - a polished palm-size scarab - clicked its wings and thumped once. The star-painted ceiling brightened, as if morning had crept in to listen and found the verdict agreeable. Proceedings dissolved into the soft chaos of conclusion: barristers retrieving their pride from lost-and-found, scribes bottling the last of the air-ink, the clerk distributing stamped copies of reality.

Cassandra stepped down. Mogrim offered her his arm with the austere courtesy of a man who would never acknowledge offering anything. She took it because her leg had begun to tremble and because accepting help was a skill she had recently, and painfully, learned.

“At last,” he said, steering her through a corridor where the wall glyphs were still congratulating one another on the elegance of the opinion, “we have ruled in favor of the dead.”

“It’s a good precedent,” Cassandra said. “They’re often very reasonable.”

“More so than the living,” Mogrim conceded. His monocle squeaked. “You will be pleased to know the Order is no longer a society, secret or otherwise. The Ministry enjoys dismantling things.”

“Excellent,” she said, and imagined letters scattering like frightened beetles across a desk in London. “I imagine Gringotts will write a very dignified memorandum.”

“They already have,” Mogrim said dryly. “It apologizes in seven languages and none of them mean *sorry*.”

They reached the great doorway. Outside, the city’s heat reached in as if to pull her back into daylight. A wind chased the edges of her coat and slipped a grain of sand into her shoe - Egypt’s way of keeping a souvenir.

Mogrim hesitated. “Miss Blythe.”

“Yes?”

“You did the correct thing,” he said. He adjusted his monocle, as if the sentence required recalibration of the universe. “Not the tidy thing. But the correct one.”

She looked at him, at the ziggurat’s patient shadow stretching across the courtyard, at the strip of sky like watered silk. “I had help,” she said. “From the polite dead and an impolite cat.”

“Mm.” His mouth tilted. “Should either reappear, kindly make them register as witnesses before they offer commentary.”

“I’ll pass it along,” she said.

They parted. Cassandra paused at the top of the stairs and let the living city rise to meet her: hawkers calling in the market, kettles singing behind shuttered lattices, the Nile breathing its

cool breath into every side street. Somewhere, a bell rang the hour in a language that didn't need numbers. The cracked wand hummed once, a quiet, domestic sound, like a kettle remembering it had been a river.

She touched the rail, warm as a forehead. "All right," she told the day. "Tea, then paperwork."

The court doors swung closed behind her with the finality of a chapter's last period and the promise of another's first line.

Gringotts Cairo occupied a carved limestone palace that looked as if an abacus had dreamed it: rows of perfect windows, ledgers of light and shadow, each column a figure balanced against the heat. Inside, the grand hall rasped with the gentle industry of goblins - quills ticking like restrained insects, brass bead-counters clacking as if keeping time for a very precise waltz. Ceiling fans spun lazily above, stirring air scented with ink, lemon oil, and the metallic tang of old enchantments.

Cassandra signed in at the front desk with a charcoal stub because pens had a habit of exploding near her cracked wand. The goblin receptionist eyed the hairline fracture running down the wand's shaft as if it were a structural fault in a vault door.

"Certified safe," Cassandra said. "Mostly."

"Kindly keep it pointed at your own problems," the goblin replied, and slid her a visitor token engraved with the Gringotts crest and the charming motto: **WE VALUE YOUR SECURITY MORE THAN YOUR HAPPINESS.**

A young human clerk escorted her down a corridor where the walls held framed portraits of past directors who glared at the future with equal suspicion. At the end, an oak door wore a brass plate freshly etched: **Regional Acting Director - Ms. Beatrice Peridot.**

Beatrice Peridot could have been carved from the same oak as her desk: upright, varnished, faintly disapproving. She had Araminta Voss's air of weaponized neatness but none of her perfume; bureaucrats of this rank exuded an aroma of policy rather than flowers. A neat stack of parchment sat before her, edges aligned with a sensual precision that made Cassandra's fingers itch to rearrange them by accident.

"Miss Blythe." Peridot's smile was brief and counted. "Please sit. Do hydrate." She gestured to a silver carafe of water that poured itself with discouraging moderation.

Cassandra sat. The cracked wand, tucked along her coat seam, gave a small contented hum that earned it a side-eye from a decorative paperweight sphinx.

"To business," Peridot said. "The Bank wishes to thank you for your service during the regrettable incident at the Temple of - " she checked the top page " - Breath."

"The Breath of Amun," Cassandra supplied.

“Yes. Well.” Peridot made a mark that looked very much like *et cetera.* “There has been - how shall I put it - public attention. The Court’s verdict was favorable; our press office has released a statement noting Gringotts’ staunch opposition to immortality that does not accrue interest.”

Cassandra swallowed a laugh badly enough that it came out as air through her nose. “Commendable.”

Peridot slid a velvet-lined box across the desk. Inside, on a cushion the color of obedient skies, lay a medal in the shape of a scarab holding a ledger. Around it, a motto in tiny runes: **FORTITVDO CVM COMPLIANCE.**

“Fortitude with compliance,” Peridot translated, as if fluency were a minor indiscretion. “Additionally, a promotion. Senior Curse-Breaker, Cairo Division. An office, three assistants, a discretionary budget, and a revised risk allowance reflecting your regrettable… magnetism for incident.”

Cassandra regarded the medal. The scarab’s tiny legs were exquisitely articulated; when she tilted the box, they glinted like arithmetic. “And expectations?” she asked lightly.

Peridot folded her hands. Her knuckles resembled small, white decisions. “Public lectures - sanctioned. Fieldwork - sanctioned. Independent statements - sanctioned through us. We would like you to be the face of responsible excavation. A narrative correction, Miss Blythe. We must demonstrate that banks are not cold-blooded engines of acquisition.” A pause. “We must do so while acquiring.”

There it was: the silk glove with the steel ledger inside. Cassandra felt again the temple’s hush, the way the world had seemed briefly made of meaning rather than policy. The cracked wand warmed against her side, like a heartbeat that had learned to purr.

She returned the box with a careful smile. “It’s a very handsome beetle,” she said. “And a generous offer. But I’m going to decline.”

Peridot did not blink. She performed, instead, an internal audit of Cassandra’s sentence, then filed it under **Non-Optimal Decisions, Human.** “You wish to… what is the phrase… take time?”

“Take my leave,” Cassandra said. “Return to London for a while. Read in my own disorderly fashion. Write in an even worse one. Drink tea not brewed by committee.”

The paperweight sphinx rotated its stone head a single disapproving degree. Peridot laced her fingers tighter. “Surely you understand, Miss Blythe, that narratives do not correct themselves.”

“No,” Cassandra said softly. “They don’t. But neither do they belong to us.”

Peridot exhaled through her nose as if releasing surplus punctuation. “The medal, at least, would look well on an office wall.”

“I promise to hang it somewhere truly dignified,” Cassandra said. “Perhaps in my kitchen, near the teabags.”

A shape moved in the doorway - tall, spare, the kind of quiet that makes rooms adjust themselves to accommodate. Tarek el-Farouk leaned against the jamb with the modesty of a man who had never leaned against anything he hadn’t first asked permission from. His dark eyes took in the velvet box, the posture, the way Cassandra’s smile had set like cooling glass.

“Am I late for the ceremony?” he asked.

Peridot glanced at him the way one acknowledges weather. “Mr. el-Farouk. Your presence has been requested for the signing of certain releases. You may, if you must, borrow Miss Blythe for a moment. Kindly return her in the same ethical condition.”

Cassandra rose. “I’m not a ledger entry.”

“Everyone is, somewhere,” Peridot said, and dipped her head in benediction, or dismissal; at Gringotts, the two were cousins.

They walked out together into the corridor where the portraits of past directors glowered. Tarek’s mouth quirked. “I see the bank remains a temple of measured gratitude.”

“They offered me an office,” Cassandra said. “And assistants. And etiquette lessons for my wand.”

“Temptations all,” he said gravely. They stepped into a side room with a high window latticed in cool shade. Someone had left the window open; Cairo breathed in, bringing the late afternoon scent of mint, dust, and distant river. On a small table sat a wrapped parcel tied with a strip of blue cloth.

“I brought you something,” Tarek said. “A selfish gift, because I want you to think of Cairo whenever you put water on to boil.”

“You assume I ever forget a place that rearranges my skeleton,” Cassandra said, smiling.

He loosened the cloth. Inside lay a teapot of honey-colored clay, unassuming and perfect, the sort that improves tea by having known sun. Around its belly, the potter had incised two slender columns of hieroglyphs - or rather, not columns, but a conversation in a circle. Cassandra traced them with a fingertip. She could feel the tiny stitches of the blade’s passage, the memory of hands.

“*Ma’at*,” she murmured, brushing the feather. “Truth. Balance.”

“And *shen* - the circle of protection,” Tarek said. “They’re old signs, made by patient wrists. The potter says the clay came from a bend in the Nile that remembers when it was a sea.”

Cassandra swallowed. “You’ve given me a conscience that makes tea.”

“Every conscience should,” he said. “It encourages use.”

His humor softened into quiet. “You were brave,” he added, with the precise care of someone naming a thing that can evaporate if spoken too loudly.

“I was afraid,” she said. “Bravery’s just the polite word we give fear when it does the washing up.”

He laughed - brief, warm. “Then may your fear always be well-mannered.”

They stood in the bounded cool. From somewhere down the corridor came the clatter of a bead-counter, a goblin voice reciting figures like a spell to hold the world together with arithmetic. In the pause, the unspoken gathered: the weeks of investigation, the ridiculous court, the sand that still lived in the creases of their shoes. The choice that had cost her a friend and saved far more.

“I may not accept Peridot’s promotion,” Cassandra said, “but if the university hosts lectures that do not end with hexes, I could be persuaded to speak badly and at length.”

“We specialize in badly and at length,” Tarek said. “We pay in mint tea and arguments.”

“Perfect.”

He hesitated, then reached into his coat and drew out a folded paper. “One more temptation. A fellowship proposal - part-time, if you like. The title is dreadful and the stipend honest. You would help us train curse-workers who ask why a ward was cast before they undo it.”

Cassandra took the paper, read the neat handwriting - his, with its deliberate serifs - and felt something like a knot loosen under her ribs. “I can’t promise permanence,” she said. “Only that I’ll try to write syllabi that smell less of dust and more of questions.”

“Questions are dust,” Tarek said softly. “They settle on everything we thought was finished and show where we missed a corner.”

She tucked the fellowship into her satchel beside the teapot, careful as a keeper shelving a rare book. The cracked wand hummed in approval - or hunger. With it, one never knew.

“When do you leave?” he asked.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Before dawn. I’ve learned that leaving is easier when cities are still half-asleep. They don’t notice the theft.”

He nodded. “I’ll walk you to the ferry.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know,” he said. “That’s why it will be a pleasure.”

Something in her chest did that contradictory thing where it ached and eased at once. She looked up at him, at the fine lines the sun had drawn around his eyes, at the dry humor set like a bookend to his mouth. The sort of face one trusts to hold a thought until one returns.

“If I come back,” she said, “it will be for tea that tastes like sentences I haven’t written yet.”

“And for arguments,” he said. “We’ll keep a chair ready for both.”

They shook hands because they were sensible people, and because the other thing would have been a different story. His grip was warm; hers was firm; both were reluctant to let go for one extra heartbeat, two. Then they did, with the tact of friends who have learned to leave certain doors open without walking through them.

In the hall, a goblin porter cleared his throat and held up a clipboard that had written, in its own hand, **SIGN HERE TO ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT OF YOUR FUTURE.** Cassandra signed *C. Blythe* in quick, looping letters that refused to be straightened.

Back in Peridot’s office, Cassandra accepted a stamped letter confirming her absolution and a leaflet titled **GRINGOTTS CAREER PATHWAYS: WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN FIVE DECADES?** She left the medal in its velvet box with a note: *For your wall. It coordinates with the wood.*

In the foyer, the receptionist slid back her token. “Leaving us, Miss Blythe?”

“For now.” Cassandra tapped the clay teapot peeking from her satchel. “I’ve got research.”

“Dangerous,” the goblin said, almost approving. “Do avoid immorality.”

“Im - ”

“Immortality,” he corrected without blinking. “Though both are bad for business.”

Cassandra laughed, the sound startling her with how light it was. Outside, afternoon had ripened toward evening; Cairo’s light shifted to apricot and brass. She paused on the steps, lifted the teapot to her ear like a seashell, and if she heard the Nile, that was between her and the clay.

The cracked wand thrummed once, faint as a cat’s purr under a blanket. “All right,” she told it, and the city, and the long thin thread tying her to London. “One more cup. Then packing. Then - whatever comes next.”

From the alley, a sleek golden shape flicked a tail and vanished before she could be sure. A bow tie? Perhaps she imagined it. The air tasted of mint and possibility. She went to meet both.

Old Cairo kept its secrets in the hour between lamps and stars. Dusk turned the alleys to soft geometry - wedges of shadow, ribbons of lanternlight - and the air tasted like mint and iron and bread gone warm again from an oven. Cassandra followed a rumor through streets that rearranged themselves kindly for those who needed a destination more than directions. The cracked wand at her side made a quiet contented hum, as if it knew the way and approved.

She found the sign by accident the way one finds sleep - by giving up on it. A brass plaque hung beside a narrow door painted with a patient scarab: Rahetep’s Rest in neat hieroglyphs, and under them, English letters engraved with the modest confidence of a truth that didn’t

require advertisement. A tiny notice beneath read: Open to the living, the dead, and well-behaved theories.

When she pushed the door, a bell chimed in a polite scale and an aroma rose - a city of scents condensed into a room: black tea with honey, cardamom, orange peel, a suggestion of dust like the memory of pages. Inside, the ceiling was low enough for intimacy and high enough for wonder, a long rectangle arranged with small round tables and mismatched chairs. Teacups floated at shoulder height, drifting like tame planets; some sipped from themselves and set themselves down with prim satisfaction.

Invisible musicians tuned behind an embroidered screen; the sound was a tremulous violin line that might have been two blocks away or inside the pot of rosemary on the counter. On one wall, a mural of the Nile had begun to migrate - the painted river crept an inch every hour along plaster banks; painted boats drifted nose-to-tail across night.

The patrons were a study in coexistence. A trio of fashionable witches consulted palm-sized spirit slates while a translucent gentleman in a 1770s wig tried to explain why dueling had improved marriage rates. A pair of goblins played a quiet game with pebble-counters that occasionally rearranged themselves when neither looked. At the far table, two ghosts - one a middle-aged woman with hair that refused the laws of gravity, the other a thin boy wearing the kind of smile that tries very hard for other people’s benefit - were arguing cosmology.

“ - an afterlife is just a library of possible endings,” the woman declared.

“Endings are only where you stop telling it,” the boy said, with the authority of someone who had stopped and started more than once.

Cassandra put a hand on the back of a chair, steadying herself against the urge to officiate. She had the ridiculous impression that every kettle in the room knew her name. The counter at the far end was a slab of wood whose rings told centuries like secrets; behind it stood a chalkboard menu in careful hand:

TEAS
House Black (mint, orange blossom, a very clean moral)
Desert Honey (rooftop hives; not for wasps)
Chamomile of Excellent Manners
Cardamom Oolong (argues with you, wins)
Saffron Rooibos (regrettably fashionable; worth it)
Cat’s Tongue - Not a Tea (warm milk with cinnamon; no, it is not for the staff)

HOUSE RULES

1. No necromancy on the premises.
2. No immortality schemes. (See Rule 1.)
3. Remember the dead are on holiday.
4. One cup per customer pours for the absent. (We’ll show you how.)
5. The waiter is a cat. He will judge you.

The bell above the door chimed again, lightly disdainful. A sleek golden cat strolled along the counter as if the counter had been built to be strolled upon. He wore a midnight bow tie and an expression that suggested he had rejected several earlier options before settling on this one as symbolically acceptable.

“We don’t serve hangovers here,” he said without looking up.

“Good,” Cassandra replied. “I brought mine to share.”

Nebu lifted his head. In the lamplight his eyes were amber coins struck with a figure who might have been a god or a joke. He regarded the wand at her side; it answered with a hum like a throat clearing in a library.

“Ah,” he said. “The tuning fork of catastrophe.”

“Only on performance days.”

He jumped from the counter with a liquid economy of movement and landed at her feet, then changed his mind and leapt lightly to a barstool that had not been there until he needed it. “You’re late,” he informed her. “The city has been having its feelings all over the pavement. I’ve had to mop twice.”

“Inspector Mogrim will be relieved to hear you’re compliant with municipal regulations,” Cassandra said, resting her elbows on the wood. “I think there’s even a code about emotional spillage.”

Nebu’s whiskers twitched. “Mogrim comes on Thursdays and inspects the biscuits. He pretends he’s looking for necromancy. I pretend the biscuits are offended by the insinuation.” He tilted his head, listening to something internal. “You’re all right?”

She was and wasn’t. She had been and then hadn’t. She chose an answer that didn’t lie. “I’m here.”

“Acceptable,” he said. “Tea?”

“House black, please. With honey. The Desert one. And - ” Her throat was suddenly, stupidly tight. “And two cups. Rule Four.”

Nebu’s gaze softened a fraction, enough to be noticed only if one watched cats for a living. “Yes,” he said. “Two.”

The preparation of tea was a liturgy. Nebu, who had never rushed anything except the acquisition of sunbeams, paused at each step as if placing a syllable of a complex word. Kettle lifted, water sighed. Leaves - minute, precise, measured by a scale that would have made a goblin nostalgic - fell like dark rain. Steam rose, and the air in front of Cassandra arranged itself differently, as if making room for a third presence between her and the counter. He decanted into two cups thin as promises, set them on saucers with a clink that sounded like punctuation, and slid over a small jar of honey whose label read Roof Bees, No Arguments.

“One cup,” Nebu said, tapping the nearer saucer. “For you. The other - for whomever you invite by not inviting. Pour with your non-dominant hand. Speak a name if you must; think it if you know better.”

Cassandra’s palms had gone slightly damp. She took the honey spoon, added a curl to her cup and a curl to the waiting one, and reached for the pot with her left hand. The pot was warm and very slightly alive, the way bread is alive just before it becomes bread. She poured. The steam lifted in delicate twists, and for an instant it seemed to write itself - slender signs forming and vanishing, half-glimpsed feathers and ankhs and spirals that meant river and balance and good-bye and not-good-bye.

She did not speak. She did not need to. She set the pot down; the second cup settled into its own stillness as if the surface of a lake had decided to hold a breath.

Nebu hopped from the stool to the counter to the stool in one fluid syllable and arranged himself to watch her drink.

“He moved on,” he said after a moment. “Before you ask. Gracefully. He left me a list.”

Cassandra smiled into her cup. “Of course he did. He loved lists. They made him feel taller.”

“He left instructions,” Nebu clarified. “One: Drink well. Two: Think carefully. Three: Do not let the living forget that the dead are not furniture. Four: No papyrus curtains - the shedding is intolerable.”

“The last seems personal,” Cassandra said.

“I vetoed it anyway,” he said, and flicked his tail at a window where translucent papyrus blinds filtered the evening into a writing surface. “He also left me the business.”

Cassandra looked up. “This is yours?”

“A partnership,” Nebu said, generosity and sovereignty in equal measure. “I provide the management, the taste, the quality control, the moral compass. The city provides the ghosts, the gossip, the ingredients, the ongoing experiment in mortality. A harpist comes on Tuesdays. The biscuits are self-reproaching.”

“And the name?”

“His. He insisted.” Nebu’s voice went very, very dry - dry enough to crack if it weren’t careful. “He said a rest was, after all, what he’d been denied.”

A thin, particular ache passed through Cassandra, the kind that finds the hinges under the ribs and presses. She sipped her tea and the world aligned - mint, heat, sweetness like a memory one had been kinder than to write down. Around the room, the evening deepened. The floating cups drifted lower as conversation warmed. A little girl, her braids tied with red thread, solemnly poured a thimble of tea into an empty saucer and told it about losing a bead. At a corner table, a witch in mourning black laughed, startled by her own voice, and clapped a hand over her mouth; the boy across from her didn’t.

Cassandra glanced at the chalkboard again and then at the rules. “How strict are you about Rule Two?” she asked. “No immortality schemes.”

“On a scale from etiquette to explosion?” Nebu pretended to consider. “Explosion.”

“Good,” she said. “We’ve had our quota.”

He looked at her, head tipped, as if her face were a book with a difficult binding. “You didn’t keep any of it,” he said quietly. “From the Breath. Not even a toe of eternity.”

“I kept the cracks,” she said. “And a better idea of where to put my questions.”

Nebu’s whiskers went forward, thoughtful. “He was proud of you, you know.”

“Pride is his area,” she said softly. “I aim for gratitude.”

They drank in company with the absent. When the first cups were nearly gone, a server - translucent from the waist down, her smile surprisingly practical - brought a plate of biscuits dusted with sesame and salt. Nebu didn’t claim them. He sat with his paws placed precisely together and regarded the second cup as if it were an argument he had already lost happily.

“Tell me what you’ll do,” he said after a while, not quite casual.

“Leave at dawn,” she said. “Let London reacquaint itself with me. Try to write down what I learned and fail in interesting ways. Lecture somewhere that forgives digressions. Buy a larger kettle.”

“And come back,” he said.

She looked over the room. On the mural river, a painted boat nudged past a painted bank where someone had painted a cat with ridiculous accuracy. The invisible musicians found a melody that might have been sad if not for the instrument’s refusal to be tragic.

“Yes,” she said. “And come back.”

Nebu rose, stretched - spine a single elegant unscrolling - and hopped onto the counter with the modest triumph of someone who has reminded gravity who is in charge. He set a small brass stamp on the wood and pressed it into a stack of paper coasters. When he lifted it, each round bore a neat impression of a feather and a cup.

“For the library,” he said. “People leave notes. Stories they forgot how to finish. We catalogue them under *Ministry of Unfinished Business.*”

Cassandra took a coaster, ran her thumb over the indentations, and borrowed a pen from a jar labelled PENS THAT WILL NOT EXPLODE, PROBABLY. She wrote: *He was kind in the end. That is all the magic anyone needs.* She signed nothing. The room would know anyway.

When she set the coaster on the counter, the steam from her cup curled around it and, for a breath, sketched letters in the air - sinuous, precise. She caught *thank you* in a language too old for her mouth and not too old for her heart.

Nebu pretended to be polishing a spoon. “Sentiment,” he said. “Ugh.”

“You’re leaking it,” she said.

“Impossible. I’m impeccably sealed.” He hopped down and arched against her sleeve for the tiniest second, a cat’s version of an embrace: fleeting, deniable, absolute. Then: “Your tab is paid.”

“By whom?”

“By a gentleman with a talent for leaving at precisely the right time.” Nebu’s eyes glittered. “He also asked me to remind you that the dead dislike being thanked as if they were favors. They prefer to be remembered as if they were people.”

“I can do that,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “You can.”

At the door, she hesitated. Rule Four hung at her shoulder like a friendly ghost. She lifted the pot once more, poured a splash into the waiting cup, and didn’t look back to see if the steam wrote anything. Some acknowledgments work better without witnesses.

Outside, the night had acquired stars like punctuation - gentle commas, one stern period over the mosque, and a question mark where the river bent. The bell above the door chimed a farewell with a flourish.

“Cassandra,” Nebu called, and when she turned, he was a silhouette against the warm, lit room - bow tie, tail, eyes. “Drink well. Think carefully.”

She saluted with the teapot box tucked under her arm. “And you?”

He considered. “I will tyrannize the biscuits and decline immortality.”

“Good.” She grinned. “Try not to drown the court next time you pour.”

He sniffed. “I would never waste tea.”

She stepped into the alley and the city welcomed her back - warm stone, cinnamon, the distant clatter of a cart and, from a rooftop, the important news that a cat had conquered a moonbeam. The cracked wand hummed once, not with power but with company. She tucked her chin into her scarf against the mild night and walked on, buoyed by ridiculous, necessary things: steam that wrote thank-you in a language of breath, a cat in a bow tie calling rules to an unruly world, a brass plaque that promised rest and meant it.

The evening slid forward like a bead on a string. Lamps deepened from yellow to amber; the mural river on the wall unrolled another inch and accepted a painted moon the color of polished bone. Conversation at Rahetep’s Rest found its tide: low hums, brief laughter, the clink of porcelain conducting it all like a metronome. Someone behind the embroidered screen struck a harp string that seemed to turn the room three degrees cooler.

Cassandra and Nebu moved to a small table near the window, where a papyrus blind sifted the night into narrow bands. The table bore a tiny vase with two sprigs of mint arranged not as decoration but as punctuation. Her cracked wand lay on the ink-dark wood like a quill between drafts, humming faintly whenever the harp found a note that reminded it of riverbanks.

Nebu hopped onto the chair opposite and sat with formal elegance, paws paired like quotation marks. He did not require the chair - cats require nothing and accept everything - but he had decided this conversation would be a seated one, which lent it the gravity of a salon rather than a corridor encounter. The house black tea cooled in their cups to the exact temperature at which steam writes slowly, as if reluctant to commit.

“So,” he said, tail curling and uncurling with slow punctuation. “You have performed the unfashionable magic of surviving.”

“New trick,” Cassandra acknowledged. “Less showy than exploding urns. More difficult.”

“And less photogenic.” Nebu’s whiskers fanned. “The city prefers spectacle. It forgave the Order briefly because their costumes were expensive.”

“They also promised immortality.”

“Yes,” he said, and the word lost its shine against the roughness of his voice. “The oldest snake-oil. People will drink eternity from the bottle even if it smells of vinegar and ghosts.”

Cassandra turned her cup so the handle aligned with the grain of the wood. She had never liked leaving things at an angle without choosing the angle deliberately. “It wasn’t a bottle,” she said. “More like a… weather. A climate of meaning.”

“Ah,” Nebu said. “The academic forecast: scattered revelations with a chance of hubris.”

She smiled despite the ache his flippancy protected. “You knew it would want him, didn’t you.”

“Of course,” Nebu said. “It made him once.” He stretched, delicate, one back leg extending behind with the arrogance of a ballet master. “Rahetep and the Breath were a conversation begun before either of us could write our names. He taught it manners. It taught him desire. We are all the sum of what we’ve argued with.”

The harp stitched quiet silver into the upper air. On the wall, the painted Nile’s surface took on shimmer enough to be mistaken for movement from the corner of an honest eye. Cassandra touched her wand and felt it hum like a kettle that remembers rivers.

“When I channeled it,” she said, “it showed me the seam of things. Spells are just stories taught to sit and behave. The Breath wanted to make every story stand up and keep going.”

Nebu’s ear flicked. “Stories that never end become prisons of plot. Ask the epics; they creak under their own heroes.”

She laughed through her nose. “He told me to break my own curse.” It came out softer than she intended. “As if I’d known I had one.”

“You did,” Nebu said. “I certainly did.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You might have mentioned it.”

“I did,” he said primly. “Repeatedly. You call it sarcasm. I call it preventative care.”

Cassandra took a sip. The tea had cooled to the temperature of reflection; it spread across her tongue with mint and an argument she could finally agree to. “I thought the curse was his,” she said. “A ritual. A spellnet. Lines knotted around a king. I didn’t realize I’d wrapped myself in something similar, only made of questions.”

Nebu’s gaze was old in the way of cats, which is to say it had been new far more times than most things are allowed. “Curiosity becomes a curse,” he said, “when you mistake having an answer for being one.”

“Is that what I was?” She felt, absurdly, like a student again, arguing with a professor she respected and wanted very much to disobey. “An answer?”

“You were a door with excellent hinges,” he said, generous. “You could open anywhere. That is useful. But doors are not destinations, Cassandra. Your better trick is knowing when to close.”

She set her cup down. It made a small sound like a thought reaching the end of a sentence. “You were afraid I’d keep it,” she said, not asking.

He didn’t bother pretending otherwise. “Yes.” The word sat between them with a complicated dignity. “You have an appetite. You hide it under jokes and hairpins, but it’s there. The Breath tastes like the first time the sun realized water would answer back. You’d have kept a mouthful and called it study.”

Cassandra thought of the temple, of the gold air pushing at her, of a chorus of voices that had all been her own. She nodded, once. “I almost did.”

“And then you didn’t,” Nebu said, not purring, exactly, but allowing approval to soften his consonants. “It was very inconvenient of you. It ruined the Order’s business plan and my schedule.”

“Your schedule?”

“Grief,” he said dryly. “I had anticipated an unsatisfactory one. You improved it.”

On the adjacent table, a pair of elderly wizards - one translucent, one stubbornly opaque - were arguing about whether the afterlife’s bureaucracy had improved since the reign of a long-dead minister. Mid-sentence, both paused and lifted their cups together, a synchronized salute to someone not present. Rule Four doing its work. Steam spiraled like handwriting; the invisible musicians matched the gesture with a brief ascending phrase, as if notation had grown ears.

Cassandra followed the motion with her eyes and found her own second cup again. It sat undrunk, the surface untroubled but for the occasional ring made by a passing draft. She felt the shape of his name form behind her teeth and decided, as she had decided in the court, to keep it there where it did no magic, only meaning.

“Tell me a selfish story,” Nebu said. “Humans do not do it enough. You are always sacrificing for causes, which is admirable and boring.”

Cassandra considered, allowed herself the ridiculous luxury of first person. “I liked him because he was vain in a way that took pressure off my own,” she said. “He could carry a room with etiquette. I could hide behind the spectacle and think. And then he spoiled it by being kind.”

Nebu’s whiskers went forward. “Kindness ruins so many tidy systems.”

“It certainly ruined mine,” she said. “He liked lists. He liked lists of ways to be good. He tried to be good as if it were an art you could advance in by disciplined practice. He failed at it the way all artists fail - beautifully, incompletely, with a sincerity that makes even the mistakes worth keeping.”

Nebu gazed at her long enough that the papyrus slats cast his eyes in stripes. “You are very nearly poetic when you’re tired,” he said. “And you are very tired.”

“Good,” she said, smiling into the rim of her cup. “Poetry is for the exhausted and the fools. I qualify on both counts.”

A soft ripple passed through the room then, subtle as a cat’s decision to leave. The lamps flickered, not from lack of oil but as if a draft had remembered them. The harp plucked a chord that brushed the skin. On the wall, the mural moon’s reflection widened; for a breath, the painted river developed depth impossible to paint. In that shimmer, somewhere between plaster and air, a silhouette lifted a cup - elegant, long-fingered, irritated by eternity and moved by small things.

Nebu did not turn. He looked deliberately at a point an inch to the left, which is how one looks at love after the fact. Cassandra kept her hand steady and did not reach. The ripple folded itself back into the room. The lamps resumed their uncomplicated shining.

“Accidents,” Nebu said after a while, voice smooth. “Rooms settle. Old paint moves.”

“Of course,” Cassandra said, equally smooth. “Humidity.”

A breath later, they both let a corner of their mouths betray them.

Nebu flicked his tail against the table leg, a domesticated thunderclap. “The library,” he said briskly, as if changing subjects could muffle a heartbeat. “Our *Ministry of Unfinished Business*. We have had a donation of shelves from a retired undertaker who made them to last longer than customers. I require… benefactors. The living are prone to forgetting they are merely future ghosts. They need places to store their amnesias until they turn back into stories.”

“I have funds,” Cassandra said. “Gringotts has been guilty and therefore generous. I’m happy to launder remorse into furniture.”

“Excellent,” Nebu said. “We shall establish an endowment with strings attached. I love strings. We will tie them to the idea that every cup poured for the absent must come with a note - one sentence, minimum, about the person or the idea. No elegies longer than the life in question. No declarations of genius without an example. A strict grammar of grief.”

“Will there be fines?”

“Only for adverbs,” he said, and let her see him pleased when she laughed. “Also, we will collect recipes. The dead always remember how things tasted. It is the living who forget.”

“I’ll send my best,” she said. “My aunt makes a lemon cake that forgives people.”

“Good,” he murmured. “Forgiveness is a lazy custard with a foolproof set.”

They sat and let the room breathe around them. A tea leaf clung to the inside of Cassandra’s cup, a single dark comma. The wand at her side had ceased humming; it dozed like an instrument put away before it could be overplayed.

Nebu watched her watch the tea and then, in the dry, surgical way of a friend who has brought bandages and intends to use them, asked, “What is the shape of your empty space?”

She didn’t pretend not to understand. “Like a doorway that keeps light on both sides,” she said slowly. “I am not shut out or shut in. I am… between.”

“Liminal,” he said. “Fashionable.”

“Unavoidable,” she corrected. “I think - ” She searched for the line that would not turn into a speech. “I think I wanted magic to give me a way around loss. Instead it gave me a way through it. Which is much less efficient and far more honest.”

“Roads worth walking are never shortcuts,” Nebu said. “They are usually badly signposted goat paths with excellent views.”

“You should put that on the chalkboard under the Cat’s Tongue,” she said. “As a warning.”

“Warnings are invitations with better tailoring.”

She leaned back. The papyrus blind made the night into a columned hall. In the street, the late traffic of feet had shifted to the lighter patter of cats and the soft certainty of people who knew where their doors were. Inside, the harp music resolved into an old lullaby that knew nothing about sleep and much about resting.

“Do you miss him?” she asked, only because he had pried first.

“Continuously,” Nebu said. “Not as in all the time, like a clock, but as in with continuity. He moves through me like a theme. I hum him when I straighten the cups. I correct his grammar in my head when no one is being tedious enough. I compose letters to him about you and

never send them because he would smirk.” A pause. “It is not pain as I knew it. It is… appetite redirected.”

“That’s kind,” she said.

“I am not kind,” he said, outraged on principle. “I am correct.”

“Both can be true.”

He allowed it with a grudging dip of his head. “What do *you* miss?”

“Him correcting me,” she said, and surprised herself. “He made it feel like a compliment. I miss the way he put down his teacup as if that act connected him to the world and he didn’t trust many other connections. I miss that he was learning how to be a worse king and a better person.”

Nebu blinked, and the blink was not a dismissal but an acceptance into archives. “We will keep those,” he said. “I will make a card for each. Cross-referenced.”

“Of course,” she said. “He’d approve. He loved an index.”

They finished their cups. The second one remained full, not because it had been forgotten but because not drinking it was the point. Nebu rose and, in an uncharacteristic lapse of style, set both paws on the table and leaned in until his nose almost touched the rim of the undrunk tea.

“Drink well,” he said formally to the air above it. “Think carefully. And remember to tip.”

The steam formed a single feather and unmade itself.

“Show-off,” Cassandra murmured.

“We keep a little theatre about,” Nebu said, satisfied. “It costs nothing and pays in grief properly metabolized.”

Cassandra reached into her satchel and withdrew the fellowship letter Tarek had given her, folded now to the softness of fabric. She smoothed it on the table, then slid it back. “I’ll help build your library,” she said. “I’ll send lecture notes, badly punctuated and vivid. I’ll send questions. I’ll send a list titled *How Not to Break What Wasn’t Hurt*.”

“Good,” Nebu said. “We will stamp them and put them under R for ‘Relearning.’”

“And when I forget why any of this matters - ”

“I will send you a bill,” he said. “Itemized. Tea leaves, string, sunbeam rentals. The cost of memory.”

She raised her cup for the last swallow; he bumped it with his head, an anointing.

“Cassandra,” he said, and for once the name was not a tease or a summons but a benediction. “You broke a large thing gently. That is harder than breaking it hard. Go and break your own

curse every morning. Begin again."

"I will," she said. "And you - "

" - will tyrannize the biscuits," he finished, "and correct the living until they improve."

They rose. The harp fell quiet with the soft exhaustion of an instrument satisfied with its evening. At the counter, the chalkboard had written, in a corner she hadn't noticed before: TONIGHT'S PHILOSOPHY: ALL CURIOSITY IS BORROWED LIGHT. RETURN IT WARM. The chalk had smudged under the words as if a paw had approved by walking through.

Nebu escorted her to the door because ritual, too, is philosophy. At the threshold, she paused beneath the bell, which chimed twice, officiously.

"If you see him again," she said, and did not finish the clause - if, if, if, a word like a cat: present on its own terms, not yours.

"I will see that he is reminded we have saucers for the absent," Nebu said, and his smile was a private thing, sharp and soft. "And that we saved him a chair he is not obliged to occupy."

She nodded. "Thank you."

He sniffed, offended by gratitude and therefore flattered. "Leave already. You are making the room sentimental."

"Impossible," she said, and stepped into the alley where the night had thinned to silk. The air smelled of mint and cooled stone; somewhere a coin sang against a tabletop. She walked away with the philosophy of cats and curses sorted into her pockets like receipts she intended, unusually, to keep - thereceipt for laughter, the receipt for restraint, the receipt for the kind of grief that closes not with a door but with a window left slightly open so the air can turn over.

Behind her, Rahetep's Rest exhaled steam that wrote nothing at all and meant everything.

Dawn began as a rumor that the sky decided to believe. The eastern edge of Cairo turned the color of unpolished brass, then honey, then something you could drink if you had a very good cup. The streets were still; shutters kept their thoughts to themselves; last night's heat thinned into a cool that remembered riverbanks. Somewhere a mule shifted, a cart strap creaked, and a minaret unrolled a line of prayer that stitched the morning to the roofs.

Cassandra walked with her satchel and the honey-clay teapot cradled in both hands the way one carries an idea that has finally agreed to be quiet. Her boots knew the route by heart now: downhill lanes that smelled of mint pots and warmed flour, a dogleg around a courtyard where fig leaves held small wet coins of dew, a straight run to the river road where dawn made the Nile look like someone had ironed it.

Cats attended. They were not hers - cats belong to no one - but they had appointed themselves an honor guard of disreputable elegance. A long tabby with a torn ear paced her

left flank with military gravity. A kitten, mostly tail and mistakes, darted in and out of shadow like a punctuation mark that had lost its sentence. From a threshold, a white cat blinked and considered allowing a blessing before deciding against it on principle. They kept her company without admitting it.

At the corner where the alley delivered itself to the river road, Tarek appeared, as promised and without fanfare, as though dawn had written him in the margin. He wore a dark coat against the hour’s honesty and carried nothing but an umbrella that had seen better storms.

“Good,” he said, voice the low register of morning. “You’ve brought the important luggage.”

Cassandra lifted the teapot a fraction. “It refuses to be packed. It sulks in boxes.”

“That seems wise,” Tarek said solemnly. “Teapots that accept confinement become accountants.”

They fell into step. The air had the taste of stone that had overheard many secrets and kept most of them. The cracked wand at Cassandra’s side gave a small, agreeable thrumming, as if it approved of the day’s syntax.

“The court has posted its formal notice,” Tarek said after a street’s worth of quiet. “It reads like a moral fable disguised as bureaucracy. Mogrim has underlined the parts that please him and pretended to forget he did.”

“I hope he inspects the biscuits this week,” Cassandra said. “Nebu thrives on oversight.”

“Nebu thrives on being right. Oversight is merely a way to demonstrate it.” Tarek tipped his head toward the river, where the ferry dock still wore its night scaffolding of shadows. “Do you have time to be improper and drink tea before you go?”

“I have time to be improper,” she said. “Tea is the impropriety.”

They stopped at a low stone wall overlooking the water. The Nile - in daylight a busy scroll of barges and arguments - was now a long, patient breath. On the opposite bank, palms wrote slow hieroglyphs against the paling sky. Cassandra set the teapot on the wall; the clay held the last of yesterday’s warmth as if it had been thinking about keeping it all night. She uncorked a small tin of leaves from her satchel, measured with a habitual care that had ceased to be superstition and become courtesy, and poured from a kettle she conjured with an apologetic flourish. The kettle replied with a dignified puff, as if to say that brevity did not preclude standards.

Two enamel cups appeared from nowhere in particular and pretended they had always been there. Steam rose. It lifted into the day and wrote nothing - good manners, she’d learned, did not insist on magic at every step.

“Rule Four?” Tarek asked, half-smile already there.

“Always.” Cassandra poured a third cup near her elbow and left it to cool, its surface a small, precise mirror of the new sky.

They drank. The first swallow gentled the edges of things. Heat, mint, the faint sweetness that suggested distant hives and patient roofs; the sort of taste that made one forgive mornings for being honest. The cats arranged themselves like punctuation around an argument: semicolons on the wall, an em dash of tail across Tarek's shoe, a parenthesis of kitten curled against the teapot's warm side. A heron walked the shoreline with the learned boredom of a minor god.

"It is possible," Tarek said, "that I will miss arguing with you."

"It's probable," Cassandra said. "You'll have to practice on brighter students. Or instructors who enjoy losing."

"I prefer opponents who think they are impervious to persuasion," he said mildly. "It makes the victories narratively satisfying."

She laughed. The river caught the sound and sent it back a few degrees warmer.

They watched a fisherman push off from a reed-choked inlet, his pole a long, slow exclamation point. In the distance, a train with the decency to be late carried its own horizon. Dawn deepened, as dawns will when given encouragement.

"I keep thinking there should be a speech," Cassandra confessed, and surprised herself. "Something dignified. Lists. We were very good at lists."

Tarek nodded, accepting the impulse and the refusal both. "The best speeches are invitations disguised as ends," he said. "But mornings do that without us."

"True," she said. "In that case: no speech. Only - thank you for lending me your city."

"It is not mine," Tarek said, almost sharp, and then softened it with the ghost of an apology she didn't need. "It tolerates me. I love it because it refuses to be owned."

"Good moral."

"Steal it," he said. "Teach it until it embarrasses your students into doing better work."

Cassandra sipped and let the heat sit under her tongue a moment like a promise. The cracked wand vibrated very gently against her coat, a sound her bones had learned to translate: here, here, here. Not a place. A practice.

"You'll write?" Tarek asked, already knowing the answer and asking because rituals require witnesses.

"I'll write badly and then less badly," she said. "I'll send pages that argue with themselves. I'll send questions I shouldn't, and you will send me footnotes."

"I will send you footnotes that argue back," he said, smiling. "And if you forget to sleep, I will ask Nebu to invoice you for borrowed hours."

"That's extortion."

“That’s friendship with accountants.”

They drank the second measure in considerate silence. The third cup - Rule Four - sent up discreet steam and cooled as if it were listening. Cassandra did not look at it directly. She had learned the mercy of side glances.

A ferry bell rang out across the water, three notes with a sensible pause between them. The crew emerged with ropes looped like domesticated serpents, voices low and practical. A woman at the far end of the dock swept last night’s grit into a small pile and disposed of it with a flick that suggested she had never once allowed the world to get the better of her kitchen. Somewhere up the bank, someone laughed at a joke that did not need a punchline because it had life in it.

Cassandra capped the tea tin and tucked the teapot back into its sling of cloth. The cats took this as their cue to make it appear as if they had always intended to leave at this moment independently. The tabby performed a precise about-face; the kitten leapt at the strap, missed, and pretended it had meant to catalog the cobblestones. The white cat bestowed a blink like a signature and melted along a wall’s thin shadow.

“I’ll walk you to the gate,” Tarek said.

“I know,” she said.

At the dock, a goblin ticket clerk recognized her with the professional composure of someone who understood that notoriety was simply a surcharge. “Morning, Miss Blythe,” he said. “One to Alexandria. Baggage?”

“Only opinions,” Cassandra said. “Lightly used.”

“Contraband, then,” he said, stamping a ticket. “We tax by conviction.”

“Put it on my account,” she said, and the clerk snorted as if debts were a philosophy he endorsed.

They reached the gangway. The ferry smelled of rope, tar, and the sort of wood that is pleased to have a job. A deckhand with arms like well-argued conclusions took her satchel and set it exactly so, with the respect due to things that had once carried a life and might again. The river moved under everything without apology.

Tarek held out a hand. They shook like sensible people, except their palms stayed together a heartbeat longer than protocol demanded. The fingers said what words would have made messy: go well, bring back more questions than you left with, do not forget that cups need washing and that this is wisdom.

“Try not to fall off anything expensive,” he said.

“I will practice restraint,” she said. “In moderation.”

He released her hand. “I’ll send the fellowship papers properly,” he added. “With an envelope that scolds you into replying.”

“I’ll ignore it for precisely the time that makes you write again,” she said.

“Good,” he said, and the word carried a small, private warmth. “Then we’re in accord.”

She stepped onto the gangway. The ferry shifted its weight like a creature preparing to swim. The cracked wand hummed once, twice, the rhythm of a heart that had learned a slower song. At the rail, she turned back, because superstition is simply courtesy to the past in a tidy coat.

On the roofline across the road, a silhouette arranged itself with theatrical precision: sleek, golden, bow tie not merely black but midnight distilled. Nebu stood with all four paws aligned and his tail describing an elegant question mark. He did not wave. Cats do not wave. He blinked once, very slowly, which in his language was a lecture, an embrace, and a verdict.

Cassandra raised two fingers in salute. The river borrowed the gesture and made it a ripple. Somewhere, a kettle reached a conclusion.

The bell rang again. The ferry eased away, ropes uncoiling like agreeable eels. Water spoke in the sotto voce paragraphs of wakes against hull. Tarek lifted his umbrella in farewell as if it were a flag of truce between eras. Behind him, the city shook out its businesses like a quilt; shutters lifted; a vendor tested a call and approved of it; a child ran, scandalizing dust.

Cassandra leaned on the rail and let the Nile’s breath play across her face. It smelled of silt and green things and the old patience of floods. The eastern sky had risen to the color of clean paper. She imagined a line on it: *All curiosity is borrowed light. Return it warm.*

She reached into her coat and touched the cracked wand. It thrummed in answer, not with the greedy hum of the temple but with the domestic sound of a kettle at the edge of a boil - ready, not ravenous. The fissure along its length felt less like damage now, more like a seam that had agreed to be visible; the place where two stories had learned to meet without swallowing.

On the deck, a tea boy - twelve, gap-toothed, too proud of his metal tray to be careful - wove among passengers selling cups the size of thimbles. Cassandra bought one and held it above the rail. Steam rose, drew a feather, thought better of performance, and vanished into the same air everyone breathed. She poured a drop overboard for the absent, which the river took the way it takes everything: with an efficiency that isn’t unkind.

“Drink well,” she murmured, because good rules follow you, and “Think carefully,” because they should. The wake wrote brief sentences against the bank and unspooled them as soon as they were legible. The cat on the roof stretched, turned in a circle, and became sunlight.

Cairo receded not as if it were leaving her, but as if it were demonstrating that she could leave and it would still exist in an entire, busy present. Over her shoulder, the western sky put away its stars in an orderly fashion. Ahead, the river wandered toward the sea like a thought content to take the long way through the day.

She breathed in, and for the first time in weeks the breath went all the way down without catching on something sharp. The ferry’s boards thrummed underfoot; the wand answered; the teapot in its cloth sling pressed its warm, faithful weight against her hip.

“All right,” Cassandra said to the morning, to the river, to the company of cats and ghosts who compose a life. “Let’s begin again.”

London received her with its customary indifference, which is one of the reasons Cassandra loved it. The city did not demand a performance; it preferred paperwork. The train slid into King’s Cross under a sky the color of a pencil rubbed dull. Rain had been at work, professional and thorough, and the platforms shone like carefully polished arguments.

Her flat on the top floor of a building that believed in eaves more than insulation had been exactly as she left it, plus dust and a spider with an entrepreneurial spirit. The room smelled faintly of old books, damp wool, and the kind of air that has been waiting its turn to be breathed. Half-open trunks leaned at angles that suggested they’d been caught plotting an escape and decided to play innocent. Stacks of unsent letters lay along the mantel like a miniature skyline - Cairo, Gringotts, Aunt Margery, a university bursar in need of reassurance. Each envelope bore a date that had become embarrassed by its own optimism.

Cassandra set her satchel on the table and the honey-colored teapot beside the sink. The clay looked wrong for London at first - too warm in a room accustomed to tin and understatement - but when she turned it in her hands it caught the dull afternoon light and made a small, private sun on the counter. She placed it where the kettle would see it and, hopefully, improve its behavior.

The cracked wand went into the mug where she kept pens. It hummed once, then fell quiet, as if it knew the room would require a different sort of magic than the temple had demanded. She shrugged off her coat and hung it on the hook that always failed at its job and always tried again.

A window rattled as the wind changed its mind. Across the courtyard, a neighbor’s canary tested the day and decided it was adequate. Someone set a broom outside a shop door with the solemnity of a guard posting. The city resumed telling itself its thousand little stories, none of which involved golden mist or sphinxes, and the relief of that made her legs go briefly unfaithful.

She boiled water without thinking - one of those sacred habits that outlive gods. The kettle complained in the same register as a clerk asked to stay past closing; London kettles are unionized by temperament. She set out two cups before she could stop herself, then left them there because some things aren’t habits so much as manners.

On the desk, the field journal waited - its leather nicked by sand and bureaucracy, its elastic tired from holding too many pages of energy that had refused to be sentences. She opened to a clean spread and breathed in the smell of paper that had not yet been wounded by ink. The first line is always an offering, her favorite professor used to say; make it something the page could accept without flinching.

She sharpened a pencil with her wand (which objected to the menial task with a faintly aristocratic vibration) and wrote:

Back in London. The rain conducts itself with familiar competence. My teapot has made itself at home faster than I have. This seems correct.

She paused, listened to the flat. A floorboard answered; the spider moved a fraction along its project; the clock on the mantel clicked in the tone of an argument won long ago. The quiet here was different from the temple's hush or the court's ceremonious silence. This quiet had neighbors. She found it tonic.

The kettle knocked its conclusion against its own throat. She filled the teapot, the clay taking the heat with a small grateful sound as if it had been cold and had chosen not to make a fuss. She poured one cup and set the other opposite it, Rule Four traveling well. Steam rose; London steam writes plainer than Cairo's, letters square and sensible, no flourishes unless the baker down the street is in love.

She stood with both hands cupped around the porcelain and let the first swallow wash the last of the desert out of her bones. Mint, honey, and something London adds to everything - smoke or apology. Warmth reached all the way down. She hadn't realized how often, in the past weeks, breath had stopped halfway as if something had been forgotten.

Work waited, and so did choices. The resigning letter to Gringotts had composed itself on the train, as such letters do when they've been rehearsed in jokes for too long. She reread the draft now and trimmed the hedging until only thanks and necessary facts remained. "Dear Ms. Peridot," she wrote with penmanship that would win no awards and lose none it wanted, "Please accept my resignation from the Cairo assignment, effective immediately. I remain fond of my colleagues and skeptical of vaults that imagine they can contain time. I will return what is yours and keep only my mistakes." She signed it, folded it, addressed it, and set a book on top to keep it from walking off in a gust of conscience.

Another letter: to Tarek. This one refused to be brisk. She allowed it its own feet, let it wander through thanks and recipes (Aunt Margery's lemon cake, annotated), through a promise to send the first clumsy lectures as soon as they were done being embarrassed to exist. She drew a sketch at the bottom of the page: a little feather and a teacup; the ink bled slightly into the paper like kindness.

A third note: to the Cairo court, a formal copy of her testimony, signed in a hand that could have been a stranger's apprentice of hers. She found that she wanted their files to be complete. It felt like a small courtesy to the future.

Around her, London put on evening early because it liked to get a head start. The rain ticked on the window as if giving instructions to the glass. She lit the lamp with her wand and the flame steadied with the satisfaction of a job done properly. The cracked shaft caught the light and showed itself honestly: a seam, not a wound. A place where two halves had agreed to remain themselves and still hold together.

She took the second cup from the table, warmed by the room, and carried it to the sill. She didn't say his name. She didn't need to. The steam gave a modest curl that could have been a lifted brow - he would have disliked melodrama on draughty afternoons.

"Drink well," she told the pane, watching the rain re-translating the city in droplets. "Think carefully."

Outside, a cat - soaked to the ribs and offended in principle - took shelter under the awning across the way and regarded the weather as if it were a colleague who had missed a meeting. The cat shook once, made a decision about the rest of its day, and trotted on. Cassandra smiled. The world had many Nebus, if one learned to look sideways.

The field journal invited her back with the tact of an old friend: no pressure, some expectation. She sat and wrote what the day would accept:

Restraint is a cousin of bravery, less glamorous and more useful. I am to try for it in the mornings and forgive myself by tea.

She stopped. The pencil hovered, ready to make an unwise promise. She repositioned it and drew a line instead, a small horizon to mark where the next sentence would belong when it had earned its place.

Fatigue found her, but not the angle-grinding kind, not the temple's stone on the soul. This was honest tiredness, domestic, full of small labor: letters written, kettle boiled, boots taken off and lined up like reasonable soldiers. She went barefoot across the wooden floor and opened the wardrobe to discover that all her good sweaters had developed ideological differences with moths. A to-do list assembled itself in her head with the politeness of a guest who has arrived on time and brought a cake.

The lamplight smoothed the edges of the room. Things knew where they would sleep. Cassandra glanced at the mantel's skyline of unsent letters and broke their spell with a decision: tomorrow, post. Tomorrow, errands. Tomorrow, she would visit the little stationery shop on Baker Street where the proprietor had once confessed to binding her own grief into journals so it did not leak into the cash drawer. Tomorrow, she would buy three notebooks and call them *Syllabi That Will Be Improved by Embarrassment*.

A soft sound came from the stairwell: claws on wood, or the quiet industry of a postal owl finding its equilibrium. She waited, not moving, aware that the room had altered itself by half a degree in the direction of arrival.

A knock. Courteous, not hesitant. The kind of knock that assumes the world is old enough to handle being interrupted. She set down her cup, smoothed her hair by reflex because some rituals are less about appearance than about signaling to oneself that one can be seen, and opened the door.

No one stood there. London is a magician about absence. But on the mat sat a square parcel with no return address, tied with blue string in a knot that had learned to be decorative after mastering competence. Rain had stippled the paper in a pattern like a constellation. She lifted it and felt its weight, familiar in the way memory is: light and consequential.

Her name was written on the top in a hand that wasn't a hand at all but a style of being precise: each letter formed with patience and humor, as if the writer had learned the alphabet from someone who valued order and then defected to affection.

Cassandra carried the parcel inside and set it on the table. She did not open it at once. London teaches its people to let the kettle come back to a simmer rather than hurriedly forcing a boil.

She refilled her cup, glanced at the second, and smiled because she had the ridiculous, certain sense that the room had just gained a chair.

The rain leaned toward the window and stayed there, briefly interested in its own reflection. Across the courtyard, the canary had run out of commentary and accepted the evening. A tram rang a bell down on the high street like a spoon on a glass toasting nothing in particular. The world was not waiting. It was merely present.

“All right,” Cassandra said, to the parcel, to the city, to the part of herself that had followed a rumor into an alley and found a tea salon run by a judgmental cat. “We’ll be sensible about this.”

She drew the blue string loose and felt, absurdly, as if she were undoing a very small spell cast by someone who trusted her not to be greedy. The knot yielded the way a lesson does the fifth time you try it with less pride.

Inside: tissue paper the color of baked sand; beneath that, the round tin she knew from Egyptian afternoons - the embossed seal she could have traced blindfolded, the faint, clean scent of desert honey. She touched the lid with the pad of her thumb and felt the ridges warm under her skin.

A scrap of parchment lay atop the tin, square and simple. On it, pressed into the fibers, a single golden pawprint, crisp and smug, and beneath, a line in neat, unsentimental script:

For when you forget that curiosity is holy, not harmless. - N.

Her laugh started as a breath and acquired sound like a shy idea realizing it could walk. She closed her eyes, not to stop tears - those would come if they wanted, in their own sensible English - but to let this settle without commentary. When she opened them, the room had chosen to be kinder without changing at all.

She set the tin on the mantel between the letters and the clock, a bridge between apologies and time. The kettle - sensitive to narrative like all true kettles - sighed a small, satisfied second boil.

Cassandra returned to the journal and turned the page. The pencil hovered. For a moment, steam from her cup curled up and past her cheek and, in the air above the paper, threatened to become a feather, then reconsidered. London is wary of spectacle. She respected that.

She wrote a line that was not an ending and not yet a beginning, but the sort of middle you can live in:

Tomorrow I will write down the way the dead taught me to pour for the absent and the living learned to drink like listeners.

She put down the pencil. The room agreed. Outside, the rain softened into a hush that touched the window like a hand held briefly to the glass and withdrawn. She blew on her tea. The

steam rose, plain and good, and the wand in the mug hummed a modest, domestic note, as if the world were a kettle and somebody, somewhere, had just decided it was time.

Chapter 15: The Cat’s Epilogue

Chapter 15
The Cat’s Epilogue

London met her with wet stone and the old coal-breath of winter. Cassandra stepped out of the Floo at Gringotts’ side hearth and immediately sneezed; London smoke had a way of insinuating itself into both lungs and memory. The grate rattled shut behind her, and the marbled antechamber arranged its reflections, presenting back a version of her that was slightly tidier and more hopeful than she felt.

The Bank was itself: tall and pale and expensive, the veining in its pillars as delicate as river-weed preserved in ice. Enchantments hummed soft as bees around the ceiling cornices. Brass lamps pooled light on the tiled floor in sensible ovals that encouraged purposeful walking. Somewhere above, you could hear the prim scrape of goblin quills and the faint, ongoing argument between the elevators about whose cables were more ethically sourced.

She could have gone straight home. Instead Cassandra walked the long hall toward her old department, letting the place reorder the city for her. Footsteps echoed. Ledgers flicked their own corners at her as if gossiping: She’s back; still breathing; still unfashionably attached to curiosity. The wall clock - an officious bronze sun with too many rays - clicked its teeth at her tardiness. When she passed the registry hatch, the hatch passed her a form without looking.

“Not today,” she said, handing the paper back. The form wilted in what might have been relief.

Gringotts smelled of polish and ink and, faintly, of the mint pastilles the senior auditors took for their stomachs. Somewhere, a teapot was attempting to unionize with the filing cabinets and being told firmly that kettles did not get holidays. Cassandra’s mouth quirked. London always soothed and bruised in the same breath: familiar absurdities pressed into a shape that pretended it wasn’t loneliness.

Her office still had her name on the frosted glass: C. Blythe, Curse Division (Field). Beneath it, in a passive-aggressive italic hand that could only have been Maintenance, someone had added: Return Your Protective Amulets In A Timely Fashion. Cassandra let her palm rest on the cool door. The magic in the room recognized her and unlatched with a crisp little sigh, as though the space had been trying to keep its posture in her absence and could finally slouch.

Half-open trunks on the rug. A coil of rope charmed to refuse knots without a written apology. The bookcase, taller than loyalty, leaning under the weight of three languages of runes dictionaries and one crumbling manual titled Courteous Disenchantment For Difficult Clients. On the desk - her desk - lay a single sheet of parchment bearing her own careful handwriting:

I hereby tender -

She didn’t read the rest. The sentence was a cliff edge. She stood, coat damp at the cuffs, listening to the steady tick of the orrery on the sideboard. It kept time by modeling the polite compromises of planets, and had never forgiven Pluto for being contrary.

The cracked wand in her pocket hummed once, a small cat’s purr against her hip, and then subsided. Cairo had made it hum like that, sometimes - to warn, to forgive, to remind her that power and penitence had been soldered together along the fault line in its grain. She set it gently on the blotter. The wand looked like a pencil that had survived a house fire and learned manners in the aftermath.

“Hello, you,” she said, because it helped to say it aloud.

Her plant had died in her absence, or perhaps in protest at her watering schedule. Its leaves had the exhausted transparency of seagrass. She touched the pot, whispered a charm that had nothing to do with resurrection and everything to do with not letting the world give up out of habit. The soil shivered. One leaf reconsidered. It wasn’t much, but then neither was grief, most days: a reconsidering.

She crossed to the window. London’s light was the color of pewter and old china. Rain did a good impression of being endless. A double-decker omnibus rolled past spraying up a fan of water that fell back like a ripped veil. Somewhere down in Diagon Alley’s parallel line, a broom messenger drew a wavering line in the sky, the ink of his wake smearing as the clouds swallowed it. The city exhaled damply, the way a library might breathe when no one was looking.

The chair remembered the shape of her when she sat. Her body remembered the chair’s creak in answer. Her fingers found the teacup she had left - weeks? months? - before, saucer still bearing the faint ghost of honey. She made a face and brewed something fresh with a flick of her wand, careful not to ask the kettle to do more than it wanted. Steam rose, carrying notes of Ceylon and comfort, and curled - just for a second - into a hesitant reed-leaf hieroglyph that dissolved before she could decide which meaning to give it.

“Not that I’m looking for signs,” she told the air, and the air, being London, remained unimpressed.

Work shuffled on the desk at her like an over-eager dog that had learned how to file. The assignment log offered up a neat list of tombs and vaults requiring her particular courtesies: one in Verona that sighed in Latin, one in Skye that bit, and a case flagged “delicately urgent” by the front office, which meant not urgent at all unless someone important had a nephew involved. Cassandra let the log settle. She could hear Araminta’s voice in the word delicately, hear the smile tilted like a knife. The floor under her feet felt less treacherous than that memory.

There were, if she was honest, simpler paths than the one that had brought her back into this room. She could have sent the letter by owl from Cairo; she could have resigned by absence; she could have stayed, doffing her cap to the clean logic of promotions. The Bank would have been happy to polish her into a very useful coin. Instead she had carried the sentence I

hereby tender across sea and desert, and put it on her desk like a stone she was ready to set down. Ready, but not yet.

“What if I don’t?” she asked, not of anyone. The question made a small dent in the air and turned itself over, curious. She felt the answer in the soles of her feet: the Bank would go on. Ledgers would still gossip. Quills would still bicker. Work would keep arriving dressed as purpose, bringing flowers to the bedside of her better judgment and calling it love.

In the corridor, a trolley of enchanted in-trays trundled past as if late for a train. The topmost tray sniffed at her door and, finding it open, nosed itself in.

“Don’t be brave,” she told it. “It’s a terrible habit.”

The tray, which had been trained to respect sarcasm, backed out with an apologetic squeak.

She stood, finally, because the moment was not going to meet her halfway. The parchment waited. The rain tapped time. She smoothed the page with the flat of her palm. The inked curve of her first letter - the I in I hereby - looked both grand and frightened, which was exactly right. She dipped the quill.

Her name, when it came, looked like her. Cassandra Blythe. The B always did a thing like a ribbon at a party trying not to be celebratory. She wrote the rest without ceremony. Reasons were offered, courtesy observed. Gratitude acknowledged with as much truth as she owed. She did not mention Rahetep; she did not write the word Breath or the word immortality or the word friend. Some names were less safe on paper than on the tongue.

When she finished, the quill put a dot after her last full stop that was slightly too emphatic, as if to say there will be no more argument. Then it lay there, panting delicately, pleased with itself.

Cassandra read the page once through. Her chest hurt, in the way of muscles that have been bracing for longer than they admit. She folded the letter. The fold was neat, but not cruel. Wax, seal, the sigil that had once meant pride and now meant polite farewell. On impulse, she pressed her cracked wand against the warm wax. The metal glint of the wand’s core left a hair-thin line where it touched - an imperfect scar across the seal. She felt better for its ugliness.

On her way to the hall, she paused under the framed photograph of the Curse Division circa 1918. The picture wizards were all very young and earnest, waving from their sandblown tents. Someone had scrawled: Do not hex the photographer - he is armed with a tripod. Cassandra touched the edge of the glass, thinking of the particular bravery of bright people doing foolish things in orderly ways. She had been one of them. She might still be, but in a different grammar.

The internal post chute accepted her envelope with a cluck and a swallow. There was a moment - always - when the letter hesitated at the lip, the building thinking it over. Then the Bank took the choice out of her hands, in the gentlest possible way, and the sealed thing slipped down into the mechanics of consequence.

Cassandra listened to it go. A breath in, a breath out. The orb lamps brightened precisely one fraction, recognizing completion. Somewhere, the elevators stopped arguing long enough to agree that someone had been brave in a way that did not require congratulation.

“Right,” she said to the empty corridor, and heard her voice return to her in a form she liked.

By the time she had collected her wand from the desk and shrugged back into her coat, London had finished making a point of raining and settled into a private drizzle. She turned down her name on the office door, the letters dimming to a pale dignity, and closed it. The latch clicked. Not final, merely finished - for this part.

As she walked toward the stairs, the wall clock’s too-many rays turned, catching a gleam from her. It was a trick of brass and light. Or it was the desert, remembering itself in the polish. Either way, the sight steadied her. She could feel the shape of the next thing not as a map but as a temperature: warmer than fear, cooler than triumph. A kettle just before the boil.

“Miss Blythe?” called the clerk at the end of the hall, startled to see her smiling. “Do you - shall I - ?”

“No need,” Cassandra said, and meant it. “I’ve poured my own.”

Cassandra’s flat received her like an old book: a little dusty at the edges, spine cracked in the right place, and so very certain of the hand that would turn it. The door stuck on the second hinge, as it always did, protesting modernity; when she shouldered through, the ward she’d set months ago fluttered awake with the papery sound of moth wings and then, recognizing her, settled into a contented hum. The hallway smelled of rain caught in wool and something darker under it - Egypt clinging to the leather of her trunk like a rumor that had decided to become perfume.

She kicked off her boots - sand had found a way into their seams and now sifted out onto the runner in pale sighs. London dust made a point of being grey; Cairo’s was gold even after oceans, as if color were a kind of stubbornness. She stood very still and listened. Neighbors above: the tap-tap of a typewriter. Street below: a milk cart as steady as tradition, a child spelling out the rain in squeals. Inside: the clock on the mantel clearing its throat once a minute to see if anyone would object to the passage of time.

Everything had waited as she left it. The books along the wall leaned into one another, gossiping in footnotes. The chaise longue wore her old cardigan like a cat that had adopted clothes. Over the fireplace, the mirror had fogged slightly around the edges as if it had been thinking too hard. In the kitchen corner, the little iron stove exuded a patient warmth that belonged to simpler physics.

On the small table under the window lay the detritus of her other life: a coil of chalk string, a brass compass charmed to point at the most inconvenient truth, a notebook with its elastic tongue protruding, put out at being abandoned. A worn pair of field gloves rested on top, smudged with ochre and ash. She trailed a finger along them. Memory rose in the skin like heat: the rasp of sandstone, that particular hollow sound when a wall wants to be a door, Nebu’s dry voice saying from somewhere unhelpful, “If you insist on touching history, at least buy it dinner first.”

Her kettle, which had strong opinions on frequency of use and had recently been starved of conversation, perked up at once. “All right,” she told it, peeling off her coat. “We’ll begin with apologies.”

She filled the kettle from the tap, let the water run until it achieved the virtue of cold, and set it on the flame. The stove’s magic was domestic - nothing clever, everything faithful. In Cairo she had learned the magics that moved deserts and unstitched curses. Here it was the miracle of a blue flame making ordinary water into company. She leaned her elbows on the counter and watched the bubbles gather in private conference along the kettle’s belly. The flat smelled itself into coherence: hot metal, old paper, damp wool, the faint citrus of the soap she’d left by the sink like a note to future sobriety.

While the water thought about boiling, she wandered. The bedroom was a narrow alcove with a window stubbornly committed to framing a brick wall and a slice of sky. Her bed wore its own topography of books and stray clothing; she folded the map of it into order with the absent competence of a person who had spent years making neat spaces in rooms that belonged to other people. She found an old scarf in the bedclothes - a fine linen thing from the Khan el-Khalili that smelled of spice and patience - and looped it around the neck of the mirror. Vanity, draped in Cairo, looked less vain.

She opened the wardrobe and closed it again. Rows of shirts that knew too well the shapes of her shoulders. A dress she’d bought in a fit of future optimism and never worn. On the shelf: a hatbox containing a field hat with a dent where Rahetep, laughing, had placed his wrapped hand years too late to touch it, saying, “Practicality suits you better than crowns.” Her throat did an odd, steadying thing. Not pain exactly. The body learning to make room for an absence.

Back in the main room, she pulled the curtains. Rain made a quiet theater of the glass. The city beyond moved like an idea she had once held dear and now held gently. The kettle began its prelude - a rising note, a barely contained urgency. She took down her favorite cup: cracked near the rim in a fine, mended line that had learned how to be stronger than before. She chose a tea without ceremony; the tins muttered their pedigrees at her, but she ignored the aristocrats and opened a plain tin with no label and everything necessary inside.

When the water was ready, she poured. Steam lifted, soft and idle, and then - because the world had learned her language or she had finally learned the world’s - it curled into the suggestion of a reed-leaf glyph, then a bird with an impossible angle to its beak, then nothing at all. The after-image of meaning hovered. Cassandra smiled into it. “You’ll make me superstitious,” she told the cup, and the cup, which had no patience for theology, simply offered warmth.

She carried the tea to the table and set it on a ring worn into the wood by years of heat and thought. The rain put a rhythm in her ears like a page turned. She opened her field journal. Its first page had once been neat. Then Cairo had happened to it. Corners bent, margins confettied with quick drawings: the outline of the court’s ziggurat; a teapot with something like a face, suspiciously militant; a cat’s paw raised as if to bless or demand tribute. Her handwriting, always disciplined, had loosened into loops somewhere around the Temple

Beneath the Nile. She touched the ink where she had scrawled, in a moment of midnight bravery, All knowledge is borrowed light, then, in smaller letters, Don’t be greedy.

She sharpened a pencil because it felt right to make small points when life had been so full of large ones. Out of habit, she checked the array of little protections threaded through the room: an amulet in the bookshelf’s shadow to discourage malicious footnotes; a thin line of salt across the windowsill for sentiment, not defense; two mothballs under the door to dissuade both moths and the sort of spirits that got peckish around knitwear. Her cracked wand lay beside the journal like a companion who had agreed to speak second. It hummed, faintly, at the tea, at the window, at her pulse, and went quiet again - as if it, too, were listening.

The first sip performed alchemy on her ribcage. Heat dilated the small places. Honey, even when it wasn’t in the cup, found a way into the taste - Cairo’s contribution, a ghost flavor. She closed her eyes and allowed the taste to carry her back: hushed corridors of the court where hieroglyphs negotiated with truth; the market’s riot of color and barter, spices vibrating on the tongue like chords; the temple’s air, ancient and alive, breathing her in as she had breathed it in. Rahetep’s laugh - a civilized sound in an uncivil math of peril. Nebu’s disdain - a comfort because it refused to lie.

“You were right,” she said to the room, and to both of them. About what, precisely, didn’t need stating.

A small framed photograph on the mantel flickered. It held a moment she had refused to let be captured: herself and Tarek seated at a café table, arguing amiably over whether the word for that specific shade of late-afternoon sun was better in Arabic or in Ancient Egyptian. She had turned away when the picture had been taken; the photograph had obliged, showing mostly her profile and a posture of listening. Tarek’s eyes in the picture were bright with the kind of teasing patience that makes an opinion a gift rather than a threat. Now the image ran forward a second further than it had when she’d left. Her photographed self leaned in and laughed at something unheard. Magic did that, sometimes, in private - edited memory in kindness rather than malice.

She ought to write letters, she thought, and then corrected herself: she wanted to. The distinction stood up straighter than pride. She pulled a sheaf of notepaper toward her, the one with the faint watermark of a tea leaf that appeared only when the page was heated. For Tarek, she began: Your city has lodged itself in the hinge of my heart; every time I open it, something golden falls out. For Griphook al-Azhari: Thank you for the courtesy of not saying “I told you so” when you might have. For Inspector Mogrim: Please give my respects to the monocle and tell it I am learning to tell the truth without biting. For Araminta - she stopped, smiled without humor, and laid that page aside. Some sentences did not need ink to exist.

She wrote until the kettle sighed into silence and the tea settled into the kind of warmth that asks to be sipped without commentary. The pencil moved. Words arranged themselves with fewer barbs, more bridges. When she paused, the room felt less like a container and more like a collaborator.

Outside, the rain deepened its conversation with the gutters. A cat yowled in the alley - some ordinary London cat with mud in its dignity. Instinct took her to the window. On the low brick wall opposite, a thin shape sluiced rain from its whiskers and met her eye with the

broad, impatient tolerance of cats at the edge of charity. Not gold. Not Nebu. But the tilt of the head made a small replacement in her chest that was not betrayal but acknowledgment: the world still had cats; she was still herself; not every miracle belonged to Cairo.

“Wait,” she murmured, surprising herself. She fetched a saucer, poured a little milk, and set it on the sill beneath the overhang. The local wards tugged at her sleeve like a fussy aunt, muttering about inviting strays, demons, and mischief. “We have room,” Cassandra told them, and drew the circle of invitation shallow enough for whiskers, not spirits.

By the time she returned to the window, the alley cat was already drinking, disdain disguising gratitude. Its tail wrote a lazy question mark in the rain. She raised her cup in salute and was rewarded with a blink that admitted, perhaps, the existence of diplomacy.

Back at the table, she turned to a fresh page of the journal. The date. The weather noted with dry amusement: Rain attempting myth, failing nobly. She titled the entry “Post-Mortem of a Profession” and, under it, “Notes Toward a Gentle Future.” Words came. Not conclusions - those had always distrusted her - but observations with good manners. That limiting oneself was not the same as shrinking. That endings, properly brewed, reveal flavors beginnings cannot. That mercy is a kind of scholarship.

Her wand pulsed once through the wood. A hairline of light walked along its crack and left no burn. “Yes,” she told it. “I know.”

The flat had warmed enough to loosen her shoulders. She catalogued the new quiet: not empty, not waiting, simply present. The kind you get in museums after closing, when all the labels relax and the objects lean a fraction toward one another to exchange opinions on the visitors. She thought of Rahetep’s Rest in Old Cairo, of floating cups and invisible musicians and Nebu’s bow tie - ridiculous, inevitable. She thought of how the world had made a place for him and for those like him, and of how perhaps she could learn to make a place for herself that was not a job description but a room with a table and a kettle and a resolve.

Another sip. The steam, now gentler, rose and unmade itself without the drama of signs. She laughed softly at her own disappointment and then at her laughter, and that felt like honesty. When she set the cup down, the ring it left overlapped perfectly a ring from long ago. Circles doing what circles do. It pleased her that they didn’t line up by accident; some miracles were just practice.

The rain eased. From the alley came the faint clink of saucer on stone and the settled hush of a cat deciding it might return. Cassandra flexed her fingers, ink-stained and alive, and leaned over the page. The pencil traced the sentence that would root the rest:

All curses are stories that forgot how to end.

She looked at it. Nodded once. The kettle, content, breathed. The room agreed. And for the first time since the desert exhaled her back into London, Cassandra felt entirely in the present tense.

Morning practiced its pale grammar across the windowsill, conjugating the rain into a thin, polite drizzle. Cassandra had slept as one does in a familiar bed after too much strangeness -

lightly, like a swimmer staying close to the surface. She woke to the soft diplomacy of the mantel clock and the tender ache of a muscle that had been bracing for months and was not yet convinced it could stop.

The post arrived with its usual chorus: a thud from downstairs, the stairwell’s echo, a pair of argumentative letters trying to sort themselves by urgency. Something lighter tapped her door as if it had learned manners on the journey. When she opened it, the hallway smelled of wet wool and paper, and sitting on the threshold was a small round tin wrapped in brown paper and twine. No return address. Just a pressed seal in gold wax, a sigil that made her ribs remember how to widen: a stylized sun, a cartouche, and, nestled within - unmistakably - an elegant pawprint.

Her name had been written with the sort of penmanship that believes posture is a moral decision. The loop on the C was a bow; the final e of Blythe relaxed like a cat pawing a cushion. Cassandra stood there for a beat longer than necessary, because her body wanted the moment to include both anticipation and mercy. Then she crouched, picked up the parcel, and felt the tin’s weight settle into her palm as if it had been waiting for that exact fit.

The twine yielded to a muttered charm and the warm breath of her cracked wand. Paper unpeeled itself. The gold seal, half-broken by travel, held a thin line across it where some metal had kissed it - like the scar she’d pressed into her resignation yesterday. She touched the impression of the paw with the pad of her thumb. Heat hummed up through her skin: not temperature, but recognition.

Inside, nestled in a circle of soft straw, sat a tin the color of old honey. Embossed on the lid, in a relief so fine it hesitated between image and memory, was Rahetep’s royal badge - a sun rising from a reed-fringed horizon - framed by a border of tiny, watchful eyes. Around the rim, someone had etched a motto in a language that preferred to be sung. She did not translate it aloud; some words behaved better when left to glow.

Beneath the tin lay a folded slip of parchment. The handwriting here was familiar in a different way: sharper, slyer, letters trimmed to an economical swagger. A perfume of sarcasm in the ink.

For when you forget that curiosity is holy, not harmless. - N.

The dash before the initial was a flourish only the guilty and the aristocratic permit themselves. Cassandra felt laughter arrive in the same room as tears, introduced them, and let them get on. She read the line again, hearing the voice that belonged to it - rich and faintly bored, capable of drawing blood when accuracy required - then slipped the note into her journal where it would wait like a bookmark in a prayer.

She lifted the tin. It purred.

Not loudly. Not theatrically. Just a vibration against her palm, a contented acknowledgement like a cat sleeping on your book as if to bless your education and impede it simultaneously. The purr stopped the instant she smiled too openly, because of course it did.

When she opened the tin, the room acquired a new climate. Tea leaves, long and dark, exhaled an aroma that was not simply scent but story: sun warmed on stone, a whisper of resin, a thread of dates and clean straw, the ghost of smoke from a brazier tended by a patient hand. And underneath it all, a sweetness without stickiness - honey if honey had learned restraint.

Tucked into the leaves was a square of parchment the size of her palm. On it, impressed in gold, another pawprint - this one less stately, half-smudged, as if the owner had been interrupted mid-signature by the need to chase a beam of light across the floor. She lifted the print; the leaves hissed softly as they settled, like an audience adjusting in their seats before the overture.

“Hello, old nuisance,” she said into the tin, and because the world had not yet run out of kindness, something like an echo kissed the edges of her hearing.

She set the kettle on. Today, even the tap water came out with a little ceremony, as if such moments required crispness. While heat imagined itself into a boil, Cassandra decanted a pinch of the leaves into her favorite cup - the cracked one that had found a way to be whole differently. She warmed the pot, rinsed it, shook off droplets like tiny bells. The act of brewing performed its secular sacrament: attention applied, impatience banished to the hallway, steam making a cathedral of the smallest space.

When she poured, the water darkened with swift conviction. The leaves unfurled, waking like script remembering a voice. Steam lifted and, because some promises keep teaching themselves how to be kept, curled first into the outline of a feather, then into the curve of a vulture’s beak - the hieroglyph for protection - then softened into nothing you could name without reducing it.

She cupped the warmth between her hands. The first inhale was a map unrolling, the kind without borders. She brought the cup to her mouth and drank and felt, gently, the desert reassemble itself behind her closed eyes.

The market returned first: copper bowls ringing like accidental bells, spices in pyramids so bright they made the tongue expect music, air braided with laughter and barter. Tarek’s smile arriving half a second before his wit. The court after: arguments paced by a sphinx, laws written in sentences that braided into new meanings as they were spoken. Inspector Mogrim’s monocle clicking in disapproval that had, somehow, learned how to love.

Then the temple. Always the temple, once remembered. The air under the earth not still at all but busy with the sorts of lives that don’t require lungs. Runes flowering and folding as if photosynthesizing human intention. The Breath - not a thing, not entirely, but the grammar beneath all things - swirling with that terrible gentleness all true power has when it knows you cannot meet it at eye level without cost. The crack in her wand receiving it, refusing it, translating it into a kind of vow. Her own voice speaking words she had not been taught by any teacher with a body: All knowledge is borrowed light. The relief and terror of meaning passing through without deciding to stay.

And Rahetep. The memory did not arrive in sepia. It came with the fresh color the heart gives to the dead when it is ready to confess that it loved them. The linen’s immaculate geometry,

the humor that had carried its own elegy folded into a corner, his touch on her shoulder at the end - light, ceremonial - like the closing of a book in a language you had once been fluent in and would now honor by not faking.

“You broke the curse, curse-breaker. Now break your own.”

Steam brushed her cheek. Cassandra opened her eyes to London’s pale, dutiful light. A tear had taken up residence on her jawline and was considering the long journey to her collarbone. She intercepted it with a knuckle and made no remarks.

On the table, the tin watched her without eyes. She touched its lid. “And you,” she murmured to the absent cat whose shadow was all style. “You ridiculous saint.”

If Nebu heard, he declined to reward sincerity with evidence. The tin purred anyway.

She drank again, slower. The heat in her mouth seemed to annotate her, marginalia of warmth along the cold sentences under her skin. The hieroglyphs in the steam reorganized themselves, not into the old language, but into a simpler one. A line, a curl, a dot - shapes children make when they are telling the truth before they know the word for it. She leaned forward, breath held just enough to be reverent. For a moment that was either one second long or as long as gratitude requires, the steam formed the English she understood best: Thank you.

It did not linger. It would have been sentimental to linger. The letters dissolved into a breath she did not realize she had been withholding. Cassandra laughed - not the bright amusement she used as armor at the Bank, not the brittle bark she had traded for bravado in certain Cairo offices, but a smaller sound, low and clear, like cut crystal catching light. Alone, she could afford honesty.

On the mantel, the photograph of Tarek and the café made its tiny perpetual movement: the dust motes shifted; her laughing self turned a fraction more toward him. The clock allowed itself to forget a second and then found it again. Outside, the rain admired its reflection in the street and tried, for a moment, to resemble the Nile. It succeeded only in being London. That was enough.

Cassandra set the cup down on its familiar ring, and when she lifted the tin to replace the lid, the leaves inside whispered - no language, just the private fricative of plant and metal. She plucked from the straw the small golden pawprint parchment and slid it into the inner cover of her journal. There it sat, weightless and anchoring, a seal on a chapter and an invitation to the next.

Her cracked wand lay beside the cup. She placed her palm over both. The wand vibrated, a thread of sound at the base of hearing, acknowledging the tea, the tin, the thought. Not power this time. Fellowship. She did not cast anything. Some spells are best performed by not performing them.

“Right, then,” she said, voice steadying into the shape of action. “We go on.”

The kettle, empty now, pinged in agreement. The radiators muttered their iron benediction. In the alley, a cat (the pedestrian, rain-streaked kind) sneezed, then resumed its appointment with the saucer. The world, which had done its best to welcome her back without pretending nothing had changed, continued in its precise and generous business.

Cassandra took the last long swallow and closed her eyes again, not to escape but to file. She placed each image where it belonged: Rahetep's bow not as goodbye but as permission; Nebu's note as both chastisement and care; the Breath of Amun as a lesson she would honor by not attempting to repeat it. In the cabinet of her chest, she made a label for the shelf: Gratitude, Honeyed. Then she stood, rinsed the cup, wiped the ring from the table and left its shadow, so that tomorrow morning she could be reminded that warmth had been here and could be invited back.

The tin clicked shut under her hands with a softness that sounded like agreement.

By afternoon the rain had learned restraint. It stitched the air in smaller, neater seams, and the window wore it like a veil that didn't need to be tragic. Cassandra cleared a space on the table with the same ceremonial care she used to give to altars and evidence - stacking books in threes, aligning pencils as if direction mattered, turning the tin of tea so that Rahetep's sun faced the room. She set the cracked cup on a fresh square of blotting paper, a precaution against the enthusiastic punctuation of grief.

Letters first, she told herself. Not because correspondence cured anything, but because words, when domesticated in ink, could stop gnawing the furniture of one's thoughts.

She chose a sheaf of cream notepaper whose watermark - an unfurling tea-leaf - appeared only when warmed by the hand. The pages were cool at first, then obliging; the leaf blushed faintly under her touch. She smoothed the top sheet, uncapped a pen that had inherited all her better habits, and wrote the name that would be easiest to love: **Tarek el-Farouk**.

Dear Tarek,
Your city has lodged itself in the hinge of my heart; every time I open it, something golden falls out. This is an apology in advance for the mess on my floor, and a thanks for teaching me to let it be beautiful.

She paused. The nib hovered, impatient in a civilized way. She smiled, hearing his dry chuckle - that soft brass of humor that never once turned to mockery. She continued:

You were right that scholarship is a kind of hospitality. I have tried to learn the difference between entering a room to catalogue its contents and entering so the room might think aloud in my company. I suspect I will spend the rest of my life learning it. If you are inclined to tutor a stubborn student from a damp island, my kettle will practice Egyptian manners. (It is very good at bowing when it boils.)

She described the London rain attempting to be a river and failing with dignity; the alley cat who met diplomacy halfway; the way hieroglyphs still flirted with her tea. She did not say Rahetep's name, not because it hurt, but because grief works better when it is allowed to choose its own pronouns. Instead she wrote:

There is a salon here called “Elsewhere,” which is only to say my table and the chair opposite. If you ever find yourself in London with an hour that refuses to be sensible, bring it upstairs. I have a compass that points to inconvenient truths; it has been sulking without you to argue with it.

She signed with love disguised as wit:

Yours (in humility I am rehearsing), Cassandra

The watermark leaf, warmed by her hand and ink, chased itself into a brighter green and then vanished: a small, private assent.

For **Griphook al-Azhari** she chose a paper less romantic and a pen that made fewer flourishes. Griphook admired precision; it thrilled him. She aligned the page to the table’s edge and began:

Director al-Azhari,
Thank you for lending me your patience in quantities beyond the Bank’s budget. You were right, repeatedly, in the ways that matter and the ones that sting. I will be resigning from Gringotts as of today; please know this is not flight but a considered step toward the work you have done better than we did: keeping what is old safe from our newness.

She paused, then allowed herself one indulgence.

If you see the teapot which flooded the defense table, please inform it that I have forgiven it for assaulting my ankles. Tell it also that its performance remains one of the finest arguments I have witnessed in any court.

She signed with formal gratitude and something warmer under the ink:

With respect (and a promise to return your chalk string), Cassandra Blythe

For **Inspector Mogrim** she hesitated, then chose a card rather than a letter, because the man had a drawer full of cards and appreciated when thoughts arrived with crisp borders.

Inspector,
Please convey my regards to your monocle. I am practicing telling the truth without biting. On days when I fail, I will remember that you taught me the difference between order and justice, and I will try again.

She doodled, in the corner, a very small sphinx with an even smaller gavel. It looked forgiving. She hoped the Inspector would not notice the forgiveness and think her soft.

She addressed envelopes in a hand that had learned to be legible even under duress. Each name steadied her, pegging a corner of the map of herself to something she would not allow to blow away. She stacked the sealed envelopes in a neat fan beneath the clock, which approved by not clucking.

Araminta’s paper lay alone. The pen balked when she set nib to it, as if refusing to be used as a weapon, however polite. Cassandra wrote **Dear Ms. Voss** and then wrote nothing else for a

while. Rain counted to one hundred, twice. The cracked wand on the table hummed at the envelope, one soft note that sounded like a warning given as a favor.

She tried a sentence: I understand now that authority is a talent for rearranging fear. She uncapped it with a line: No, that gives you too much poetry. She tried again: You taught me rigor. I am grateful. You taught me how to speak bureaucracy. I am unlearning the accent. She stared at the words until they admitted they were really for herself. Then she drew a single line through the page - not violent, just decisive - folded it, slid it beneath the tin of tea, and left it there to be pressed into a silence that would not need the post.

The room, pleased with her economy, seemed to breathe in tandem with her. She slid the letters into her satchel for later, the leather creaking a little like an old friend stretching.

Now the ledger.

It had followed her home years ago, too heavy to be morally upright and too useful to be returned. A goblin master-account: calfskin, corners banded in brass, the spine tattooed with an alphabet of tiny numerals as elegant as lace. It smelled of ink that believed in consequences. She brought it to the table as if it were a witness and opened to the next blank spread. The paper, unusually thick, resisted at first and then gave way with the amiability of a stubborn mind changing.

At the top, with a pen that liked titles, she wrote: **Post-Mortem of a Profession**. Beneath, in smaller hand, **Notes Toward a Gentle Future**.

Columns came next. Years of extracting sense from old curses had made her body expert at building frameworks. She drew three clean lines to divide the page: **Debits**, **Credits**, **Remainders**. She paused, looking at her headings, then allowed herself a fourth column that had no place in goblin arithmetic: **Mercies**.

Under **Debits** she began listing what the work had cost - without malice, without exaggeration:
- Sleeplessness, the sort that pretends to be research.
- A habit of treating every room as a puzzle.
- The flattery of being good at something dangerous.
- The small cruelties of efficiency.
- An accent I did not choose.

Under **Credits** she set down what it had given:
- Languages that let stone speak.
- Friends carved from circumstance and kept by choice.
- The discipline to look again, properly, after the first answer.
- A kettle that forgives.
- Proof that humor is a form of magic no ministry can regulate.

Remainders she reserved for things that could not be balanced and should not be:
- Sand in the hems of everything.
- A laugh that sounds like linen remembering air.

- The shape of a hand on my shoulder that made leaving a way of staying.
- A cat’s note: Curiosity is holy, not harmless.

She sat with the page, letting the words take their own temperature. Outside, a boy called up to someone named Rosie and was answered by a window opening like a grin. The alley cat, finished with its milk, leapt to the wall and shook one hind foot as if shedding an opinion.

When she turned to the final column, **Mercies**, she wrote more slowly.

- That the worst temptation came with enough light to see it clearly.
- That my wand broke where I could see the break.
- That knowledge agreed to pass through me instead of staying.
- That I learned to say enough without resentment.
- That goodbye arrived dressed as permission.
- That laughter did not leave with the dead.

Her cracked wand, which had been lying across the ledger like a punctuation mark refusing to commit, flickered. A narrow blue spark walked the hairline fracture from hilt to tip and back again. It was not a flare, not a demand. A pulse, as if some small star inside the wood had remembered to breathe. Cassandra touched the wand with two fingers, the way one might greet an elder one respects and refuses to worship.

“All right,” she said softly. Acceptance lives in the throat when it is new.

She closed her eyes and let her mind step carefully through the rooms of Cairo one last time - not to linger, but to check the windows. The courtroom of hieroglyphs, the bazaar hung on air, the temple under the Nile with its alive silence. She drew each door to with the kind of care that never clicks. Behind the last, Rahetep standing in the place beyond metaphor, bowing, not to be grand, but to balance a scale she had not known she’d been carrying.

When she looked again at the ledger, the ink had dried to a civilized black. No blotting required. She wrote, at the bottom, in the space accountants reserve for signatures and miracles:

All curses are stories that forgot how to end.

She held the pen over the sentence as if expecting it to argue. It didn’t. The ink glimmered a moment - London’s pewter light catching in the wells of the letters - and settled.

A gust moved the curtain, lifting the edge of the scarf she had tied around the mirror. Her reflection considered her with a new neutrality. Not approval; something kinder - permission to be unperformed. She raised a hand. The reflection did not try to improve it.

Cassandra stood, the chair answering with its grateful creak. She slid the ledger back into its carton, a homecoming for a book that had once imprisoned numbers and now housed a small grammar of grace. The satchel received the letters, heavy with their honesty. She carried both to the mantel and laid them beside the photograph of Tarek and the café, the monocle’s imaginary cluck already audible in her head.

On the table, the tea had cooled to that perfect interval between warmth and memory. She took a sip. The taste had thinned, as all things do when left alone too long, but in the faintness there was a sweetness one misses when distracted by heat. London’s rain had paused to consider mercy; in the alley, someone laughed, and then someone else did, and the sounds braided without argument.

She put the cup down, its base finding the ghost ring she had refused to wipe away. The two circles nested, history and now, neither swallowing the other. Her wand lay quiet, her shoulders not yet, but willing. Acceptance had not arrived with trumpets. It had come on soft feet and taken a chair. Regret, that old clerk, packed its bag without being asked. In its place: a plain, durable readiness.

“Enough,” Cassandra said - not as an apology, not as surrender, but as the exact measure of what the heart can hold and still pour. The room answered by being itself, and for once, that was perfect.

Dusk arrived the way London prefers to confess: not by darkening, but by deciding light would henceforth be rented by the minute. The rain, having spent an industrious day stitching up the city, unthreaded itself into mist. In the softening window, lamplight trembled into being in polite succession along the street, as if each gas mantle had been waiting to see whether the others would commit.

Cassandra laid a clean cloth on the table. The linen was faintly tea-stained despite its best efforts - a constellation of rings where conversations had cooled. She set out two cups without thinking, then paused when she saw them side by side, white and expectant, like open parentheses. The pause did not accuse. It only took a breath with her.

“All right,” she said. “Stay.”

She took down the tin of honey-colored tea and let her palm rest on its warm lid. The purr inside greeted her again - subtle, indulgent, the sound of a cat approving a plan it would later pretend had been its idea. She measured the leaves for one cup, then - after the smallest, most human of hesitations - measured for two.

The kettle sang up from a whisper to a note that filled the flat without bullying it. She poured into each cup. Steam rose, veil upon veil, making the air smell briefly of sun on stone and stories told under it. In the glass of the window, her reflection gained a halo of breath; the halo thickened, blurred the face behind it, softened the edges until she could pretend - if she wanted - that she was not alone.

She wanted, and she didn’t. Both truths fit.

She set one cup where she sat most nights, the other in the chair opposite. It was an old bentwood thing, slightly haughty, rescued from a café that had decided its furniture should stop remembering conversations. Cassandra had kept this chair precisely because it did. Tonight, it accepted its duties without creak or complaint. The cup steamed beside it as though warmed by a hand that knew where the lip had been chipped and loved it better for the history.

She did not perform a summoning. The cracked wand lay on the table like an elder who had come for supper and would rather talk than work. Its thin fracture flashed once as if to say: I am here already.

“Then so is he,” she said, and the air - not colder, not warmer, simply more deliberate - agreed.

The first mouthful from her own cup settled the day. Heat traveled down her throat as if installing a small hearth at the sternum. The taste was the same as in the morning, yet altered, as evenings alter everything: richer, more patient, a soprano now singing alto. She set the cup down and, as if the gesture were a bell rung for attention, the mirror above the mantel fogged over from the inside. Not a haunting - hauntings announce themselves with an insistence that gives away insecurity. This was a suggestion, offered like a well-mannered footman: If you wish.

A shape gathered. Shoulders. A tilt of the head so perfected by pride it had forgotten its origin. Not features - those are private and particular - but the idea of a face you would trust to read the names of gods without swallowing them. Linen, or the memory of it, arranged itself with admirable geometry, every fold an argument for decorum. The silhouette bent the fraction of a bow.

Cassandra sat straighter because certain people improve your posture even in absence. “You’re late,” she said, aiming for lightness and hitting truth by accident.

The fog did not answer. But a warmer patch of air drifted from the chair and paused where a lap might be. It smelled faintly of resin and the dust that accumulates only in rooms that have rules. She imagined a wrapped hand, immaculate and absurd, cupping the tea to inhale the story of it. She felt herself watched in a way that was not surveillance but company - a gaze that believed the soul’s best feature was its curiosity.

“I wrote to Tarek,” she said, because conversation likes to be fed. “He’ll correct my metaphors by return post.”

A ripple crossed the mirror, the kind of amused dissent Rahetep had mastered at court: approval laced with a sigh that forgave the insufficiency of language. Cassandra laughed, and her laugh made the mirror clearer for a moment, as if sound were glass’s native polish.

She thought of all the words she might cram into the space between now and the cooling of tea. Explanations. Apologies to no one present. Anecdotes kept back so that memory would not grow fat and slow. She thought of the phrase she had written that afternoon, the one that had sat on the page without flinching: All curses are stories that forgot how to end. She could tell him that. Or she could let the sentence do what good sentences do when not watched - go about the room quietly mending things.

Her hand went to the journal on the table; she resisted the urge to read aloud. Not tonight. Not homework. She pushed the second cup a half inch nearer the other chair. It felt like moving closer without presumption.

From the street, a piano sounded three notes in a row - someone remembering a song and then forgetting it for the pleasure of remembering it again. The radiators added their thready harmonies. On the wall, the scarf over the mirror breathed. Time grew kind and stopped trying to count itself.

“Do you remember,” she asked, eyes on the fog that was not fog, “that market trick with the jar of sunlight? You pretended not to be impressed and then immediately bargained for two.”

The air acquired a dignity that was, unmistakably, embarrassment disguised as principle. She grinned into her cup. “Yes, well. You wore your vanity as honestly as other men wear their hats. I suppose that’s why I trust you.”

A merciful stillness answered, the kind of silence that never punishes. It sat between them like a third guest who knows when to excuse itself without leaving.

The steam from the second cup lifted a thin strand toward the mirror. It curled, gently, into a reed leaf and then a spiral, and in the spiral Cassandra thought she saw a corridor winding away into sand. She did not follow it. Some roads improve the moment they are not taken. She stayed at the table with the cups, because the heroic thing now was not pursuit but presence.

The cracked wand stirred. A line of light slid up and down its seam, no brighter than a thought you decide to keep. The vibration that came with it was familiar now, an animal’s contentment. She laid two fingers on the wand in acknowledgment and felt under skin the same answering hum. Her body, that stubborn librarian, re-shelved a book called Fear two notches lower.

And then - because the world does not resist giving us one kindness more than we think we deserve - a voice, from somewhere that refused to be mapped, drawled with the weary elegance of well-bred mischief:

“Don’t ruin eternity by over-steeping it.”

It could have been only her own wit, performing in a borrowed accent. It could have been memory showing off. It was also, perfectly, Nebu.

Cassandra did not start. She tilted her head toward the second cup, the way one does when a cat chooses your lap and you learn not to frighten the choice. “I would never,” she said. “I’ve been scolded by experts.”

Silence returned, but it wore a bow tie. There are wardrobes you do not unlearn.

She lifted her cup, let the rim kiss her lower lip, and kept it there a heartbeat before drinking. Warmth moved through her like an argument that does not require a winner. In the mirror, the suggestion of a man settled into a stillness that was not departure but a kind of being present so complete it needed no outline.

“I resigned,” she said into the space where two cups made a table into a promise. “You told me to break my own curse. I’ve started.”

The fog thinned, then gathered again, the way a courteous listener nods. She found that it was enough.

Outside, a tram bell shivered the mist. On the sill, the saucer she had left for the alley cat was empty, rainbeads arranged around its rim like an alphabet she did not need to decipher. The city was making its nighttime list: footsteps catalogued, shutters accounted for, clouds consulted. She felt none of the old panic that often came with the closing of books and days. The ending knew its job. It didn’t need her help.

She reached toward the other cup, hesitated, then lifted it with both hands. It was warm but untouched. For a ridiculous moment she considered pouring it back into the pot - waste offended her in all its costumes - then stopped, hearing Nebu’s imagined offended hiss at thrift mistaken for virtue.

She held the cup midway, between place and place, and raised her own in answer. The cracked wand hummed. The mirror’s fog, courteous to ceremony, made itself a little more present.

“To borrowed light,” she said.

The toast hung there, delicate as a moth’s wing, and then landed. She sipped. From the other side of the table came no sound and absolutely a presence, which is often better. The second cup’s steam thinned, paused - as if inclining its head - and unspooled into the room until there was no telling where tea ended and breath began.

They sat like that for a while, Cassandra and her absent friend and the cat who might be memory or mercy or both, listening to the piano downstairs find its melody. The cups cooled. The mirror cleared by degrees. The purr inside the tin slowed, not to stop, but to become the sort of quiet you carry with you to keep the louder kinds at bay.

When at last she set her cup down, the ring it left intersected neatly with the day’s earlier circle and some long-ago circle underneath. Venn diagrams of heat, a scholar’s consolation. She touched the overlapping center with the tip of her finger and felt it warm still. Enough, she thought, and the word did not close anything. It opened the door to the next room.

The fog on the glass surrendered to its nature and vanished. The chair across from her regained its ordinary emptiness, which was not a failure but a capacity. She smiled into it, the way you smile at a stage after the curtain has fallen because you know the actors are still breathing somewhere, removing paint with cold cream, laughing in other clothes.

“Good night,” she said, and the room, doing its best impression of Cairo for just one heartbeat, bowed.

Evening let itself out of the sky with good manners. The lamps along the terrace had already taken their breaths and bloomed; the wind fussed at the eaves like an aunt straightening a collar that would not stay straight. Cassandra buttoned her coat and slid the cracked wand into the inner pocket where it lay, warm as a kept promise. She left the cups on the table - one with its rim kissed thin by her mouth, one cooling in companionable secrecy - and drew the door shut behind her. The latch took the thought and made it sound like a decision.

The stairwell smelled of coal, old polish, and the complicated optimism of city flowers trying to be brave in window boxes. Down on the pavement, London hummed its twilight hymn - tram bells counting, tires unfastening water from the road, a newsboy's voice practicing prophecy on corners. Rain had downgraded itself to mist so fine it behaved less like weather than like the city's own breath. It laced her hair into obedience and softened the world's edges until even the bricks looked persuadable.

She walked without aim, which was a luxury she had learned to call work. Pavements made their wet mathematics under her soles, squares counting themselves into sense. A woman in a cloche hat hurried past with a bouquet of parsley and newspapers; a constable unfolded his umbrella with the gravity of a benediction; a dog made of opinions and mud regarded her and decided, magnanimously, not to bark. The river, two streets away but present in everything, moved with the muscle-memory of a nation that had taught itself to endure.

Cassandra's throat still tasted faintly of honey and iron kettles. As she turned the corner into the little crescent of shops, a gramophone somewhere behind a fogged window struck up a waltz that thought better of itself after a bar and settled for being a lullaby. The greengrocer was bringing his crates in; the baker, aproned in flour like a blessing gone off prematurely, chalked tomorrow's promises on a board. She read them with a tourist's attention: loaves, buns, a cake that would try to make a widow forgive an anecdote. Ordinary miracles, correctly priced.

On the low wall opposite the baker's door, a cat was installed. Not the thin alley diplomat from the afternoon, but a sleeker creature, rain beading on its coat as if gold had learned how to be fur without forgetting to glint. It had the posture of a small monarch who has discovered that the throne is damp and refuses to be impressed. Its eyes were amber where the streetlamp touched and something older where the lamp did not. The tail, extravagant, wrote an editorial in the air and punctuated it with a flourish.

Cassandra stopped, hands in her pockets to keep them from reaching as if names could be recaptured by touch. "Well," she said. The word went out into the mist and came back with company.

The cat looked at her the way very clever beings look at very clever beings when they are both tired and sentimental and disinclined to admit either. It did not come down. It did not purr. It blinked once - an aristocratic concession - and then performed the smallest of nods. Not deference; recognition. A salute between professionals.

"Of course," she murmured. "You'd be busy."

A scent came to her on the damp air - impossible, ridiculous, precise: resin and sun, a ghost of sweet straw. It might have been a cart passing with dates under canvas. It might have been a memory misbehaving. It might have been a cat who had learned, at last, when to be kind.

She laughed, not because anything was funny but because something in the world matched something in her and they made a sound together. The laugh went up and startled a pair of pigeons into a flight that pretended to be grace and was, in fact, negotiation.

“Tell him - ” she began, and stopped. The city, efficient, took the unsent message and filed it under Delivered.

The cat considered her for another breath, then stretched, a length of line becoming a curve, and slid off the wall into the mist. It made no sound when it landed. It allowed the night to believe that it had invented it. When she stepped forward to follow, because habit is a polite ghost, the fog received her and then decided, not unkindly, that this was far enough. The slick pavement offered her a reflection with its hair smudged into myth; she left it to complete itself without her.

On the way back, she bought matches from the tobacconist simply because she liked the box: a paper sunburst, a promise of flame. The old man behind the counter wrapped them as if they were contraband hope. “Evening, Miss Blythe.”

“Evening,” she said, startled at how right it felt to be named in a place that did not know what deserts do to a person’s pronouns.

She climbed the stairs with the slow confidence of someone who has traded urgency for attention. The key turned. The flat inhaled and let her in. The two cups waited, patient. The air still carried a trace of temple-sweetness, now braided with London’s cleaner smells: damp wool, ink gone docile, bread through walls. She shrugged her coat onto the chair’s back; it accepted the responsibility without complaint. The cracked wand slid against the wood and hummed once, approving the choice of evening over errand.

On the mantel, the photograph of Tarek caught a draft and shivered. It was absurd to tuck a picture in, so she did, tucking the scarf’s corner around it anyway. The kettle had cooled, but the metal retained a memory of heat; when she set it on the flame, it resumed the conversation as if no one had left the room. The second cup’s steam had thinned to a suggestion; she lifted it and touched the rim. It was still warm in the way of stones that keep a day’s sun for the first hour of night.

She did not pour it away. She lifted it, instead, and held it beneath her chin for a heartbeat so that the last of its warmth might learn her again. “Profligate,” she told the air, in case any cats were listening. “See? I can be taught.”

At the table, her field journal lay open to the afternoon’s page: Post-Mortem of a Profession. The ledger from the Bank sat beside it, closed, heavier now that it contained something more volatile than sums. She slid the journal nearer, smoothed a fresh sheet. The paper glanced up, attentive. It smelled faintly, when she warmed it with her palm, of bergamot and chance.

Outside, the city adjusted its shawl of night. A carriage clattered in apology for being archaic; someone laughed with their whole history; the river turned in its sleep. Inside, the clock made a modest business of measuring mercy in seconds. The cracked wand rested along the journal’s spine, a blue filament pulsing within its fracture like a vein learning to be a candle.

She did not think about audience. There are entries you address to no one so that everyone in you may answer. She dipped the pen. The nib held ink like a vow and, for once, did not demand rhetoric in return. She began, not at the top, but two lines down, because some endings like a margin to lean against.

Tonight the rain in London remembered the desert and behaved itself. I walked under it and did not dissolve.

She paused, listening to the sentence settle. She added, in the margin, smaller hand:

I am learning the weight of not-knowing and it turns out to be lighter than any crown.

She set the pen aside and reached for the matchbox. One struck into a flare more gold than it had any right to be; she touched it to the candle on the table. Flame caught, thought about extravagance, chose steadiness. Light pooled around the cups, the ledger, the journal, gilding the edge of the tin where Rahetep's sun rose forever from its well-behaved horizon. The room became briefly Egyptian in tone, shadows as articulate as script.

Cassandra leaned back. The chair creaked the way old ships do when they agree to carry you without demanding to know your destination. Her hands remembered a ritual from no temple but the kitchen: she drew the unspent warmth of the second cup over the first, and some of it crossed. Not much. Enough.

She thought of Araminta, of all the clevernesses that had never learned to kneel. She thought of Griphook, of bureaucracy done well and badly, of Mogrim's monocle granting absolution by means of exactness. She thought of Tarek, of the way he listened to history as if it were a person with good stories and terrible boundaries. She thought of Nebu's note tucked inside the journal cover, a golden pawprint smudged as if laughter were a solvent. She thought, because she always would, of Rahetep's hand on her shoulder - the lightest weight that had ever changed her.

"You were right," she said, no louder than ink. "About everything that matters, and wrong about all the rest in ways that made me love you."

The candle guttered and righted itself, as if refusing melodrama on principle. The cracked wand's inner thread of light made a small, sure ascent and fell back - breath, not spectacle.

Cassandra bent to the page. The pen hovered. She had written the sentence once today in a ledger that belonged to numbers. It belonged here, too, in the messier book that kept the arithmetic of her heart. She did not need to rehearse it. It had been waiting in her mouth since the tomb, since before the Bank, since she was a girl who believed that a riddle had a right answer and that she was its natural destination. She wrote, carefully, the way one sets a cup on a ring and hopes to match it: **All curses are just stories that forgot how to end.**

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