

THE GAMES EXIST. THE BUDGET DOESN'T. YET.

A public playable tank alpha. A working occult runtime and visual editor.
Two released products. Built without external production funding.

US\$60K-US\$80K

SIX MONTHS

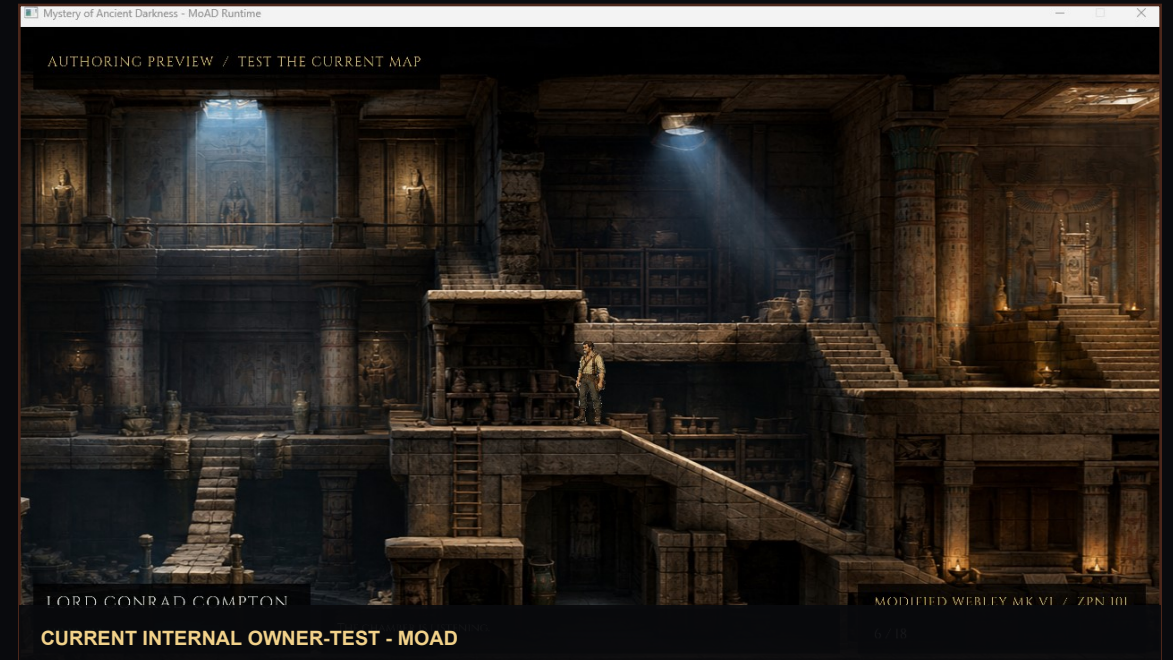
TWO RELEASE CANDIDATES

FUND THE GAMES THAT REFUSED TO WAIT.



THE RISKY PART ALREADY RUNS.

Most studios arrive with a deck and ask you to finance the possibility that something playable may eventually crawl out. We arrive with executables.



ACCOMPANYING THIS PDF: two playable Windows pre-alpha builds. Each has one map and a visual editor for drawing, saving and launching another. Both engines run; the shared RURK mathematics is implemented. US\$60K buys six months to two good-indie release candidates; US\$80K buys the same deadline with a harder finish.

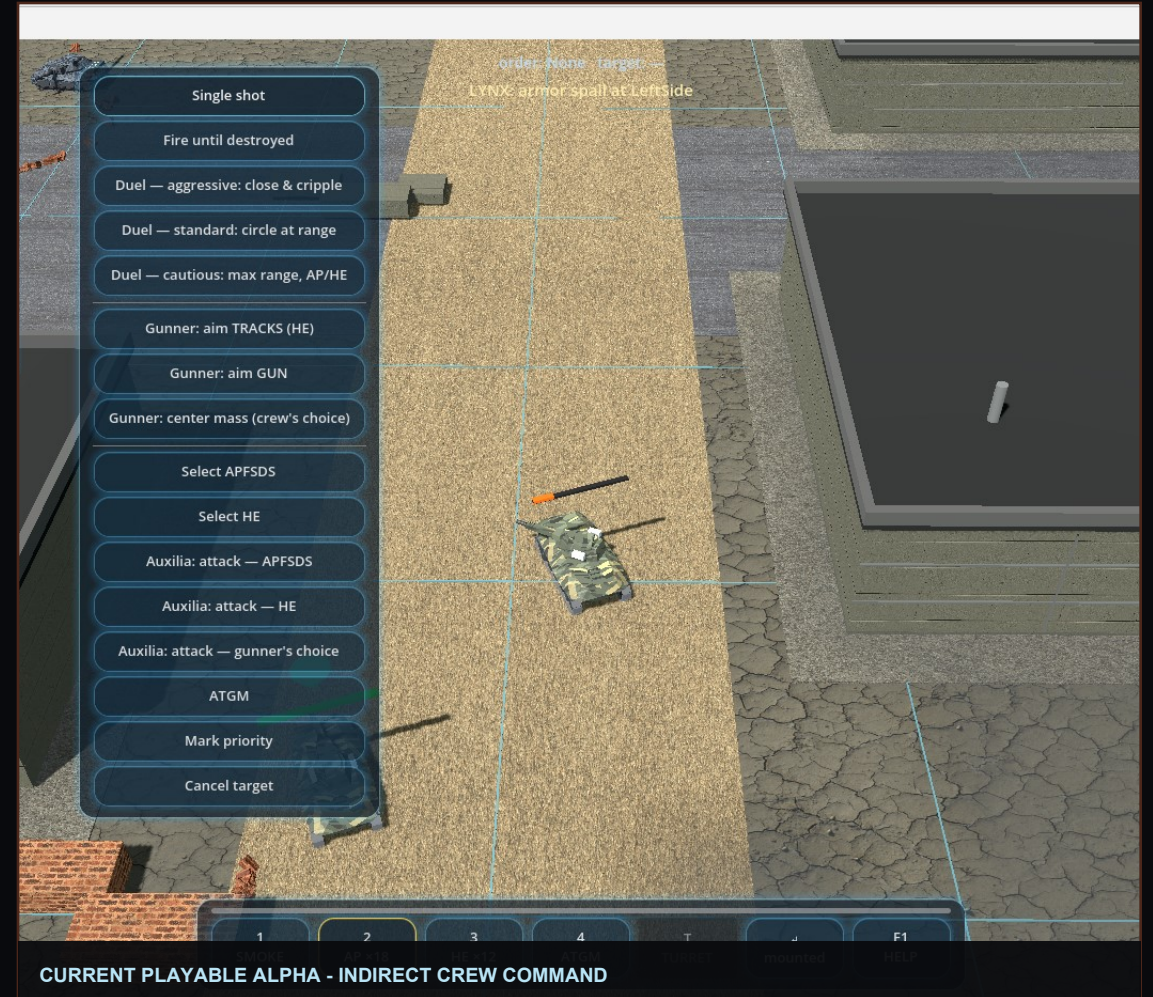
YOU ARE NOT THE TANK. YOU ARE THE OFFICER.

A story-driven tank roguelike RPG where you command the crew, not the machine.

Thea is a human colony cut off from Earth and split by civil war. A sudden Vanguard offensive leaves Colonel Alexander Greyhawk's experimental Concordian armoured unit as the last force in the region capable of resistance.

His family remains inside the occupied capital, marked by the criteria feeding the enemy's concentration camps. The war is strategic. For Greyhawk, it is painfully personal.

- Give orders to the driver, gunner and crew instead of steering an arcade vehicle.
- People and machines share the same RURK role-playing framework.
- Allied armour receives contextual commands, then acts through its own tactical logic.



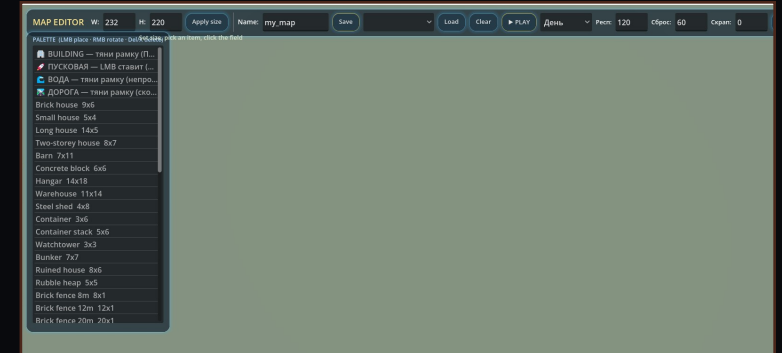
CURRENT PLAYABLE ALPHA. RELEASE CANDIDATE IN SIX MONTHS.



LIVE COMBAT / LOCAL DAMAGE / CREW STATE



SERVICE BAY / REPAIR / RESUPPLY / UPGRADES



THEMAPEDITOR / DRAW - SAVE - PLAY

CURRENT BUILD

- 3D single-player, offline Melee/FFA, LAN multiplayer and the original 2D prototype.
- Armour zones, HE and APFSDS ammunition, called shots, smoke, repair and resupply.
- Tactical enemy roles, stances and persistent combat records.

FUNDED SIX-MONTH MILESTONE

- A complete good-indie release-candidate build.
- Persistent crew and vehicle state plus an authored mission chain.
- Role-playing scenes and consequences returning to battle.
- Improved onboarding, presentation and a packaged Windows review build.

PLAY FREE / PAY WHAT YOU WANT

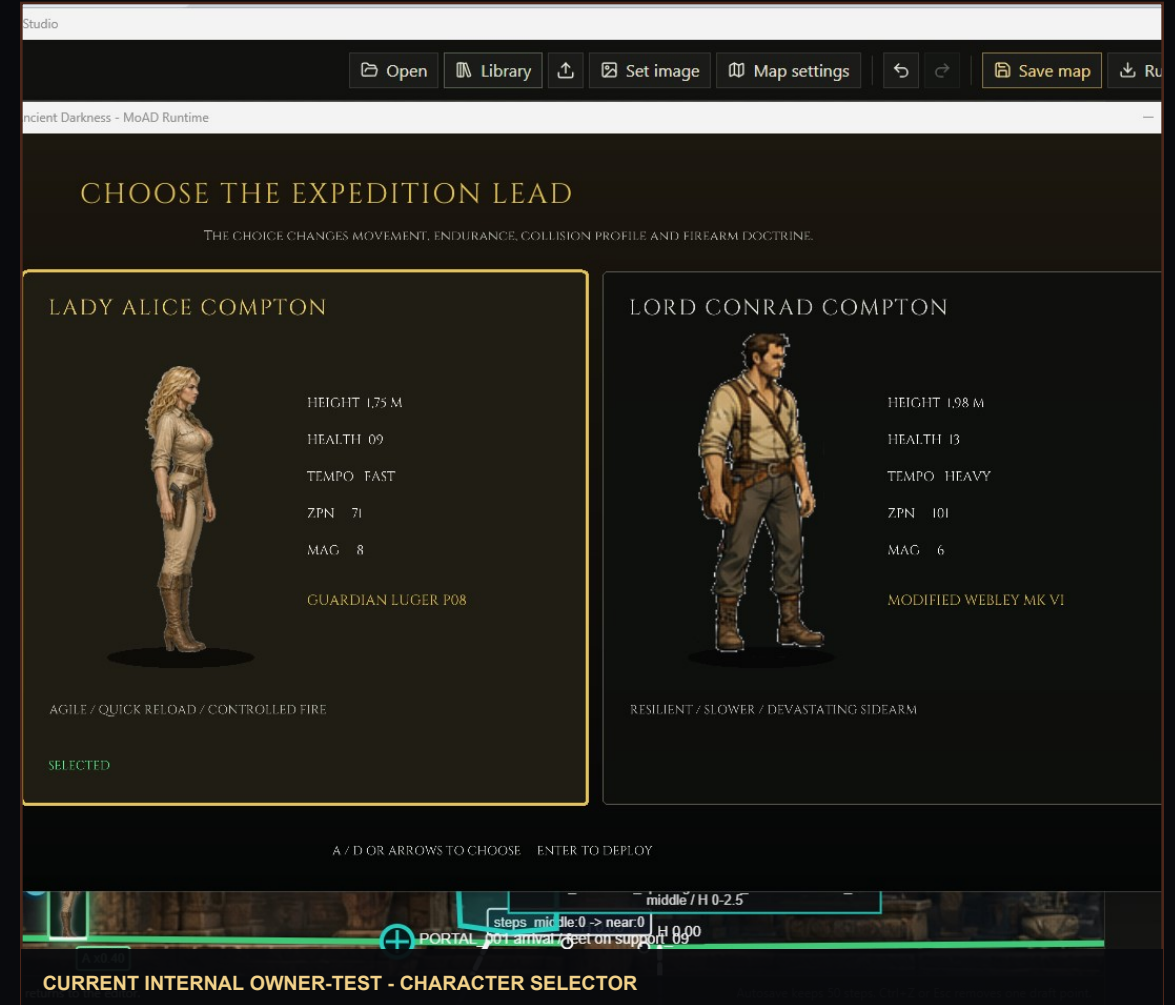
WATCH GAMEPLAY

THE BLACK STONE TOOK THEIR SON. THEY FOLLOWED IT INTO HELL.

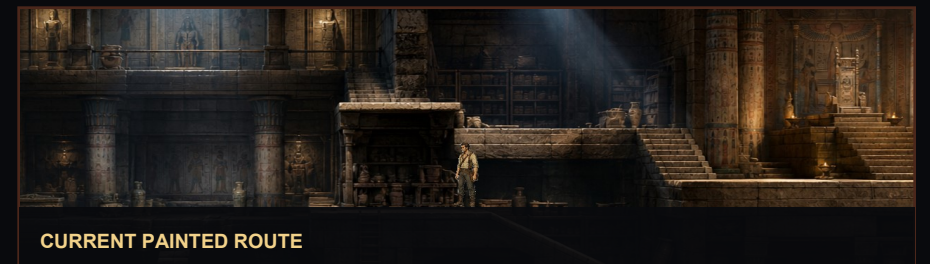
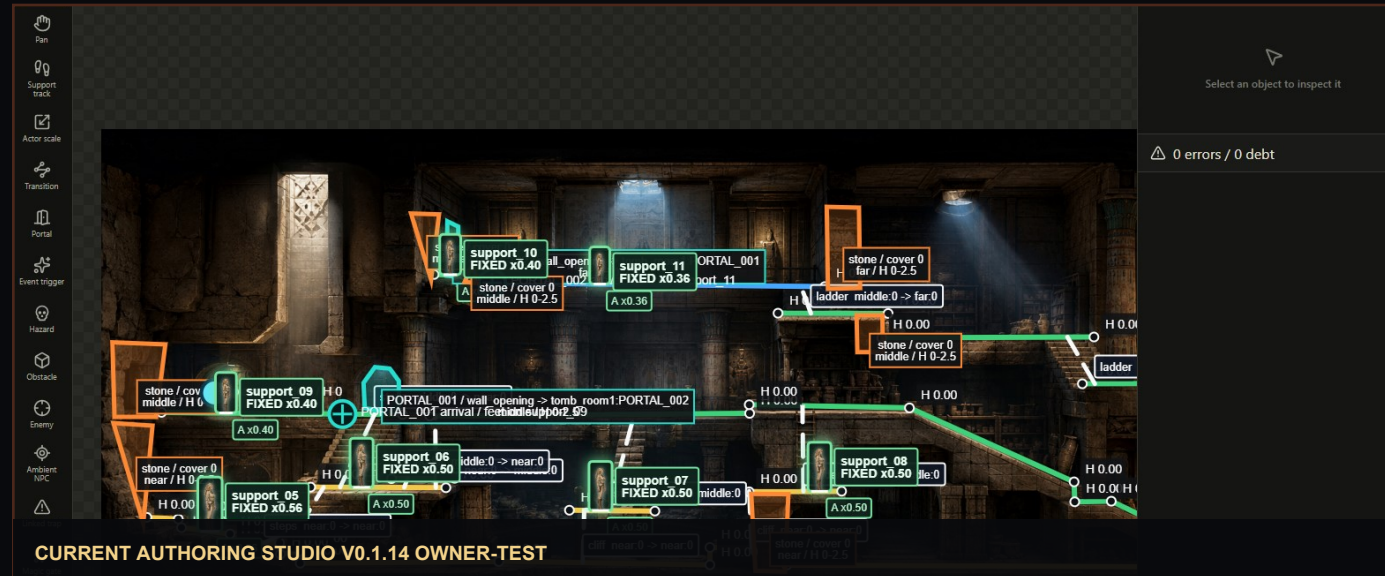
A high-resolution painted 2D occult action-adventure running on a custom 2.5D runtime.

In 1935, the Black Stone inside Compton Hall takes nine-year-old Alexander Compton. His parents, Lord Conrad and Lady Alice Compton, follow the trail left by Conrad's grandfather to Egypt - not as treasure hunters, but as a married couple entering an ancient war to bring their son home.

- Two protagonists with different combat rhythms, histories and narrative roles.
- Cinematic traversal through painted spaces with authored depth and occlusion.
- RURK-derived combat, persistent wounds, dangerous magic and consequential visual-novel decisions.



THE TOOLS WORK. THE TOMB STILL NEEDS ITS TEETH.



CURRENT PROOF

- Custom C# 2.5D runtime, visual authoring studio and typed .moadmap production data.
- Packaged Windows installer; editor, engine, runtime smoke and installed self-tests pass.
- Current route remains owner REVIEW until linked portal arrival passes live.

FUNDED SIX-MONTH MILESTONE

- A complete good-indie release-candidate build with final representative art, animation and audio.
- An authored route combining traversal, combat, a consequential decision and onboarding.
- A packaged Windows release-candidate build for press and publisher review.

THE TOOLS EXIST BECAUSE THE GAMES NEEDED THEM.

The games lead. The production machinery matters because it shortens the distance between money spent and playable work delivered.



The foundational half is already built under brutal crunch: both engines run, the shared RURK mathematics is implemented, and Eugene has written both stories. He will write the remaining dialogue and scene text himself - roughly two months of founder work, with no AI-generated narrative. Funding buys content production, specialist finish and QA.

US\$60K-US\$80K. SIX MONTHS. TWO RELEASE CANDIDATES.

	PROTECTED BASE	FULL PLAN
● Founder runway + full-time direction, engineering and integration	US\$18K	US\$18K
● MoAD art, animation and content production	US\$12K	US\$16K
● Tanks of Thea production and campaign support	US\$9K	US\$12K
● Outsourced original music, sound design and implementation	US\$5K	US\$8K
● Selected outsourced 3D vehicles, props and hard-surface work	US\$3K	US\$6K
● AI, software, cloud, build tools, storage and licences	US\$5K	US\$5K
● QA, compatibility and localisation preparation	US\$4K	US\$6K
● Legal, accounting, IP and platform administration	US\$2K	US\$3K
● Production contingency and contractor replacement	US\$2K	US\$6K

US\$60K is enough for two good-indie release candidates. US\$80K buys more specialist art, audio, selected 3D, QA and contingency. The deadline stays six months; the finish gets much harder.

FUNDING RANGE

US\$60K-US\$80K

SIX MONTHS. SIX GATES. TWO RELEASE CANDIDATES.

01

BASELINE LOCK

Freeze the working engines, simulation and tools. Convert the written stories into scene, mission and asset schedules. No new engine invention.

02

AUTHORING

Eugene writes and locks principal dialogue and scene text himself. First funded route and mission assembled in the existing engines.

03

CONTENT PRODUCTION

Expand both games through their editors. Integrate persistence, consequences, campaign state and UX. Every placeholder counted and owned.

04

FEATURE COMPLETE

Bring both games to feature-complete internal builds. Integrate representative final art, animation and audio. External QA begins.

05

RELEASE PREP

Content and feature lock. Balance, save/load, onboarding, installation, performance and compatibility. Release-candidate defects only.

06

TWO RELEASE CANDIDATES

Final polish and acceptance for both games. Reviewer and publisher builds, manifests, archives, licences, known issues and press packages.

THE ENGINES, EDITORS, MATHEMATICS AND STORIES ARE ALREADY ON THE TABLE.

Every gate requires a runnable build, manifest, recorded acceptance playthrough and defect list.

FUND THE GAMES THAT REFUSED TO WAIT.

Give us thirty minutes. We will put the builds on screen, show exactly what exists, name every unfinished edge and walk the six-month spend gate by gate.

No cinematic alibi. No invented traction. No perfumed wreckage.

- An investor prepared to fund the two-milestone plan.
- A publisher interested in either game.
- One serious introduction to the person whose mandate this actually is.

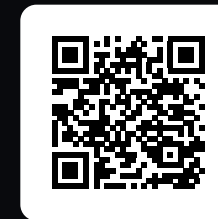
US\$60,000-US\$80,000 does not buy an idea. US\$60K buys six months to two good-indie release candidates. US\$80K buys the same deadline with a much harder visual, audio and QA punch. The accompanying pre-alphas already let reviewers play one map in each game - or draw and launch their own.

EUGENE LYSSOVSKY

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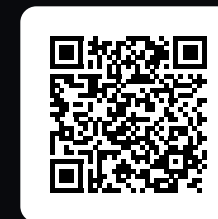
linkedin.com/in/eugene-lyssovsky



PLAY TANKS



WATCH TANKS



READ INITIUM



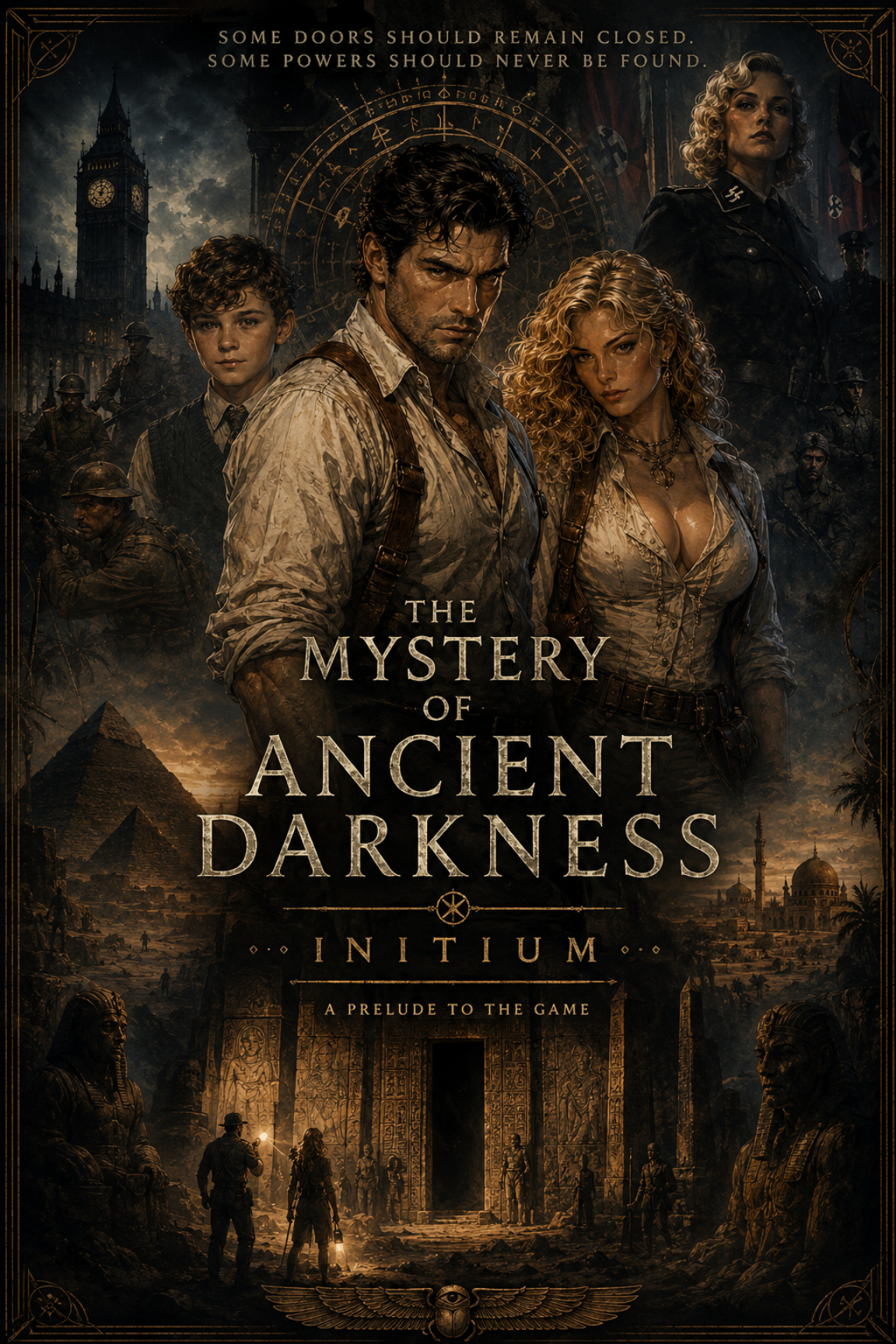
SEE RURK

THE COMPLETE 67-PAGE INITIUM

ILLUSTRATED PRELUDE BEGINS NEXT.

Private financing discussion. No guaranteed-return claim.

SOME DOORS SHOULD REMAIN CLOSED.
SOME POWERS SHOULD NEVER BE FOUND.



THE MYSTERY OF ANCIENT DARKNESS

♦♦ INITIUM ♦♦

A PRELUDE TO THE GAME



MYSTERY OF ANCIENT DARKNESS



INITIUM

A PRELUDE TO THE GAME

MYSTERY OF ANCIENT DARKNESS

INITIUM



EUGENE LYSSOVSKY & AELISS

THE MISFITS SOFTWARE · 2026

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Mystery of Ancient Darkness: Initium is a narrative prelude to the game. World, concept and narrative direction by Eugene Lyssovsky. Written by Eugene Lyssovsky & Aeliss. Illustration direction and book design by The Misfits Software.

A human-led, AI-powered production.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE VALLEY

— ◆ —

The Valley of the Kings. Or the valley of tombs — a more honest name, if less romantic. Dozens of catacombs cut into bleached rock, most of them still unplundered, waiting in the heat with the patience of things that have already waited three thousand years.



The Valley of the Kings, before the first door opened.

The young man turned to his father.

Lord Compton had just finished leafing through his notebook — a small leather-bound thing, crammed with a handwriting so precise it could have been mistaken for print — and dispatched a native with a wave of his hand to set the braces for opening the door. The gesture was unhurried, imperial — the gesture of a man who had been giving orders to other men's servants since before he could walk. He was pale. He had been pale for months.

"Father, do you truly think—"

"Yes, son. Behind this door lies the tomb of the 'Guardian Pharaoh,' whatever that may mean. Pemberton insists it is a ceremonial title, of course."

"Pemberton is a pretentious fool. And we both know it."

They shared a laugh — restrained, identical, the laugh of men who have been trained since birth to find the same things amusing and the same things beneath them. Lord Pemberton was famous for his attachment to the mystical. He was an active member of the Society for Psychical Research, subscribed to every spiritualist gazette in print, and had personally travelled to meet Madame Blavatsky the year before her death — a fact he related to anyone who failed to leave the room in time. In the Compton household, all of the above firmly placed a man in the category of persons not to be discussed seriously. The Comptons were a dynasty of scholars, explorers, conquerors. Pioneers of the Empire. They believed in God, naturally. And only in Him. Everything else belonged to Science and to Man.

"Son, see to it that these savages do not damage the interior frescoes. I need to step back to the tent."

Conrad watched his father walk away across the sand — slowly, carefully, one hand pressed to his side as though holding something in place. The illness was devouring him. He was not yet old, but something he had encountered two years ago in the lesser pyramid of Jaffa — entirely buried beneath millennia of sand — was now killing him, methodically and without haste, the way Egypt kills everything that is not made of stone.

Superstitious people, Pemberton among them, spoke of a curse. Pemberton had even arrived at Compton Hall with an African woman he called a "priestess of the goddess of life" — a tall, silent creature with painted arms and eyes that looked at Lord Compton as though she could see the shape of his death behind him. It was the first time the young man had seen his father lose his composure sufficiently to eject another nobleman from the house like a misbehaving cat. One might say the "priestess" had been of some assistance: the fury had actually made Lord Compton feel slightly better.

Conrad understood his father's reaction perfectly. After the discoveries of Pasteur, Yersin, and the other great microbiologists, to speak of "curses" was laughable. They understood — both of them, father and son, with the quiet certainty of educated men — that Lord Compton had simply contracted an ancient, microscopic parasite. Conrad had been spared only because he was younger and stronger. He took after his grandfather: broad-shouldered,

thick-wristed, built for endurance rather than elegance. He lacked his father's aristocratic bearing. His mother, while she was alive, had called him "my little bear." His father, while his mother was alive, had allowed it.

The young man — Conrad, twenty, heir to Compton Hall and to three generations of Egyptian dust — saw to it that Ahmed and Youssef fastened the braces evenly and without haste. Then he gave the order to pull.

The stone slab that had sealed the entrance for three thousand years yielded with a crunch that set his teeth on edge — as though the tomb itself were reluctantly unclenching its jaw. The air from within struck his face: dry, dusty, with a taste of something metallic. Not musty — and that surprised him. Tombs he had visited with his father before had smelled of decay and stagnant eternity. This one smelled different. Like heated stone. Like the desert from within.

He raised his electric torch — his father's gift for his sixteenth birthday, the last word in American engineering, the object of his secret pride — and stepped inside.

The corridor was narrow, too tight for two men abreast, and its walls were covered in paintings of astonishing preservation. The pigment had not flaked. The lines were crisp, as though the craftsman had finished his work not three millennia ago but yesterday. Conrad paused. On the left wall, a procession of priests carried something resembling a sarcophagus, but set upright, toward a monumental gateway. On the right, the figure of the pharaoh stood before a black rectangle that filled the wall from floor to ceiling. The pose was strange: not triumphant, as rulers were customarily depicted, but valedictory. One hand raised, palm forward. As though the pharaoh were not entering the afterlife, but leaving this world. Of his own free will.

He noted it in his pocket book by reflex: *"Wall L — procession, upright sarcophagus (?). Wall R — pharaoh bidding farewell (?). Does not conform to canon. Show Father."*

The corridor turned, then turned again — and opened into the chamber.

The burial chamber was not merely empty. No sarcophagus, no canopic jars, no funerary goods — nothing that would befit the burial of even the most insignificant nobleman, to say nothing of a pharaoh. Only the frescoed walls — and it.

The slab.

It occupied the entire far wall, floor to vault. Matte black, fashioned from a material that Conrad had never encountered — not in his father's collections, not in the catalogues of the British Museum, not in the descriptions of Belzoni

or Mariette. And yet there was something vaguely familiar about it. Something he had certainly seen before, but could not place. The thought slipped away like the remnant of a dream upon waking.

The surface absorbed light completely. The glow of the servants' candle-lanterns, the beam of his electric torch — all of it vanished into the blackness like water into sand.

Conrad approached and touched it with his hand.

The surface was warm. Not the warmth of stone that has sat in the sun — a different warmth. Organic. Like the skin of a living thing.

He withdrew his hand. Not from fear, naturally. Comptons are not afraid. Simply the unexpectedness of it.

Perhaps he should have ordered the slab chiselled out and taken with them. Perhaps his father would have done precisely that.

But behind him came the sound of running feet. He spun round and saw Ahmed — the most capable of the natives, at least he spoke passable English — his face a mask of terror and grief:

"Milord, your father, he—"

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

MBAMBWE

— ◆ —

The enormous Zulu — Alice would have called him beast-like, in the careless way of colonial daughters who meant no harm and understood no offence — with the sincere, kind laugh was trying to teach Lady Cholmondeley to dance. Lord Cholmondeley was meticulously recording every step his wife attempted to reproduce. The Zulu roared with laughter, but once the fit had passed, he patiently returned to instruction. Alice noted that her mother was getting better at it... and received a smack on the back of the head.



Mbambwe taught power as a language of consequence.

"Look! Learn!" Mbambwe was angry. Alice chose not to take offence — after all, she had been daydreaming, and as for manners... well, a gentleman west of Suez is not answerable for what a gentleman did east of Suez. Alice suppressed a mental laugh.

"Stupid white woman! Have power hand. Not understand. Not learn. How you become vessel of power?! I think — give up!" The priestess's English was broken, though she was learning the language at an astonishing speed. Within a week, rough as it was, she spoke freely.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Mbambwe!" Alice nearly broke her tongue on the name. "I am trying!"

She picked up the totem. A female figure carved from... bone? Very wide hips, enormous breasts, a jutting bottom — and yet a womanly curve at the waist. Alice noted, almost without thinking, that the figurine bore a striking resemblance to the priestess herself.

"Now! Now feel! Is warm?"

There was warmth indeed. More than warmth — heat? Alice reflexively opened her hand, but the figurine did not reach the ground — Mbambwe snatched it from the air and thrust it triumphantly skyward, crying out something in one of the Bantu dialects. Alice looked at her own hand in bewilderment: on her right palm, clear as a brand, the face and breasts of the totem had been seared into her skin — the most deeply carved parts, presumably. Speaking of breasts... the girl shivered. At seventeen she was evidently still growing, because in the past week her undergarments — the upper ones, at any rate — had become catastrophically too small. It was curious: both her mother and grandmother had been, as befitting high-born English ladies, slender and dry. But Alice's body had been changing since they arrived in Africa — the local food from the Great Lakes was clearly having an effect. And to Alice's mind, the change was positive. She liked, somehow, that she was becoming more curvaceous. And with it, she felt increasingly alive.

"You power more than I fear. You be great vessel. Best. I glad you learn. Serve life. Be life. Own life. And death. I teach you this. You have hands of life and death. This good!"

"Thank you, Mbambwe. Forgive me, may I rest — I think I squeezed the totem too hard, my hand hurts."

"Walk by shore. Careful. Is beautiful. Spirits help. Speak with spirits."

It was funny, but Alice understood what she meant: the wind from the lake did sometimes seem to whisper. Alas, Alice was not conversant in the language of the wind, though she occasionally caught something very like the characteristic phonetic patterns of Bantu. Nature, at times, was remarkably inventive.

...Her mother, meanwhile, had managed to reproduce the entire dance and was now joyfully embracing her father. Lady Cholmondeley had the appearance of a true lady but the soul of a genuine simple woman, and this was enormously attractive to her husband. Lord Cholmondeley had never been a cold fish — it was this, perhaps, that allowed him to find common ground even with the most remote tribes of Africa, which the entire Cholmondeley family simply adored.

* * *

The Zulu guide watched the pair of white colonisers with a kind of tenderness. They were strange people, but the good kind of strange. Good-natured, open, unaffected, and they paid extremely well. He had been so lost in thought that he sensed their daughter's approach only at twenty paces. The girl was unusual — and the umthakathi had chosen her as an heir. By rights, one ought to have warned her, discouraged her from this training — nothing good comes from friendship with an umthakathi... But that would mean turning the wrath of Mbambwe upon himself.

"Changa-Changa, gratitude for teach mother dance!" The girl's Zulu was atrocious, but there was something touching in the fact that she tried to learn their language at all. As for her inability to learn his name and her constant mangling of it... Changchangkhgui sighed heavily.

"Thank you, little Lady Angel! Your mama — try very hard!"

"'Lady Angel'?"

"You very beautiful girl. Like isithunywa. You have very good husband. I know. I feel."

He was not lying. He could indeed feel fate — not in detail, but as a line drawn in shades. And that behind the warm shade of family the line shifted to something that froze the blood in his veins — this, Changchangkhgui had no intention of saying.

Alice smiled once more at Changa-Changa. These native names were so delightful. It cost her considerable effort not to laugh when pronouncing them — she was saved only by her sincere wish not to offend her dark-skinned friends.

Let many in the Empire consider Africa a land of savages, terrible beasts, and disease. For Alice, it was a second home. Beautiful, mysterious, and utterly enchanting.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHARGE



...The whistle.

The howl of their own guns, pinning Jerry to the ground.

The rush.

The tanks crawled — ponderous, inexorable — but no man's land was no place to linger, and a tank made poor cover: the enemy had artillery, and the greenish fog on the flank suggested nothing good...

Conrad glanced back. His boys, jaws clenched, followed their officer. Was he afraid?

He was. God, yes, he was. It was the fourth year of the Great War. The Somme, Ypres... Good Lord, what hadn't there been... And of course he was afraid. But he — precisely he — had no right to fear. Anyone else — but not him.

Comptons are not afraid. And besides — he was no longer merely Lord Compton. He was also a captain of the Royal Scots Fusiliers.

Royal.

He would not have retreated with ordinary ones either.

Conrad bared his teeth.

"The Charge of the Light Brigade," you say? Well, the British aristocracy has always known how to die beautifully!

"CHAAAAAAAAAAAAARGE!"



Comptons are not afraid.

...He exhaled only when the trenches were taken. His hands trembled slightly, and by force of will he suppressed the shaking. The chambers of his faithful Webley were empty. He had ejected the casings automatically, and there was nothing left to reload with. It appeared that this time he had taken the lives of twenty-four men. Lord Compton did not miss. Did not know how.

The company was intact. Well... there were wounded, certainly. But all were alive. John, the youngest, who had lied about being nineteen at seventeen years old at the very start of the war and had marched with them all the way here — was grinning through the grime, lying on a stretcher with his arm and leg bandaged. "He'll escape from hospital again before he's healed," Conrad thought resignedly.

He stood, holstered his empty revolver, and turned to face his boys, to say something to them... And heard the burst. Then another. Then the whistle... And then John leapt onto his captain, knocking him off his feet and shielding him with his body. Conrad had just enough time to think that Jerry had begun working their own lost trenches with heavy artillery, then there was a flash, pain...

And the ability to think, he lost for a time.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

LADY ANGEL

The worst part of triage was not that men died. The worst part was that she decided who.

A twenty-year-old girl with a VAD armband and six months of training that had prepared her for nothing stood at the entrance to the surgical tent and handed out fates. Stretcher. Face. Wound. A finger — right, toward the surgeon. Or straight on, past, to the wall where those lay for whom the surgeon no longer mattered. Next stretcher. Next face. Next finger.

Every evening Alice Cholmondeley wept into her pillow. Every morning she rose and went back to the line.



The worst part of triage was that she decided who.

The first was Private Thomas Wynn. Welsh, blue-eyed, barely twenty. Shrapnel in places no boy should have to learn he possesses in such a manner.

Alice sat with him until dawn, because there was nothing else to be done for him, and because no one should die reaching for a hand that is not there.

Thomas spoke little. He breathed with difficulty. Toward morning he reached into a filthy puttee and drew out a German Luger — a trophy, wrapped in cloth, dull with grime on the outside but, judging by the toggle action, cleaned to a mirror finish within. Parabellum, nine millimetres, magazine of eight. Four remained.

"Let it guard you, Lady Angel," Thomas said.

"Thank you, Thomas... Thank you... I shall keep it, and it shall keep me... And I will remember you... Always..."

Thomas smiled. Squeezed her hand. She felt the fingers loosen. And she went on holding long after there was no one left to hold.

That was how the nickname began. That was how the Luger began.

Alice put the pistol in her apron pocket. Then in the drawer of the bedside cabinet. Then under her pillow. The Luger moved with her, like a cat that chooses its own sleeping place and relocates during the night while its owner is not looking. She could not explain it. Simply, each time she reached for it, it was exactly where her hand would fall in the dark.

She fired it for the first time three weeks later.

The front came to the tents. Not gradually — in a lunge: a breakthrough on the right flank, a series of explosions, shouting, and suddenly — grey figures in helmets between the beds. One of the Germans — young, no older than Thomas — froze in the aisle, bayonet levelled, looking at the tent full of wounded with an expression that Alice could never afterward define more precisely than "bewilderment." He did not want to be here. He did not want to kill wounded men. But behind him a second was already running, and in the second one's eyes there was no bewilderment at all.

Alice fired twice. The first time in her life. Both men — dead before they hit the ground.

The Luger kicked in her hand — short, precise, almost gentle, as though someone had guided her wrist. The recoil was softer than she had expected: the pistol settled into her grip as though it had been made for her. Both rounds struck true: one in the chest of the first, the second in the throat of the other. Alice had not aimed. There had been no time to aim. The pistol found the direction on its own — or the hand found it, or something that Mbambwe had never named guided the barrel toward that which had to die so that those she guarded might live.

She stood in the tent among the wounded, a smoking pistol in her hand, an apron smeared with other men's blood, and thought only one thing: "Two rounds left."

Then — already calm, already feeling nothing but emptiness — she knelt beside the second German and took from him a pouch with two P08 magazines — the distinctive flat boxes, unmistakable. Thomas would have approved.

Then came the second time. And the third. The front came to the tents twice more that year, and twice more Alice Cholmondeley — twenty years old, VAD armband, daughter of a lord — killed men with a dead Welsh boy's pistol, the boy who had called her an angel.

She wrote it down that evening — briefly, in a level hand, without corrections. "Two. Thomas's Luger. He asked the pistol to guard me. It did." The Cholmondeleys, for all her father's gentleness, were a family whose castle held more armour and weaponry than many a museum. The blood was the right blood. Alice closed the notebook, put the Luger under her pillow, and slept.

And afterward — after each time — she returned to the stretchers. To the river that did not stop. To the faces. To the decisions.

Because she did not only take lives. She saved those who truly could still be saved.

And that — that alone — was enough to make her stand the next morning.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

WE



The ability to think returned in fragments.

Conrad lay on a stretcher. The tent canvas swayed overhead. Someone was carrying him — unevenly, with a crunch across the duckboards, between moans and voices that made him want to lose consciousness again. He tried to turn his head and saw John — beside him, on the next stretcher, grey and still. The orderly carrying John caught Conrad's gaze and looked away very quickly.

Conrad closed his eyes. Clenched his jaw. And let the darkness take him again.

The second time, he came to at the entrance to the surgical tent. A golden-haired girl in a stained apron was moving along the row of stretchers. She moved quickly, precisely, without hesitation — a finger to the right, a finger straight on, a finger to the right, a finger straight on. Her face was angelic. Her eyes were a hundred years older than her face.

She reached his stretcher. Their eyes met.



She had found him before either of them knew what that meant.

Conrad could never afterward explain what happened in that second. He was wounded, in shock, bleeding, on the edge — and had no right to see anything clearly. But he saw. Her. Sharply, as he had never seen anything in his life. Golden hair escaping from beneath a kerchief. Brown eyes with no fear in them. A figure that even beneath the stained apron was impossible to look away from. And something else — something for which he never found a word.

She was looking too. And could not tear herself away.

Then the darkness took him again. But Alice — Alice already knew. Not with her head. With something deeper, something older, something Mbambwe had awakened in her by an African fire. This man was hers. She did not yet know why, did not yet know what for. But hers. And nothing else mattered.

Three surgeons had passed his stretcher. Each had glanced, shaken his head, and moved to the next.

Alice ran after the first. Then the second. Then the third. She pleaded, demanded, begged — she, the daughter of Lord Cholmondeley, who had never in her life begged anyone for anything — seized their sleeves and said "you don't understand, he will live, I know it, please." They shook their heads. Gently prised her fingers loose. Walked away.

Then she went back to him. Seized the handles of the stretcher and pulled it herself.

Surgeon-Major Hargreaves — Irishman, atheist, and a cynic of the first water — had been cutting for thirty-six hours without pause. He looked at the stretcher Alice had hauled into the tent, looked at what lay upon it, and said:

"Miss Chumley, you are wasting theatre time on a corpse." And sent her away.

Alice came back. Silently. Seized the stretcher and dragged it back into the tent.

"Foolish girl," Hargreaves said, more gently now, more wearily. "You have fallen in love with a dead man. Sergeant, take the stretcher out, please."

Perhaps he was right about the first part.

The stretcher was carried out. Past the threshold of the surgical tent. Set down on the ground. Left.

Alice dropped to her knees beside him. Straight into the mud, the blood, the mess of clay and bandages. She seized his chest — not placed her hands, not listened carefully as Mbambwe had taught, but clutched, the way one clutches a drowning man — and began to murmur. Words she did not remember knowing. Words Mbambwe had spoken by the fire while Alice had thought she was learning philosophy. Words that were neither Zulu, nor English, nor any language to be found in a textbook.

Conrad opened his eyes.

He saw — through a film of pain and fever, but he saw — the golden-haired girl bent over him. Her eyes were glowing. Not a reflection of a lamp — there were no lamps; they were outside, on the ground, under open sky. Her eyes burned blue, and she was murmuring something that made the blood in his veins go cold — not from fear, from something more ancient, more deep, from a sound that human vocal cords should not have been able to produce.

Then — a flash. Short, violent, like a bolt of lightning. Blue light passed through him, and he arched on the stretcher, and something without a name switched on inside him. The pain left. Not dulled — left. As if someone had turned a switch.

Conrad wanted to say something — but instead of agony, sleep took him. Deep, warm, black, dreamless. The sleep of a man who is healing.

Alice let go and sat on the ground. Her legs would not hold her. She breathed as though she had run a mile. Something in herself had changed — she felt it in her whole body, as though her clothes had suddenly become too small. The apron pressed tight across her chest. The strap of her bag dug into her hip, though that morning it had sat loose. There was no time to think about it.

She looked at the wounded man. And frowned.

The wounds were... trivial. Alice remembered — REMEMBERED — that ten minutes ago this had been horror: torn flesh from shoulder to hip, shrapnel, mud, gas. Three surgeons had walked past. She herself had seen and understood there was no chance.

And now — superficial grazes. Concussion. Blood loss from minor cuts. Nothing she could not have stitched herself given a table.

Alice did not stop to consider how this was possible. She was a Cholmondeley. Cholmondeleys do not think — Cholmondeleys act.

She stood. Wiped her hands on her apron. Walked into the surgical tent where Surgeon-Major Hargreaves was washing his hands over a basin, and took him by the collar.

"I am Lady Cholmondeley," said Alice, in a voice that turned Hargreaves's knuckles white. "And I will not be ignored. You will come with me. Now. And you will look at this man. And you will explain to me why three surgeons walked past a wounded man whom I could have stitched MYSELF with an operating table."

Hargreaves allowed himself to be dragged. Partly because the girl who one minute earlier had been kneeling in the mud now radiated enough energy to power an artillery battery. Partly because something in her eyes was wrong, and he preferred not to find out what.

He looked at the wounded man.

Then he looked again.

Then — slowly, very slowly — he turned to Alice.

"Miss Chumley... These wounds..."

"Yes?"

"These wounds... are not what I saw twenty minutes ago."

"You saw what you wanted to see twenty minutes ago," Alice cut him off. "Operate."

Hargreaves operated. Cursing himself for an old fool, begging her pardon with every stitch. His hands were impeccable. His mind was in utter disarray. Because he KNEW what those wounds had been. And he had not the slightest explanation for what they had become.

* * *

Conrad woke in the morning. He felt as though he were hungover — no worse. Beside him on a chair sat the girl — the same one, golden-haired. She had not slept — she was holding his hand and looking at him point-blank, like a person who had not looked away all night.

"Are you a nurse or an angel?" Conrad asked.

She looked at him. And spoke with an intonation that should have brought the entire tent to attention:

"I am Lord Cholmondeley's daughter. And if you continue to tear your stitches while quoting Romans, I shall have you tied to the cot."

Conrad laughed. Then winced in pain. Then laughed again.

Within two hours they knew everything about each other. That his name was Conrad and he was a Compton. That her name was Alice and she was a Chumley — Cholmondeley, but pronouncing it was impossible and unnecessary. That his father had died in Egypt of something the doctors could not identify. That her father was an Africanist and an eccentric whom she adored. That he was twenty-seven and a captain of the Royal Scots Fusiliers. That she was twenty and had gone to the front at nineteen. That he did not miss — did not know how. That she had killed at least six men with a Luger given to her by a dead Welsh boy who called her an angel. That his favourite book was the third volume of Caesar's Commentaries. That her favourite shade of pink was called "*cuisse de nymphe effrayée*." That he drank his tea strong and black. That she drank hers without milk, which for an Englishwoman bordered on treason.

And that neither he nor she had the word "I" any longer.

Only "we."

* * *

It took Adjutant Watkins more than three hours to find his captain. The hospital was enormous, the records in disarray, and nobody could properly explain what had become of a wounded officer who had first been written off and then, for some reason, operated upon. When at last he identified the right tent and lifted the flap, Lord Compton — fresh stitches, one arm in a sling, and the expression of a man whose morning had decidedly gone well — was kissing a nurse who sat on the edge of his cot and did not object in the slightest.

Watkins froze. Turned scarlet. Began to retreat.

"Watkins," said Conrad, without taking his eyes off Alice. "Find the regimental chaplain. Immediately."

"Sir?"

"The chaplain, Watkins. Man in black with a cross. The one who marries people. At the double."

Watkins vanished. Partly because he had been given an order. Partly because the captain's face left no room for clarifying questions. And partly because he very much wanted to stop standing in a tent where his commanding officer was kissing the daughter of one of the Empire's most senior lords as though the war were already over.

It was not over. But for the two of them — in a sense — it was.

Conrad informed Lord Cholmondeley by letter — from the front, not from a drawing room. Eight pages, impeccable hand, not a single abbreviation. Lord Cholmondeley replied in a single line: "Young man, my daughter went to war without asking my permission. I see she has found her match."

From that day they did not part for more than a day. On principle.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

THE PORTRAIT



Alexander turned nine.

The gift had been negotiated behind closed doors for two weeks, in talks more fraught than certain battles in the House of Lords. Conrad declared that a future lord must sit well in the saddle — in a tone that admitted no discussion. Alice did not discuss. She simply chose the prettiest little filly in three counties — a chestnut with a white blaze and the temperament of a duchess who knows precisely how much she is worth.

The filly received Alexander graciously. Alexander received the filly with a delight that rattled the conservatory glass.

The birthday, however, had very nearly been defeated the day before by Conrad's other great romance: that dreadful Webley.

Her two boys had locked themselves in the workshop directly after breakfast and vanished for the better part of the day. From behind the door came metallic clinking, muffled voices, and — once — a restrained paternal "careful with the spring, son." They emerged at supper — smelling of oil, brass, and triumph.

At table, the discussion covered a recoil compensator. Strengthened cartridges. And several further improvements which Alice understood only well enough to be alarmed by. Alexander could hardly eat for excitement. Conrad pretended to scold him for talking with his mouth full — and answered every question with the gravity of a professor lecturing at Oxford.

They were so proud of him. Alexander was a whirlwind of questions. He asked about Africa. He asked about Egypt. About wonders and adventures, and whether mummies really walked at night. Conrad even — with a certain amount of grumbling — told him war stories. Stories of the war he had never spoken of, to anyone. Not even to Alice — in their most open, most honest, most midnight conversations.

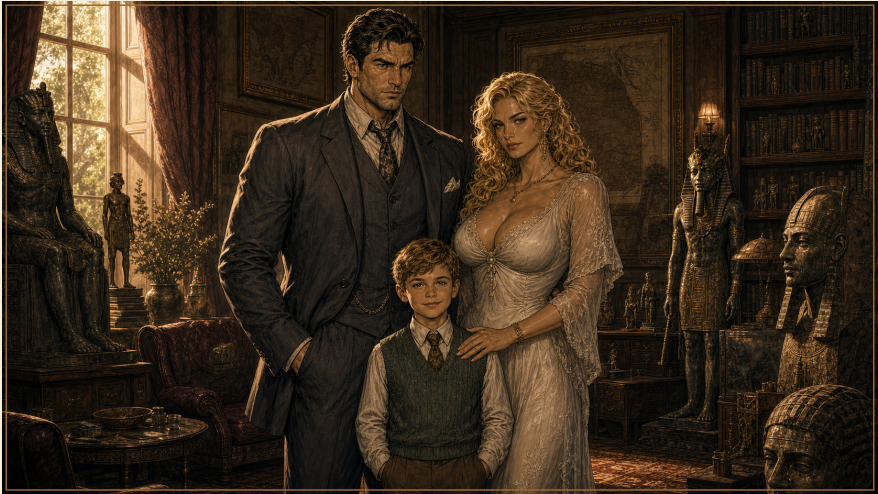
But to a nine-year-old boy — he told them. Sparingly, choosing his words, going around what ought to be gone around. But he told them.

Alice watched them across the table — two identically bowed heads, one dark, one fair, over a diagram of a revolver cylinder drawn on a napkin — and thought that happiness, contrary to the whole of world literature, could be entirely without plot. Just supper. Just a napkin. Just the two most important people in the world, arguing about muzzle velocity.

How she loved her boys.

* * *

It was decided to commission a family portrait.



The exposure preserved all three of them — already smiling.

Colour photography. A proper full-plate job — still rare enough to feel like a small scientific expedition in its own right. Alice seized upon the idea with such enthusiasm that Conrad found himself, as ever, entirely incapable of saying no to her. In truth, he could not conceive of a circumstance in which he should ever need to.

The photographer arrived with an assistant, three crates of equipment, and the expression of a priest admitted to a mystery. Setting up the apparatus took an hour. Choosing the light — another. Conrad watched the process with the genuine fascination of a man who had grown up among instruments, catalogues, and expedition equipment: the apparatus was rather remarkable. He caught

himself reflecting that there was more than sufficient space in the east wing of the Hall for a proper colour darkroom...

Alexander rose to the solemnity of the occasion and heroically suppressed his customary delighted grin for the entire duration of the preparations. He stood between his parents — in his formal little suit, hair slicked down, grave as a cabinet minister — and only the corner of his mouth twitched now and then, betraying what the gravity was costing him.

Alice and Alexander were so happy that even Conrad could not maintain the mask of the solemn and dignified lord for longer than ten seconds.

The exposure preserved all three of them — already smiling.

He loved them more than life itself.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CALL



...She heard it in her sleep. *"Thou shalt knowe no feare."* The voice sounded as though it came neither from inside her head nor from beside her. It was half dream and half sleep paralysis. She felt something viscid touching her mind, felt spectral tendrils sliding across her eyeballs... She wanted to scream but could not. She could only breathe — desperately, harshly, as though her lungs were being crushed. This woke Conrad — and the visitation released her.

She needed thirty seconds, during which her husband — frightened — this was Lord Compton! Frightened! — tried to reach her, kissing her, peering into her eyes...

...Then she sat bolt upright, very nearly breaking her husband's nose with the top of her head. But that did not matter. In her mind, the fragments of sensation had at last converged into a single fabric.

"ALEXANDER!"

...They were off their feet an instant later. Conrad snatched up the electric torch as he ran. Alice was ahead of him. She did not know where the trouble was.

She felt where.

By the time they reached the threshold of the private museum of Compton Hall, they understood they were too late. The black stone — ancient, enigmatic, brought back by Conrad's grandfather from God knows where... Alexander was pressed into it — no, not pressed. Sinking. Impossibly, inconceivably, the boy was drowning in the stone. He managed to stretch out one hand and cast a look at his parents. Not frightened. Focused. Fighting. Defiant.

A Compton's look.

And then he went under the matte-black surface, head and all.



They understood they were too late.

Alice threw herself against it a fraction of a second later... and was hurled back into her husband's arms. Her shoulder ached, but that did not matter. She flung herself at the stone again, tried to claw at it, to tear it open with her nails...

Conrad pulled her away, then bellowed at the top of his lungs: JOHN!

The butler materialised five minutes later. With a tray, cognac, and two snifters. John was, as ever, immaculate.

In the time it had taken him to arrive, the Comptons had examined the stone.

A piece of rock, as though sliced cleanly in two. The cut surface — matte black, swallowing nearly all light. Smooth.

Warm.

Almost hot...

...Conrad looked at the stone once more, then flinched, sprang to his feet, and — sweeping his wife into his arms — strode toward the library in great, devouring steps. Lady Compton gave a small squeak and seized hold of his bull neck. She knew: when Lord Compton began to act, there was hope.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

BEFORE DAWN

...Eggs and bacon.

Two more enormous mugs of coffee.

Dawn beyond the windows.



Three mugs of coffee, two breakfasts, and one surviving clue.

John stood like a living statue two paces away. Perfect and impeccable. The only sign that he was a living man was the trembling of his cheek. The old man loved Alexander to distraction — but then, who didn't? He would have taken his own life if he had thought it would bring the young master back; he blamed himself for not intervening, for not catching the boy in time. John's mind understood that he was blameless. His heart did not.

The worst of it was that there was almost nothing he could do. Almost — save to be, for his lord and lady, even more perfect than always. To take from them every burden but one — the saving of their son. Everything else, old, faithful John took upon himself.

He could still hear his lady's sobs as she had told him — him alone among the servants of Compton Hall — what had happened. It had not occurred to John to question her account. He had, in truth, been butler to this family for forty years, and he still felt uneasy in the museum.

Having heard her out, John said only this: "My lord, my lady — permit me to absent myself and set the necessary wheels in motion. I am certain the young lord will await your aid. I know him, and I have always admired his strength of spirit." For the first time in all his years of service, he did not wait for an answer.

First, he roused every servant in the house. Without explanation, without tales of the supernatural. Simply deploying the full authority of a butler acting in the interest of his House. The result: an early English breakfast and coffee were delivered to the Comptons as swiftly as was humanly possible. John himself, having briefed the staff, took his place beside his master and mistress. Lord Compton need not look up from the lectern, upon which he and his lady were spreading one incunabulum after another. John simply followed the direction of a pointed finger — fetching books, not forgetting to supply mugs of coffee and a napkin.

The whole business took three mugs of coffee, two helpings of breakfast, and several priceless volumes drenched in coffee.

The answer lay before them. One of the last travel journals of Lord Octavian Compton. Conrad's grandfather. An account of a solitary but magnificent tomb, lost in the sands. And — rendered with skill, for Octavian had been a superb sketch-artist — a drawing of the stone.

The coordinates of the tomb were given alongside. They were, admittedly, written in a strange, ligature-like script. Conrad, however, needed only five minutes to work something out.

"We need to go to Prague University. Then — Cairo. John, I need an aeroplane. A good one. Cost is immaterial."

"Of course, sir." John gave a short bow and vanished behind the door.

"We shall fly alone." This was not a question. It was a statement.

"Yes, my darling. We simply haven't time to assemble a proper expedition. We may be able to hire people in Cairo."

"I am certain he is alive. I can feel him. Quite literally."

"That is enough for me." Conrad drew his wife gently to him, and she pressed herself against his chest. They stood like that for several minutes, and then Alice raised her eyes to her husband, tall as a cliff face:

"We will save him, won't we?"

"I promise."

Conrad did not even stress the word. Simply and calmly.

But Alice knew now with certainty — it would not be otherwise.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

THE JOURNEY



Downing Street at nine in the morning smelled of wet stone, petrol, and sleeplessness. Conrad arrived by taxi because he did not want to wait for Bennett with the car. Every minute felt like a burn.

The secretary at the door — a young man of impeccably correct appearance, the sort who appear to have been born in a three-piece suit — began the standard formula: "I am afraid the Prime Minister is presently engaged with Lord Lampson, and—"

"I need them both," said Conrad. "Now. My name is Compton."

The secretary paused. Not because he was frightened — because he recognised it. "Compton" within the walls of Whitehall was not merely a name. It was three generations of men who had known Egypt better than the Egyptians and Africa better than the Africans. He had seen the name in documents, in reports, on the spines of books in the Foreign Office library. And the man before him — tall, grey at the temples, with something in his eyes that the secretary had never encountered in twenty months of gatekeeping — was not asking.

"One moment, my lord."

The moment stretched to five. Then the door opened and Baldwin himself stepped into the corridor — the Prime Minister, short, solid, with a pipe that he seemed never to release even in his sleep. Conrad knew him from Parliament — not closely, but well enough to exchange a handshake without the ceremony of introduction. Baldwin had visited Compton Hall twice. He had walked through the Egyptian Gallery. He had paused before the mummies, and asked — with a lightness that did not quite conceal genuine unease — whether any of the old stories about curses had substance.

"Compton?" Baldwin raised an eyebrow slightly. "At this hour?"

"Prime Minister. I need to speak with you and Lord Lampson. It cannot wait."

Baldwin studied him for one second. Then stepped aside.

"Come through."

Miles Lampson was already on his feet. Tall, heavy, his face tanned to the colour of Egyptian clay — twenty years in Cairo leave their mark. He saw Conrad — and for a moment stood perfectly still.

"Good Lord. You are the very image of your father. Only broader in the shoulder."

They had not met in more than ten years. Lampson had known the elder Compton from the excavations — a young diplomat and a famous lord-scholar, drinking tea together in the shade of a mastaba while workers carried potsherds out of the sand. He remembered Conrad as a youth with a notebook, quiet and serious beyond his years. That youth now stood before him — forty-five, hard-faced, and holding himself together with visible effort.

"What has happened, my boy?"

Conrad told them.

Not a summary. Not a sanitised version for the comfort of men who preferred the world to behave itself. He told them what had happened, in the precise, stripped language of a field report — the language of a man who had once delivered casualty figures at the Somme and had learnt that the only mercy available in such reports is brevity.

The Black Stone in the family museum. His grandfather's acquisition — from an unmarked tomb in the southern wadis beyond the Valley of the Kings. A slab of material that no Compton in three generations had been able to identify, classify, or mark with any known instrument. A surface that absorbed light and was warmer than the room. A thing that had stood in the gallery for decades, unremarkable, uncatalogued, ignored.

Until two nights ago, when it opened.

His son — Alexander, nine years old — had walked through the house in the dark, drawn by something his wife had felt in her sleep before her mind had woken. By the time they reached the gallery, the boy was sinking into the surface of the stone. Not falling. Not pushed. Drawn inward, as though the blackness were liquid and something beneath it were pulling.

Conrad described the pale tendril around his son's neck. He described the boy's face — not frightened; focused, defiant, fighting. He described the surface closing behind him like a sealed tomb.

He described his wife's attempt to claw the stone open with her bare hands.
He paused.
Baldwin's pipe had gone out. He had not noticed.



Find your son. In God's name, bring him home.

Lampson was leaning forward, both hands flat on the desk, his face the colour of old plaster.

Neither man interrupted. Neither man said: "Surely there must be a rational explanation." Because they were English lords, and an English lord does not call another English lord a liar when that lord's son is missing and his eyes look like Conrad Compton's eyes looked at that moment.

And because both of them had been to Compton Hall. Both had walked through the Egyptian Gallery. Both had felt it — the faint, persistent, entirely irrational chill that hung over the collection like a low cloud. Both had stood before the stone, and both had experienced the impulse — never discussed, never acknowledged, firmly filed under "imagination" — to step back from it.

Baldwin spoke first.

"The coordinates. You have them?"

"My grandfather recorded them in cipher. We have identified the tomb."

"Egypt."

"Yes."

Baldwin drew on his dead pipe, discovered it was dead, and set it down on the desk with the careful precision of a man organising his thoughts around a fixed point.

"Lord Compton. I have sat in this office through a general strike, two constitutional crises, and the rise of a German paper-hanger who appears to believe he is Frederick the Great. I have not, until this morning, been asked to believe that a stone in an English country house has swallowed a child." He paused. "But I am being asked by a Compton, whose family has never once in three generations brought this office a story that proved false. And I am being asked by a man whose face tells me that if I waste his time with scepticism, he will walk out of this room and do what he intends to do regardless, and I shall have lost the only opportunity to understand what is happening."

He stood.

"Therefore. Lord Compton — find your son. In God's name, bring him home. And in the King's name — find out what that thing is. Because if a stone can do what you have described, then it is either the most important discovery in the history of the British Empire, or the most dangerous threat this world has faced since the last war. Possibly both."

He turned to Lampson.

"Miles. The Crown will render Lord Compton full assistance. Full. Everything he asks for — transport, papers, access, supplies, silence. But the secrecy must be absolute. Not a word beyond this room. If this is real, and if it becomes known — I do not wish to contemplate the consequences."

Lampson nodded. He had not taken his eyes off Conrad.

The document took ten minutes. The seal of His Majesty's High Commissioner in Egypt. Personal signature. "The bearer, Lord Conrad Compton, acts with the knowledge and support of the office of the High Commissioner. All officials and representatives of authority are instructed to render him full assistance."

Then Lampson took a separate sheet, wrote a single line in his own hand addressed to the chief of Cairo police, and handed it to Conrad: "This is a Compton. Give him whatever he asks for."

The secretary — who had materialised at some point during the conversation with a tray bearing three cups of tea and a plate of biscuits, set

them down without a sound, and retreated to the wall with the expression of a man who had heard absolutely nothing — now stepped forward.

"Will there be anything else, Prime Minister?"

"No, Wilson. Thank you."

"Very good, sir." Wilson collected the untouched biscuits and dissolved.

Lampson held Conrad's hand a moment longer in the handshake.

"Find the boy, Conrad."

"I will."

It was said the same way as "I promise" — without stress, without posture. Simply and calmly. Lampson nodded. He knew that tone. The father had spoken the same way.

* * *

Meanwhile, Alice and John were receiving the aeroplane.

Croydon — London's principal aerodrome — in the morning haze looked like a field from another century: low buildings, hangars, a windsock, the smell of oil and wet grass. And among it all — a Junkers Ju 52/3m. Three-engined. Corrugated duralumin, three BMW engine stars, blunt-nosed, angular, ugly — and beautiful with the particular beauty possessed only by things built to work.

John had chartered it in four hours. The sum he paid remained between him and the Compton bank. The crew, John reported, comprised two Germans and a Frenchman: the pilot, Brandt — perhaps forty, lean, close-cropped, with the pale grey eyes of a man who has seen something he does not discuss — and a co-pilot and navigator, Lange, younger, taller, with a face that would have been handsome if it were not permanently clenched. Both taciturn. Both professional. Both asking no questions whatsoever. Conrad would have appreciated that. The third — their mechanic and radio operator — had not yet arrived.

Alice was walking along the fuselage, counting crates being loaded into the cargo hold, when a noise from the aerodrome gate caused every head to turn.

A motorcycle was approaching. One could not, in fairness, call it a motorcycle without a certain generosity of spirit. It was a Terrot 100 — French, tiny, a hundred cubic centimetres of optimism on two wheels — and astride it sat a young man in blue mechanic's overalls and a flat cap pushed back on his head, dark hair falling into his eyes, grinning as though the morning were a personal gift addressed to him alone. He was oil-stained to the elbows. He was

twenty-three years old. His name was Adrien Bernavon, he was from Lyon, and he was the mechanic whom Brandt, in a moment of what he now clearly regarded as criminal insanity, had hired six months prior.

Bernavon pulled up beside the Junkers, dismounted, and — without preamble, without greeting, without so much as a glance at Alice or the immaculate elderly gentleman beside her — began methodically pushing the Terrot toward the cargo hatch.

"She'll fit," he announced to nobody in particular. "She always fits."

Brandt, who had been supervising the fuel lines, turned very slowly. Lange, who had been checking the navigation charts, turned at exactly the same speed. They looked at the motorcycle. They looked at Bernavon. They looked at each other. And — in a gesture of such perfect synchronisation that it might have been rehearsed — they each raised a hand to their respective foreheads and covered their eyes.

Alice watched a twenty-three-year-old Frenchman attempt to wedge a motorcycle into an aircraft's cargo hold while loudly explaining, in three languages, that it would absolutely, definitely, certainly fit, and felt — for one brief, disorienting, entirely inappropriate second — an urge to laugh.



Juliette always fits. The laws of geometry are expected to cooperate.

"Juliette flies with me or I don't fly," Bernavon declared, addressing this remark to the Terrot's handlebars. "We are inseparable."

He had named the motorcycle. Of course he had named the motorcycle.

The motorcycle fit. Barely. Strapped to the bulkhead with cargo webbing, covered in a tarpaulin, wedged between crates of excavation equipment and jerry cans of petrol, it occupied a space that might otherwise have accommodated two passengers. Brandt's expression, as he watched the operation, could have curdled milk at thirty paces. Lange, to his credit, silently helped strap it down.

Alice resumed her inventory. Everything was aboard now: excavation tools, ropes, torches — six of them, with spare batteries — medical supplies, tinned food, water, jerry cans of petrol for the return journey, and one French motorcycle wedged between them like a stowaway. Thomas's Luger hung at her hip in its holster — a familiar weight, steadying, like the handshake of an old friend. Alice always felt calmer when she could feel its steel against her. In her valise — the mask and the figurine of Mbambwe, given to her by her father twenty years ago. Conrad knew about them. Conrad knew everything about her. Between them there were no secrets — and there never would be.

She did not permit herself to think about Alexander. While her hands were occupied, her head functioned. The moment her hands stopped, there would begin what she could not afford. Not now.

Conrad arrived an hour later. Stepped from the taxi, crossed the airfield, and — without a word — handed her the papers. Alice read them. Smiled — for the first time in two days.

"This is a Compton. Give him whatever he asks for."

"Miles always did know how to turn a phrase."

They boarded the aircraft. John remained on the ground — someone had to watch over Compton Hall. The farewell was brief: a handshake from Conrad, a kiss on the cheek from Alice, and a look in the old butler's eyes that said everything he could not permit himself to say.

"Bring him home, my lord."

"I will, John."

Three engines roared. The Junkers rolled across the grass, bounced, lifted — and England began to shrink below.

* * *

They visited several cities en route. The order of those visits, however, has no bearing on this story — what matters is only what they found.

In Prague — in a room at the Charles University, buried under books from floor to ceiling and smelling of pipe tobacco and great age — Professor Knedlík was waiting for them. Ninety-one years old. Desiccated as parchment, his hands covered in liver spots, and in his eyes a fire quite incompatible with his age.

He recognised the name Compton before Conrad had finished introducing himself.

"Octavian!" The professor seized his hand. "You are Octavian's grandson! God... God, my boy, how like him you are..."

Octavian Compton and Josef Knedlík — a young professor and a young lord — had worked together on the manuscript the world knew as the Voynich Manuscript. More precisely, on a copy — a transcript that Octavian had somehow obtained long before Wilfrid Voynich discovered the original in 1912. They had not cracked the manuscript in its entirety — no one had. But they had cracked one of its ciphers. One of many layers. And this cipher Octavian had thenceforth used to encode his most sensitive records.

Conrad placed the page from his grandfather's journal before the professor. The ligature script he had been unable to read.

Knedlík put on spectacles. Took them off. Put on a different pair. Leaned in. His hands trembled, but his eyes did not.

"Coordinates," he said after ten minutes. "These are coordinates. Latitude and longitude. And beneath..."

He fell silent.

"Beneath — what?" asked Conrad.

The professor removed his spectacles and looked at Conrad the way one looks at a person to whom one is about to say something they will not wish to hear.

"Your grandfather wrote: 'In this tomb there are too many treasures to leave to greedy humanity. And they are not gold or diamonds. Everything is far, far more terrible. I shall take with me only one half of the Mirror. Perhaps I can unravel some of the secrets at home.' "

Silence.

"Half the Mirror..." Conrad repeated. The black stone in the museum. The cross-section. As though sliced cleanly in two. One half — brought home by his grandfather. The other — still in the tomb.

"Young man," said Knedlík quietly. "I must warn you. The Voynich Manuscript is not what it appears to be. It is not a botanical treatise, nor an

alchemical recipe. It is... an allegory. About forces beyond human comprehension. Octavian understood this. And it is, I believe, precisely why he took the half and left."

"And died on the way home."

"A storm," Knedlík nodded. "So I was told. His crates — the artefacts for the museum — travelled by a different route. They arrived. He did not."

Conrad stood. Alice, who had been silent throughout, placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Be careful, Lord Compton. Your grandfather was a brilliant man. Brave. Cautious. And it did not save him."

Conrad looked at the old man. Then at Alice. Then back at Knedlík.

"My grandfather travelled alone. I do not."

* * *

From Prague — again the roar of three engines, again the corrugated fuselage trembling in turbulence, again the crates clinking in the cargo hold. Alice pressed herself against Conrad and fell asleep — for the first time in three days. He did not move. He held her and watched through the window as the Mediterranean appeared below — flat, blue, indifferent to all human tragedies.

In his pocket lay the coordinates. Decoded. Precise.

And his grandfather's words — about things more terrible than gold.

Cairo was waiting.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

CAIRO



Cairo greeted them with heat, the smell of rancid oil, noise, and exhaust fumes. The city was acquiring more motor traffic by the month. While the Comptons had been in the air, a coded telegram had arrived from London; by the time the Junkers touched down at Almaza aerodrome, a brand-new half-track had been dispatched from the British garrison and stood waiting on the tarmac, its engine ticking in the afternoon sun.

The captain assigned to the vehicle — a young Scotsman named McAlister, red-haired, freckled, and evidently delighted to be doing something other than garrison duty — saluted Lord Compton with the crisp enthusiasm of a man who had been given an interesting order and intended to execute it perfectly.

Setting out immediately, in the evening, after a day of flying, struck the Comptons as inadvisable. The task was to save their son and investigate the event — not to die attempting either. Exhausted from the journey, at night, they would be useless. McAlister drove them to the best hotel in Cairo — the Kheops — handed them over to the establishment's proprietor, a man named Abu, and departed for the barracks, promising to return at dawn with soldiers to unload the aircraft and then convey Lord and Lady Compton wherever they wished to go. En route, he dropped the Junkers crew at the officers' hotel, where Brandt, Lange, and Bernavon would await further instructions.

Bernavon, naturally, attempted to bring Juliette into the officers' hotel. Brandt informed him, in a tone that permitted no appeal, that the motorcycle would remain with the aircraft. Bernavon's expression suggested that he was being asked to abandon a child.

Abu was charm itself — or at least, strained every sinew to appear so. As was proper for an Arab hotelier at the sight of wealthy clients, he erupted into a cascade of compliments, launched a whirlwind of activity around the delivery of the guests' luggage to their suite — a royal suite, naturally — and talked without

pause throughout the entire operation. The suite, to Conrad's surprise, had been prepaid by the Crown for a month, with an option for unlimited extension. It appeared that Baldwin had not left everything to the High Commissioner; he had begun pulling strings of his own. Conrad felt a lump rise in his throat — pride in the Empire, quiet and fierce.

To escape Abu's relentless hospitality without giving offence — a diplomatic challenge roughly equivalent to withdrawing from a French salon without being noticed — the Comptons crossed the street to the Luxor, a coffeehouse belonging to Abu's brother.

Conrad remembered them both as children, when both establishments had been run by their father, old Mohammed. Hazid, Abu's older brother, appeared to be his precise opposite. Where Abu was squat, plump, round-cheeked, with an enormous potato nose and a lifelong inability to stop talking, Hazid was tall, lean, with the fierce face of a warrior, an aquiline nose, an ancient ornamental dagger perpetually tucked into his belt, and a habit of extracting words from himself as though each one cost him physical effort. He also made the finest coffee in Cairo.

The brothers did not get along. This meant that the Luxor was, perhaps, the only establishment in the city where one could hide from Abu's suffocating warmth without insulting his feelings.

The coffeehouse was surprisingly — given its prices — crowded. Conrad's trained eye immediately identified the military bearing of nearly every man present. No uniforms, no — just khaki shorts and field vests that sat on their wearers like uniforms regardless. They spoke German. Conrad knew the language well enough to have eavesdropped, had his attention not been interrupted by an enthusiastic cry from across the room:

"Conrad! My boy!"

It was cool inside the Luxor. The evening air and the newfangled electric ceiling fans, beating the air with their blades, had brought the temperature down to something almost civilised.

Opposite the Comptons, at a large, low, heavy tea table on carved claw-feet in the style of Second Dynasty furniture (Conrad noted mechanically), sat three men.

The first was the source of the cry: Lord Pemberton. With the sweetest smile on his plump, perpetually perspiring face — damp even in the cool air of the coffeehouse — he introduced the other members of his party: Dr. Kurt von Ravenhorst, an archaeologist, and his assistant, a secretary named Otto von

Wolfenried. Conrad noted that the "secretary's" spine was permanently straight, as though he had swallowed one of the Prussian rulers with which their gymnasium masters were fond of encouraging future officers toward Germanic order — by applying said ruler to the future officers' backsides. His wife, with a gentle touch, directed his attention to another detail: a strange ring on Otto's hand, and an identical one on Ravenhorst's.

The conversation could not be said to have stalled. They covered a great deal — from the peculiarities of false-room construction in underground tombs of the Late Kingdom period to a lengthy exposition by Ravenhorst on the subject of Aryan superiority. The latter topic appeared to excite the doctor considerably more than archaeology: he showered Lord Compton with compliments, praised his magnificent wife, and then launched into a disquisition on how such splendid specimens of the Aryan phenotype entirely confirmed the findings of his own research. The doctor even had the self-deprecating grace to lament his own appearance, lamenting that at some point his ancestors had evidently permitted a slight admixture with someone or other, which left him far from the standard set by the Comptons or by Kurt himself. And indeed, Kurt embodied every possible and impossible stereotype of the German "Aryan ideal" — tall, taller than Conrad, broad-shouldered, athletic, with a shock of blond hair the colour of overripe wheat, bright, clear blue eyes — as though he had stepped off one of Herr Goebbels's recruitment posters.

Lady Alice, who had travelled half of Africa with her father and understood that there were no superior races, only adapted ones, barely restrained herself from yawning. Conrad had already twice attempted to steer the conversation back to archaeology, hoping to find the purpose of what was clearly a German government group in Cairo. Pemberton, meanwhile, enthusiastically echoed every pronouncement and periodically inserted references to Blavatsky, which produced a faint nervous tic in Conrad's cheek.

"Oh, good heavens! Lord Compton in person, and with his magnificent wife?"

The voice was female, remarkably beautiful and strong, with a faint, almost deliberate German accent. It came from above.

Conrad looked up.

On the gallery that ran along the upper level of the Luxor — Hazid, in his silent way, had clearly invested in the building since Conrad's last visit — a woman was rising from a table where she had evidently been sitting for some time. At her feet, two dogs rose with her: a large German Shepherd in perfect

saddleback colouring — deep black mantle over rich orange-tan — and a lean, taut Doberman, dark as wet iron.

She descended the narrow staircase with the unhurried precision of a woman who knew exactly when to appear and had been waiting, Conrad now realised, for precisely this moment. She had heard everything. She had chosen her entrance.

Ravenhorst rose with uncharacteristic haste.

"Countess! I did not know you were here."

"I have been here for an hour, Kurt. On the gallery." She gestured vaguely upward. "Wonderful coffee and excellent acoustics. I heard ten minutes of your monologue on cranial indices quite distinctly." She turned to the Comptons and extended her hand — not for a kiss, for a handshake. "Dr. Helene, Countess von Nornau. Biologist, anthropologist, and — by default — the only person in this expedition who remembers that archaeology is a science, not an occasion for racial sermons."

The last words were directed at Ravenhorst — and inflicted damage incommensurate with their lightness. Conrad noticed the doctor's jaw petrify for a fraction of a second behind his steel-rimmed spectacles.

"The Countess somewhat exaggerates," Ravenhorst smiled.

"The Countess understates," Helene replied, taking a seat. "Lady Compton — née Cholmondeley." She pronounced it correctly: Chumley. "If you permit. Your family arrived in England nearly a century before mine was founded."



She had heard everything. She had chosen her entrance.

She turned to Conrad.

And here something occurred that she had not expected.

In photographs — and she had seen several, including the one printed in the joint monograph with his father on the tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty — Conrad Compton looked like a well-bred English scholar. Broad-shouldered, yes. Dark-haired, with a hard jawline. But photographs did not convey *presence*.

Up close, in the Cairo heat, in a field shirt unbuttoned two buttons from the collar, with perspiration gleaming at his temples and forearms bared by rolled sleeves in the manner of a man accustomed to physical work rather than offices, Compton proved to be something for which Helene was not prepared.

Not Otto. Otto was perfect, like a blade: beautiful, cold, obedient. Sleeping with Otto was rather like sleeping with an ideal instrument — pleasant, efficient, and touching absolutely nothing deeper than skin.

Compton was different. Compton was *heat*. Dense, animal, male heat that radiated from him in waves, and in which she, for one unguarded second, very nearly lost the thread of her thought. Testosterone, sweat, sunburned skin, hands that looked equally capable of turning the page of an ancient manuscript and breaking a neck — and whose owner would not even pause to consider the transition between these two activities.

And his eyes. Dark, calm, utterly indifferent to her as a woman. He looked at her the way an officer regards an unfamiliar officer of a foreign army: evaluating, attentive, without the smallest flicker of interest beyond tactical necessity.

This was... unusual.

Helene smiled — and engaged the mechanism she always engaged when a worthy object presented itself.

"I have read your monograph on the burial chambers of the southern wadis four times, Lord Compton. The fourth time with a pencil. I am compelled to admit: your analysis of the masonry in shaft KV-38 is more convincing than Carter's."

Conrad inclined his head slightly.

"You read the footnotes, or only the main text?"

"The footnotes. And the appendix with your father's sketches. Particularly diagram C-14 — the one where he reconstructs the ventilation circuit from soot traces. Brilliant work."

For the first time that evening, something flickered in Conrad's eyes that was not professional courtesy — but it was not attraction. It was surprise. Appendix C-14 was a technical detail that perhaps three people in the world had mentioned in twenty years.

"You are a specialist in tomb ventilation systems?" he asked with mild irony.

"I am a specialist in systems that allow the dead to remain dead," Helene replied. "And sometimes — do not."

Alice, who had been silently observing until now, leaned forward slightly. Conrad noticed.

"Countess, you mentioned an expedition. Where to, if it isn't a secret?"

"Oh, that is rather your question, Lord Compton." Helene accepted a small cup of coffee from Hazid, who had approached without a sound — she took it with a nod, as though she had been a regular for years, though Conrad knew she had not. "We have only just arrived. Getting our bearings. Taking the measure of the desert. But you — I saw you arrive. A rather impressive Ford, if I may say so. The British Army does not lend half-tracks to tourists."

"A family interest," said Conrad easily. "We were sorting through my grandfather's old crates from Egypt — they've been gathering dust in the Hall for decades. Found his field journal, and in it — a mention of a tomb he never

had the chance to excavate. My wife and I decided we'd been sitting at home long enough. Time to shake off the cobwebs."

"Shake off the cobwebs," Helene repeated, with a smile that said she was filing every word for later examination. "With a chartered Junkers. In one day." She tilted her head. "I had heard that the Comptons are a remarkably wealthy dynasty, but chartering a trimotored aircraft at a day's notice rather confirms the rumour. Or did you simply buy it?"

"John — our butler — handled the arrangements," said Conrad. "I confess I did not ask the price."

"Your butler chartered a Junkers." Helene's eyebrows rose a fraction — genuine amusement, or a very good imitation of it. "I begin to understand why the British Empire endures."

"And your wife shares this sudden archaeological impulse so completely that she flew with you across a continent?" Helene continued, turning her grey-blue gaze to Alice. "On a moment's notice?"

"Lady Compton is a field researcher," Conrad replied. "She travelled Africa with her father before she learned to drive a motorcar. This is our *joint* enthusiasm."

He spoke the word "joint" without emphasis — but something in the way he said it caused Helene, for the first time that evening, to falter very slightly in her rhythm. She was accustomed to men who said "we" out of politeness. Compton pronounced "we" like a physical law.

Helene shifted her gaze to Alice — truly, for the first time, not glancing. Golden curls. Brown eyes in which a lazy, entirely unperformative warmth was floating. And a body that even beneath a field shirt refused to be inconspicuous. But the critical thing — Alice was not jealous. She was watching Helene with an interest closer to the zoological than the anxious: the way an experienced field naturalist observes a large predator, noting its habits.

This, too, was unusual.

"A family enterprise," Helene smiled. "How touching." She took a small sip of coffee — and then, without transition, without pause, in the same drawing-room tone: "How is your son, Lord Compton? Alexander, if I am not mistaken? He must be about nine?"

Conrad did not flinch. Nothing in his face changed. Twenty-five years ago, on the Somme, he had learned to receive unexpected fire without altering his expression — the skill had saved lives then and saved them now.

"Nine," he said. "Well, thank you."

"I am glad to hear it." Helene set down her cup, and for a moment — a brief, possibly genuine moment — something softened in her grey-blue eyes. "Truly. I confess I was... I hope you will forgive a stranger's presumption, but it struck me as unusual that you would undertake such a journey without him. A boy of nine, a family of explorers, a grandfather's lost tomb — it is precisely the sort of adventure a child would beg to join." She paused. "Unless there were a reason he could not."

The coffeehouse fans continued their slow revolution overhead.

"I have heard a great many legends," Helene continued, her voice lighter now, as though retreating from territory she had deliberately entered, "about healing properties attributed to certain tomb artefacts. Resins, unguents, inscribed vessels — the Egyptians were remarkably inventive in their pharmacology. One does encounter stories of families travelling great distances in search of..." She stopped herself. Smiled. "But forgive me. These are silly fantasies. I spend too much time reading folklore and too little minding my manners. I am certain Alexander is perfectly well and simply terrorising your household staff in your absence."

It was elegantly done. The hypothesis had been placed on the table like a card laid face-up: *your son is ill, you are seeking a cure, the tomb is not academic curiosity but desperation*. And then, just as elegantly, retracted — folded back into the hand, invisible again, deniable. But everyone at the table had seen it.

Alice placed her hand on Conrad's knee — a gesture invisible to the others, hidden by the tabletop.

"Compton children," said Alice, entering the conversation for the first time, her voice perfectly calm, "know what to touch. They are taught."

Helene met her gaze. For a second, something hung between the two women — not hostility, not challenge, but the mutual recognition of two beings, each of which understood precisely what the other was capable of.

"I do not doubt it," said Helene softly.

Conrad finished his coffee. Thanked Ravenhorst for the conversation. Shook Wolfenried's hand — the man had not spoken a single word all evening, but had memorised, Conrad was certain, every one. Nodded to Pemberton, who melted into a damp smile and uttered something rapturous about how wonderful it was to encounter an old family friend.

They stepped out into the Cairo night. The heat had subsided, but the air remained thick and warm, like someone else's breath.

Alice walked in silence. Conrad walked in silence. They crossed the street, entered the hotel, climbed to their suite, closed the door.

"She knows," said Alice.

"She knows something," Conrad replied. "She knew his name. She knew his age. And she told us exactly what she thinks — that Alexander is ill and we are searching for a cure in the tomb. A healing artefact." He paused. "She dressed it up as folklore and silly fantasies, then apologised. But the card was on the table. She wanted us to see it."

"Where is she getting this?"

Conrad sat on the edge of the bed. Removed his boots. Looked at the ceiling.

"Somewhere between London and Cairo. Telegraph, garrison, diplomatic pouch — I don't know. But she didn't stumble onto us by accident. She was sitting on that gallery, waiting, listening. She chose when to come down. Everything about that conversation was prepared."

"She is dangerous, Conrad."

"They are all dangerous, my dear." He paused. "But she — particularly so."

Alice sat beside him. Laid her head on his shoulder.

"We don't take soldiers from the garrison?"

"No." Conrad ran his hand through her hair. "We take no one. Tomorrow McAlister unloads our supplies, we thank him for his service, and from then on — the two of us. Only you and I. As always."

"As always," Alice repeated.

Downstairs, in the Luxor coffeehouse, Helene von Nornau was finishing her second cup of coffee, absently scratching Geri behind the ear. Ravenhorst was saying something. She was not listening. Before her eyes hung the forearms of the English lord — tanned, dark-haired, scarred — and his absolutely, unforgivably, insultingly indifferent dark eyes.

Countess von Nornau was not accustomed to indifference.

She finished her coffee and decided that this required correction.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DESERT

They left the Kheops at five in the morning, while Cairo was still the colour of ash.

McAlister had the garrison moving before dawn. By the time the Comptons arrived at Almaza, the Junkers was already open, its corrugated belly disgorging crates onto a line of soldiers who passed them hand to hand with the efficient rhythm of men who had been told, by a captain who had been told by a lord who had been told by a prime minister, that this particular cargo was not to be dropped.



Everything they could carry. Nothing they could afford to forget.

Bernavon supervised the unloading of Juliette with the intensity of a man overseeing the disembarkation of a firstborn. He then spent eleven minutes explaining to a bewildered private why the motorcycle needed to be set down on its wheels, not its side. Brandt and Lange stood beside the aircraft in silence,

watching the desert light creep across the aerodrome. They had not been told when they would be needed again. They did not ask.

McAlister, it transpired, was the sort of officer who worried productively. While the crates were being transferred to the half-track, he appeared at Conrad's elbow with two items.

The first was a military shortwave radio set — a bulky apparatus in a reinforced case, fitted with a hand-cranked generator and a ten-metre wire antenna that could be strung between the vehicle and any convenient vertical object. Operating on the high-frequency band, it used ionospheric reflection to reach Cairo from distances of up to three hundred kilometres — better at night, McAlister explained, when the upper atmosphere cooperated. The set had been tested the previous week. It worked. Mostly.

"And if it doesn't, sir," McAlister added, producing a wicker cage from behind the half-track with the air of a conjurer, "there's always these."

Eight pigeons regarded Conrad with the placid indifference of creatures who had been doing this job since Mesopotamia and saw no reason for excitement.

"Pigeons," said Conrad.

"Homers, sir. Bred at the garrison. They'll find Cairo from anywhere in the Eastern Desert. Rain, sandstorm, doesn't matter. Signal corps swears by 'em." He paused. "Bit old-fashioned, I know. But wireless valves crack in the heat and pigeons don't."

Conrad looked at the pigeons. The pigeons looked at Conrad. An understanding was reached.

"Thank you, Captain. Anything else?"

McAlister hesitated — the hesitation of a man who has been told to render full assistance and is wondering whether full assistance includes the thing he is about to say.

"Sir — are you certain you won't take an escort? I can have a section ready in an hour. Good lads. Desert-trained."

"I am certain, Captain."

"Sir." McAlister straightened. Whatever he thought of a lord and his wife driving into two hundred kilometres of open desert alone, in a half-track loaded with excavation equipment, a radio, eight pigeons, and enough ammunition to hold off a minor insurrection — he kept it behind the expression that the British Army had been manufacturing in its officers since Waterloo.

He handed Alice a folded map — current survey, marked with water points, known Bedouin encampments, and the locations of three British fuel caches maintained for desert patrols.

"Ma'am. The blue triangles are reliable wells. The red circles are camps — Sheikh Hamid's people, mostly. Friendly. The green squares are our fuel dumps — combination locks, the code is written on the back."

Alice took the map, studied it for ten seconds, and folded it into her breast pocket. McAlister, who had seen staff officers take twenty minutes to orient a map, looked at her with the expression of a man revising an assumption upward.

"God speed, sir. Ma'am."

"Thank you, McAlister. We'll signal when we arrive."

The half-track pulled out of Almaza at six-fourteen, heading southwest into a sky the colour of heated copper.

* * *

For the first sixty kilometres, the road existed. Not a good road — a track of compacted sand and gravel, rutted by lorries and the occasional staff car — but a road nonetheless, with telegraph poles marking its course like a line of drunken sentries.

Then the road ended and the desert began.

Conrad drove. Alice navigated, the map on her knees, a compass in her left hand, the Luger in its holster on her right hip. The half-track ground forward at thirty kilometres an hour, its tracks chewing sand, its engine filling the world with a sound like a mechanical heartbeat. Behind them, dust rose in a column that could be seen, Conrad estimated, from fifteen miles. There was nothing to be done about that. They were not trying to be invisible. They were trying to be fast.

They spoke little. There was little to say. The coordinates were in Conrad's pocket. The desert was in front of them. Alexander was somewhere beneath it.

At a hundred and forty kilometres, they stopped to refuel from the first cache — a buried steel drum, precisely where McAlister's map said it would be. Alice cranked the hand pump while Conrad checked the tracks. At a hundred and eighty kilometres, they ate — tinned beef, hard biscuits, water from the jerry can, sitting on the warm bonnet of the half-track while the engine ticked and cooled.

At two hundred and six kilometres, the left rear track threw a pin.

* * *

The sound was distinctive — a sharp metallic crack, followed by a rhythmic clanking that meant one of the track links had separated and was being dragged rather than driven. Conrad brought the half-track to a halt, set the brake, and got out.

The pin had sheared clean. Metal fatigue, desert heat, a flaw in the casting — it didn't matter. What mattered was that without a replacement, the half-track was a very expensive piece of modern sculpture sitting in the middle of the Eastern Desert.

They had no spare pin.

Conrad crouched beside the damaged track, turning the broken halves over in his hands. The break was clean. The pin could be replaced — if one had a pin. Or fabricated — if one had a forge.

Alice was already looking at the map.

"There's a Bedouin camp," she said. "Here — Sheikh Hamid's people, according to McAlister. Seven kilometres northeast. Blue triangle, so there's a well." She traced the route with her finger. "Rocky ground, then a wadi, then open flat. I can walk it in an hour and a half."

"In this heat?"

"I grew up walking in this heat." She took the water bottle, slung it across her body, and checked the Luger. "A Bedouin camp this size will have a smith. And if the British garrison has been running half-tracks through here as regularly as McAlister implied, there's a decent chance the smith has seen this problem before."

Conrad looked at her. He did not say *be careful* — she would have found it insulting. He did not say *I'll come with you* — someone needed to stay with the vehicle and the cargo. He said:

"Buy water, if they have it to sell."

"Obviously."

She kissed him — briefly, firmly, the kiss of a woman leaving on a task, not a woman saying goodbye — and walked northeast into the shimmer.

* * *

The ruins appeared at the four-kilometre mark.

They were not much — a collapsed wall of mud-brick, half-swallowed by sand, with the stump of what had once been a watchtower rising from the dune

like a broken tooth. Roman, perhaps. Or Ptolemaic. Old enough that the desert had nearly finished the job of forgetting them.

Alice heard the voices before she saw the men.

Three of them. Local — loose robes, keffiyehs, the lean and weathered look of men who lived in the spaces between settlements and survived by taking what others had earned. Two carried curved knives. The third had an ancient Martini-Henry rifle that looked as though it had last been cleaned during the Mahdi's rebellion.

They saw her at the same moment she saw them.

The arithmetic was simple. A woman, alone, foreign, visibly armed but outnumbered. In the open, this was a problem. But Alice was not in the open. She was beside the ruins.

She was inside the wall before the first man shouted.

The mud-brick was old, but thick — three feet of compacted earth and straw, more than sufficient to stop a Martini-Henry round at this range. Alice put her back against it, drew the Luger, and assessed. Three men, approaching from the south. One firearm, old, single-shot, slow reload. Two blades. The wall gave her cover on three sides. The watchtower stump provided elevation if she needed it.

She did not panic. Alice Compton did not panic. She had once performed triage under artillery fire for six consecutive hours. Three men with knives and an antique rifle were, by comparison, a moderate inconvenience.

The man with the Martini-Henry fired. The round struck the wall two feet above her head and showered her with dust. She counted to three — reload time for an experienced shooter with a single-shot breech-loader — leaned around the corner, aimed for the shoulder, and squeezed the trigger.

The Luger put the round through his forehead.



Thomas Wynn's pistol had its own ideas about where bullets ought to go.

Alice had aimed for the shoulder. She was certain of it. She would remain certain of it for years afterward, the way she was always certain when the Luger did something she had not quite intended. Thomas Wynn's pistol had its own ideas about where bullets ought to go when someone was shooting at its owner. She had stopped questioning this in France.

The man dropped and did not move. The other two froze — the universal paralysis of men who have just watched their companion's head snap back.

And then, from the north, came the sound of hooves.

Not one horse. Not two. Ten — perhaps twelve — riding hard, raising a plume of dust that looked, against the afternoon sky, like a sandstorm with intentions. Alice heard whooping. She heard something that sounded, improbably, impossibly, like a rebel yell.

The riders crested the dune and descended upon the scene with the enthusiasm of men who had been hoping for exactly this sort of entertainment.

They were not Bedouin.

They were not British.

They were, unless Alice's ears deceived her, *American*.

The two remaining bandits took one look at twelve horsemen bearing down on them at full gallop, abandoned their dead companion with the loyalty characteristic of their profession, and ran. They made it approximately thirty yards. The Texans shot them out of their sandals without breaking stride — four Colts fired almost simultaneously, the reports cracking across the desert like dry wood splitting. The riders wheeled to a halt around the ruins in a cloud of dust, laughter, and profanity that was, unmistakably, Texan.

"Well, I'll be *darned*," said the man on the lead horse, pushing back a battered wide-brimmed hat to reveal a sunburned face, a grin the width of the Nile Delta, and eyes the colour of bleached denim. "Ma'am, you dropped that fella 'fore we even got close. That was the prettiest piece of shootin' I seen since Abilene."

He was perhaps thirty. Tall in the saddle, rangy, with the build of a man who had grown up roping things and had simply substituted camels for cattle when geography demanded it. He wore a dusty canvas jacket over a collarless shirt, riding boots that had once been expensive and were now archaeological, and a Colt revolver on his hip with the casual accessibility of a man who considered it a body part.

Behind him, his companions — a mixed collection of sunburned, dust-caked, cheerfully disreputable men in various combinations of Western and desert clothing — were already dismounting, examining the wounded bandit with professional detachment, and passing around a canteen.

"Ma'am," the leader continued, swinging down from his horse with the fluid ease of a born rider, "name's Calhoun. Beauregard Calhoun, if my mama's to be believed, but ain't nobody called me that since the baptism. Bo'll do." He extended a hand. "An' these here reprobates are my associates. We're in the, ah, antiques business."

"Alice Compton," said Alice, holstering the Luger.

"Compton?" Bo's eyebrows rose. "Like the Egypt Comptons? The diggin' Comptons?"

"The very same."

"Well, *shiiiiit*." He said it with three syllables and genuine reverence. "Ma'am, your granddaddy's book is the reason half of us is out here. 'Course, we mostly just look at the pictures on account of the words bein' a mite... scholarly."

He offered her his horse — or, more precisely, he swung back into the saddle and extended a hand downward.

"Hop on up, ma'am. Ain't walkin' in this heat when there's a perfectly good horse."

Before Alice could formulate an appropriate response, she found herself pulled up and settled in the saddle in front of him — his arms on either side of her, holding the reins, his chest against her back, the brim of his hat casting shade over both of them. It was efficient, practical, and approximately as subtle as the man himself.

"Comfortable, ma'am?"

"Tolerably," said Alice, in a tone that would have frozen the Nile.

Bo appeared not to notice.

As they rode toward the Bedouin camp — at an easy walk, the horse picking its way through the stones, the rest of the band trailing behind in a loose column — the nature of his "antiquities business" became apparent through the gaps in his cheerful, ceaseless, spectacularly ungrammatical narration.

They were tomb raiders.

Not archaeologists. Not scholars. Not researchers. They were men who went into holes in the ground and came out with gold, and if the hole happened to contain four thousand years of human history, well, that was real interestin', ma'am, but it didn't pay the bills and it sure as hell didn't buy new boots.

"Now, I ain't sayin' we're *thieves*," Bo clarified, with the earnest expression of a man who was saying exactly that. "Thieves take stuff what belongs to folks. This here stuff belongs to dead folks. Dead *real* long ago folks. An' I figure, ma'am, them pharaohs had their shot at enjoyin' it. Fair's fair."

He shifted in the saddle behind her, warming to his theme.

"Sides, way I see it, the Lord's on our side in this particular endeavour. Them pharaohs was *oppressors*, ma'am. Oppressors of the Hebrew people. It's right there in the Good Book — plagues, locusts, partin' of the Red Sea, the whole business. Every God-fearin' Christian knows what Pharaoh done." He paused, with the gravity of a man delivering a theological argument. "So the way I figure, takin' their gold ain't stealin'. It's *reparations*. Biblical reparations. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, an' sometimes He uses a Texan with a shovel."

"You've read the Old Testament, then?" asked Alice.

"Yes, ma'am. Well." Another pause, longer this time. "There was pictures."

Alice, who under other circumstances would have found this philosophy somewhere between appalling and criminal, discovered that she lacked the

energy to be outraged. The man had, after all, just saved her life. Or at least significantly simplified it.

"You mentioned you had information about a site," she said, steering the conversation with the practiced ease of a woman who had grown up extracting intelligence from reluctant sources — her father's African informants had been excellent training.

"Oh, that." Bo's grin widened. "Yeah, we got us a lead. Fella we met — dervish, y'know, one of them wanderin' holy men — he told us 'bout somethin' he called the Second Great Valley. Says it's bigger'n the Valley of the Kings, an' ain't nobody touched it. Not Carter, not nobody." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Can't tell you where, ma'am. Professional courtesy an' all. But I will say this — if it's half what that ol' dervish claimed, we're all gonna be rich enough to buy Texas."

"You intend to buy Texas?"

"Well, ma'am, first I gotta get rich. Then I gotta get famous. *Then* I buy Texas. A man needs a plan."

They rode in silence for a moment. Then Bo glanced at her sideways.

"Y'know, ma'am, you shoot real good. Like, *real* good. I ain't seen a lady handle a pistol like that since my aunt Dolores, an' she was wanted in two states." He paused. "If you ever get tired of your husband an' all them fancy English manners — you come find ol' Bo Calhoun. I'm fixin' to be the richest an' most eligible bachelor west of the Mississippi, an' I could use a gal who don't miss."

Alice looked at him. He was entirely serious. He was also entirely ridiculous. And he was, she admitted to herself, not without a certain sunburned, dust-caked, magnificently illiterate charm.

"I shall bear it in mind, Mr. Calhoun."

"Bo."

"I shall bear it in mind, Bo."

He beamed.

* * *

Sheikh Hamid's camp was larger than Alice had expected — forty tents, perhaps fifty, arranged in a loose crescent around a stone-lined well. Goats, camels, children, cooking fires, and the pervasive smell of cardamom and animal dung.

The sheikh himself was not what she had expected either.

He was lean, grave, white-bearded, with eyes that had been assessing strangers for sixty years — but he was sitting on a horse. Not a camel. A horse — a pure Arabian, grey, fine-boned, with a neck like a drawn bow and an eye that suggested it considered everyone present to be beneath its social station. The saddle alone was worth more than everything Alice was wearing. Sheikh Hamid was not a poor man. Sheikh Hamid was a man whose tribe had served three generations of Comptons, and been paid — by Compton standards, which is to say generously — for every year of that service.

When Alice said her name, the sheikh's composure — sixty years of desert-forged dignity — cracked.

"Compton," he said. Not a question. A recognition. "*Compton*. The lord — he is here? He is in Egypt?"

"Seven kilometres southwest. With a broken track pin."

The sheikh issued four commands in rapid Arabic. The smith — a squat, silent man with forearms like bridge cables — was dispatched to his forge. A tent was opened. Tea was produced. And the sheikh himself swung onto the Arabian with an agility that had no business belonging to a man of his age and announced that he would escort Lady Compton personally.

Bo and his men had vanished during the preparations — melted into the desert with the practised ease of people who preferred not to be in the same location as a Bedouin sheikh and a British officer's wife for longer than socially necessary. Alice suspected she would see them again. The desert was large, but the places worth going in it were remarkably few.

The smith produced the replacement pin in twenty minutes — hand-forged, slightly rough, but dimensionally precise. He also produced, from a wooden box beneath his workbench, two more pins, factory-made, still wrapped in oiled cloth.

"The English trucks," he said, in Arabic that Alice followed easily. "They always break here." He tapped the pin. "Bad metal. Egyptian suppliers." He shrugged — the universal shrug of a man who had long ago accepted that some things were beyond repair, but pins were not among them.

Alice bought all three pins, six goatskins of water, and a bag of dates. She paid in gold.

The return column was grander than Alice had intended: herself on a camel, the sheikh on his Arabian, four armed riders, and two pack camels carrying the water and supplies. They covered the seven kilometres in under an hour.

Conrad was sitting on the bonnet of the half-track, cleaning the Webley. He looked up, saw his wife arriving at the head of a Bedouin column — and then saw the rider on the grey Arabian, and stood.

Sheikh Hamid very nearly fell off his horse.

He did not, because he was a sheikh and sheikhs do not fall off horses, but the dismount was considerably less graceful than the mount had been, and the sound that came from his throat was not the formal greeting of a desert chieftain but the broken cry of an old man who has just seen a ghost.

"*Ya ibn Compton.*" Son of Compton. He crossed the distance in four strides, took Conrad by the shoulders, and embraced him — hard, fierce, the embrace of a man who had served Octavian, served Conrad's father, watched Conrad as a boy with a notebook in the shade of a mastaba, and had not seen him in more than a decade.

Conrad held him. Did not pull away. Did not stiffen. The English reserve that governed his interactions with every other human being on earth — except Alice — did not apply here. Sheikh Hamid existed in a different category. He was not a servant. He was not an employee. He was something older and more binding: a man whose honour was welded to the Compton name by three generations of shared work, shared danger, and shared silence about things found in the desert that were better left unspoken.



Ya ibn Compton. Son of Compton.

"You will not stay in a camp," the sheikh said, when he had released Conrad and wiped his eyes without embarrassment. "You will come to my tents. You will eat. You will rest. And when you find what you are looking for and make your camp — I will place ten of my best warriors around it, day and night. No one will approach without my permission."

"Sheikh—"

"This is not a request, Lord Compton."

Conrad looked at Alice. Alice looked at Conrad. An understanding passed between them — the wordless calculation of two people who recognised, simultaneously, that Sheikh Hamid's camp was not merely hospitality. It was a base. A hub. A safe point from which to operate and to which to return.

"We accept," said Conrad. "With gratitude."

"With gratitude," the sheikh repeated, and waved the word away as though it were a fly. "Gratitude. Your grandfather paid for my father's well. Your father paid for my sons' education. You owe me nothing. I owe you everything."

Later — after the pin had been replaced, after the half-track had been driven to the camp, after tea had been served and drunk in the proper silence that good tea demands — Conrad took Sheikh Hamid by the arm and walked with him to the edge of the camp, where the firelight did not reach and the stars were close enough to touch.

He told him everything.

Not the abbreviated version. Not the cover story about a grandfather's journal and professional curiosity. Everything. The Black Stone. The surface that absorbed light. Alexander walking through the house in the dark. The pale tendril. The boy sinking. Alice's hands on the stone. The surface closing.

Sheikh Hamid listened without interrupting.

Halfway through the account — at the moment Conrad described his son's face, not frightened, focused, fighting — the sheikh's hands shot out and gripped Conrad's forearms. Hard. Not hostile — the grip of a man who needs to anchor himself to something solid because the ground beneath him has shifted.

"Describe the stone again," he said. "The surface. You said it absorbed light."

"Yes."

"And it was warm."

"Yes."

"And there was no reflection."

Conrad paused. He had not mentioned that detail — had not, in fact, consciously registered it until this moment. But the sheikh was right. The Black Stone had no reflection. Not darkness — an absence of reflection. As though the surface existed in a place where the concept of reflection had not been invented.

"*Marāyā bilā in'ikās*," the sheikh whispered. Mirrors without reflection. He released Conrad's arms and sat down heavily on a rock, looking suddenly every year of his age. "I have heard of these. In the stories of my grandfather's grandfather. We call them *Durūb Allāh al-Muḥḥima* — the Dark Paths of Allah."

"What are they?"

"Corridors. Passages. Not destinations — *paths*." The sheikh looked up, his eyes fierce in the starlight. "Your son did not fall into a pit, Lord Compton. He was taken onto a road. And a road has two ends."

Conrad felt the breath leave his body.

"He is somewhere."

"He is *somewhere*. Yes. And if the old stories are true — and I have never known them to lie, though I have often wished they would — then wherever he is, he remains himself. The *Marāya* do not destroy. They transport."

"How do you know this?"

The sheikh was silent for a long moment.

"There is a woman," he said finally. "In the deep desert. Beyond the third wadi. My people call her *Allatī Tatabaddath ma' Jibril* — She Who Speaks With Gabriel." He saw Conrad's expression and raised a hand. "I know what you are thinking, Lord Compton. I am a rational man. I have sent my sons to English schools. I do not believe in fairy tales." He paused. "But I have seen her stop a sandstorm by speaking to it. And I have seen her tell a mother the exact location of a lost child, two hundred kilometres away, by holding the child's blanket."

He looked at Conrad.

"Do you have something that belonged to the boy?"

Conrad's throat closed. He turned to look at Alice, who was sitting by the fire thirty metres away, her face lit by the flames. He did not need to call her. She was already watching. She had been watching since he and the sheikh had walked to the edge of the camp. She could not hear the words, but she could read her husband's body — and something in the way he stood, in the way his shoulders had changed, told her what she needed to know.

She went to the half-track. Opened the valise — not the equipment valise, the other one, the small leather case she had packed last, in silence, while John stood in the doorway and said nothing.

She walked back carrying a small, battered, much-loved plush bear. One ear was torn. One eye was a replacement — a brown button, sewn on by Conrad after the original had been lost in the garden. The bear smelled of soap, of biscuit crumbs, of the particular warmth of a sleeping child.

Alexander had received it on his first birthday. He had not slept without it since. They had found it on the floor beside the Black Stone, where it had fallen from his arms.

Alice placed it in the sheikh's hands without a word.

The old man looked at the bear. Looked at Alice. Looked at the bear again. His jaw tightened.

"I will send a rider tonight," he said. "She will have it by morning. If your boy lives — she will know."

* * *

They did not sleep well. The sheikh's tent was comfortable — carpets, cushions, a paraffin lamp that cast warm shadows — but neither Conrad nor Alice could close their eyes for long without seeing the same image: a small bear falling from small arms in the dark.

At dawn, they ate. Flatbread, goat cheese, tea so sweet it made the teeth ache. The sheikh sat with them, speaking of practical matters — water points, terrain, the location of the valley entrance that Octavian's coordinates indicated. He knew the area. His tribe had avoided it for generations.

"My grandfather called it the Valley of the Silent," he said. "He said the wind speaks there, but not with the voice of wind."

At noon, the rider returned.

He came at a gallop, his camel lathered with sweat, and spoke to the sheikh in rapid Arabic that Alice strained to follow. The sheikh listened, asked two questions, listened again. Then turned to the Comptons.

His face told them before his words did.

"She Who Speaks With Gabriel says: the boy lives. His heart beats. His spirit has not departed." He paused. "She says he will remain alive for at least seven more days. Beyond that, she cannot see."

Alice sat down. Not gracefully — simply sat, as though her legs had made a decision without consulting the rest of her. Conrad placed his hand on the back of her neck and held it there.

Seven days.

"Then we have seven days," said Conrad.

"Then you waste no more of them here," said the sheikh. He stood. "Go. Find the valley. Make your camp. My warriors will follow within the hour."

* * *

The desert changed as they moved south. The flat gravel plains gave way to broken ground — low ridges of sandstone, wadis carved by rains that fell once a decade, and outcrops of dark rock that rose from the sand like the spines of buried animals. The light changed, too — from the white blaze of the open desert to something warmer, more amber, as the sun began its descent.

At the coordinates, the terrain rose.

What Conrad had expected — from Octavian's journal, from the decoded notes, from the old sketch maps — was a single tomb entrance in a cliff face,

somewhere in the southern wadis beyond the Valley of the Kings. A forgotten site, lost in the vastness of the Western Desert, marked only by his grandfather's private records.

What he found was something else.

The rise appeared, at first, to be a line of dunes — high, wind-sculpted, golden in the late sun. But as the half-track ground upward, the sand thinned, and beneath it Conrad felt the tracks bite into stone. Not sandstone. Limestone. Bedrock.

The "dunes" were a ridge. A saddle — two peaks, with a natural pass between them, wide enough for the half-track but only just. Conrad guided the vehicle through the gap, the engine labouring against the gradient, sand hissing against the undercarriage.

They crested the ridge.

And stopped.



Below them, the valley waited.

Below them, in the last amber light of the Egyptian day, lay a valley.

Not a wadi. Not a depression. A *valley* — perhaps three kilometres long and one wide, walled on all sides by cliffs of pale limestone that rose sixty metres from the valley floor. The walls were striated, layered, ancient — the geological record of an ocean that had dried a hundred million years before the first pharaoh drew breath.

And in those walls — cut into the living rock, half-buried by sand that had been accumulating for millennia but had not yet managed to erase them — were doorways.

Not one doorway.

Dozens.

Conrad counted — his lips moving silently, his grandfather's journal open on his knee. The old man had written of *a tomb*. A single tomb, in the southern wadis, containing things more terrible than gold.

He had not mentioned that the tomb had neighbours.

Alice leaned forward, her hand finding Conrad's on the steering wheel.

"Conrad."

"I see it."

The valley floor was still. No movement. No sound except the wind, which came through the gap in the ridge behind them and descended into the valley with a low moan — the sound of air passing over stone lips, through stone throats, into stone lungs.

Far below, at the deepest point of the valley, where the shadows were already pooling, a single entrance was larger than the others. Flanked by carved figures — barely visible at this distance, eroded by time, but unmistakably deliberate. A doorway built not to be entered, but to be guarded.

Conrad picked up the binoculars.

Alice pulled her scarf over her hair against the wind.

The half-track's engine idled, ticking in the silence.

Seven days.

Below them, the valley waited — as it had waited for three thousand years, and three thousand years before that, and longer still, since before the names of gods were written and the dead were given instructions for the journey.

It was not what Octavian had described.

It was immeasurably more.

* * *

SEVEN DAYS



THE VALLEY IS WAITING

MYSTERY OF ANCIENT DARKNESS